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By Hari Kunzru

For a government waging a War on Terror based on the clash between 'good' and 'bad' values, multiculturalism is losing its appeal, says Hari Kunzru. Shifting its emphasis from tolerance to the need to impose 'shared values', New Labour is enforcing nationalism with the carrot of 'belonging' and the stick of exclusion

After 9/11 the British consensus around multiculturalism began to shift. In the wake of the 7/7 London bomb attacks, this process of change has accelerated sharply. Scanning the last nine months of media and government pronouncements, it appears the issue of the relationship between immigrant communities and our historically white Anglo-Saxon Protestant State is no longer primarily viewed as an economic or social issue; it's a question of national security. So they're here, they're cleaning our toilets, nursing our old people and tiling our kitchen floors (good), still in Bombay but stealing our back-office jobs (mixed), scamming the NHS and being assigned prime council houses for their improvidently large families (bad), but mainly they're settling among us and we have no guarantees about what they think. Any one of them might secretly be trying to murder us. Some of them definitely are (very very bad indeed).

The notion of a 'War on Terror' (WoT) is the intellectual framework now used by almost all commentators to understand both international relations and internal security. It's worth remembering that as a theoretical construct, (as opposed to what Dick Cheney likes to call the 'facts on the ground') the WoT is the co-creation of two highly ideological groups – Bin Laden's Islamists and the US Neo-Cons, both of whom have promoted the conflict as largely or wholly one of values, as opposed to a struggle over resources and access to political power. So instead of Bush reminding Americans that they have strategic goals in the Middle East or that Bin Laden started out as part of a popular religious movement dedicated to the overthrow of the House of Saud (a concrete political goal), he employs moral language (famously, the 'axis of evil') and talks about his enemies in what might be thought of as cultural terms: 'Remember, these are – the ones in Guantánamo Bay are – killers. They don't share the same values we share.' (2002) [<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAMR510492002>]

Lately (all quotes are from his press conference on 21 March, 2006), Tony Blair appears to be conducting a doomed rearguard action against the overwhelming binary logic of the WoT, a logic his own Iraq policy has done so much to reinforce. So it's down with Samuel Huntington ('This is not a clash between civilisations, it is a clash about civilisation') and up with values:

The only way to win is to recognise this phenomenon is a global ideology; to see all areas in which it operates as linked and to defeat it by values and ideas set in opposition to those of the terrorists ... This terrorism, in my view, will not be defeated until its ideas, the poison that warps the minds of its adherents, are confronted, head-on, in their essence at their core.

So, given that no one in charge appears to want to talk about any of the possible structural reasons poisonous ideology might start to eat away at the mind, we're stuck with the theory that it's the theory which is the problem: terrorism as bad meme. If (as a terror warrior) this is your approach, then you're likely to see the question of culture as a crucial battlefield.

The OED gives culture, among senses concerning plants, microbes, physical training and personal growth as ‘a particular form or type of intellectual development. Also the civilisation, customs, artistic achievements, etc. of a people, esp. at a certain stage of its development or history.’ This OED definition has a couple of interesting inflections. The first is the notion of ‘a people’. The second is that of ‘stages of development’. They make it clear that when we think about culture (at least in official British English) we’re in the territory of 19th century Romantic Nationalism. *Kultur* is what defines the *Volk*, what makes it more than an aggregation of individuals, and what gives it the right to occupy a particular geographical space, the landscape which has reciprocally formed it, and so on and so forth. The idea of culture was geopolitical in origin, and remains so today.

Peculiarly, given its subsequent history, multiculturalism first emerged in Canada as a response to tensions between its English and French-speaking populations. Enshrined in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1971, it was quickly implemented elsewhere, and initially acted as a powerful ideological corrective to the injustices of state nationalism, which insists (often against evidence) on the existence of unitary national cultures and demands absolute assimilation and the erasure of difference as the price immigrants must pay to gain admission. Current Canadian legislation aims to ‘ensure that all individuals receive equal treatment and equal protection under the law, while respecting and valuing their diversity.’ The Canadian government runs a multiculturalism website, which lists the benefits as follows:

Multiculturalism ensures that all citizens can keep their identities, can take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging. Acceptance gives Canadians a feeling of security and self-confidence, making them more open to, and accepting of, diverse cultures. The Canadian experience has shown that multiculturalism encourages racial and ethnic harmony and cross-cultural understanding, and discourages ghettoisation, hatred, discrimination and violence.[1]

Multicultural politics have undoubtedly proved useful in reconfiguring the public discourse of former colonial powers such as Britain as they adapt to mass immigration, particularly in opening up institutions and providing a framework by which those who have no direct social experience of immigrants (and their second generation kids) can interact with them/us. No doubt about it, ‘Chicken Tikka Masala’ is a genuine step forward from ‘no blacks, no dogs, no Irish’. However in recent years, many of the more challenging aspects of multiculturalist discourse (in particular its celebration of hybridity and the formation of new identities) have been sidelined in favour of those aspects which are easy to deliver as policy (‘community relations’ conducted as a dialogue between the centre and notional representatives of supposedly stable and fixed ‘minorities’), or which suit prevailing political fashions. It’s difficult, for example, to square ‘respecting and valuing diversity’ (a quintessentially information-age activity, performed largely through the production and consumption of various kinds of media, from street festivals to television advertisements) with the concrete realities of Britain’s ruthless (and very popular) immigration policies. No amount of Benetton-style image making can negate the impact of dispersal, detention camps and forced removals. Multiculturalism is, in this respect, just a mask for the border police. Without accompanying action to combat social and economic inequality, it looks increasingly threadbare.

Now we face a Prime Minister who is declaring war on bad values, which means that ‘respecting and valuing diversity’ looks (from the 360 degree point of view of a terror-warrior) less like an unproblematically good thing (the way it used to, say, in the GLC chamber in 1984) than a girly-man weakness a modern social-democratic combatant government can ill afford. The message is that (rather like Middle Eastern democracy) diversity is good, as long as it’s our kind of diversity: confined to those aspects of culture (food, music, dress and so on) which increase the array of consumer choices without challenging the fundamentals. Middle England wants its Asian babes in bikinis, not burqas.

There is in circulation a right-wing critique of multiculturalism which is exploiting the WoT to attempt to regain ground lost in the culture wars of the '80s. If terrorism is a bad meme and terrorism is the product of Islamic culture, then we can say with confidence that Islam is worse than whatever we're proposing as 'our' culture. In saying this, we accept the validity of making value judgements about culture in general, something which the right has always claimed the Stalinist commissars of multiculturalism specifically disallow. Leaving aside the truth or otherwise of such a characterisation, the secret desire (what Slavoj Žižek might call the 'obscene supplement') of this school of thought is that once we've loosened up on this issue, we'll start re-embracing other value judgements and developing a taste for the juicy treats beloved of a certain strand of social conservatism, dishes which have been off the menu for some years: black people's tendency to crime, homosexuality's destructive impact on the family-which-is-the-bedrock-of-society and suchlike. Then (oh happy day!) it'll be like the horrible '60s never happened.

Certainly, from a WoT perspective, if you ignore social, political and economic reasons for terrorism and concentrate purely on values, it's easy to make the initial Islam/terror case to the average British voter. Because of the fear of terrorism the field is open in a way it hasn't been for ten years for a reassertion of monocultural dominance. The new name for it is 'shared values' and it's present around the edges of such cultural sharp objects as the newly-introduced 'Life in the UK Test' [<http://www.lifeintheuktest.gov.uk/>] for immigrants, which asks coyly about Christian festivals and saints days and the queen's ceremonial duties and trial by jury. Oh, and quangos. The test introduces the concept of a minimal standard of shared values as the price of admission to Britain. The political conversation now appears to be all about ownership of those values. This notion, which has obvious appeal to conservatives, is also attractive to the mainstream social democratic left, a tradition which in Britain now consists of three layers, rather like a Victoria sponge cake – a bottom spongy layer of methodist piety, a thin red jammy spread of second international socialism and most recently (1980's onwards) an overbaked top layer of communitarianism. All three layers lead social democrats to believe that the area of values is their natural terrain, good ground to pick a fight with the centre right and its founding model, the atomised individual of classical liberalism, so very silent about what happens when that individual comes into relationship with others.

It's worth remembering that Osama Bin Laden is also operating on the terrain of shared values:

It is to this religion that we call you; the seal of all the previous religions. It is the religion of Unification of God, sincerity, the best of manners, righteousness, mercy, honour, purity, and piety. It is the religion of showing kindness to others, establishing justice between them, granting them their rights, and defending the oppressed and the persecuted. It is the religion of enjoining the good and forbidding the evil with the hand, tongue and heart. It is the religion of Jihad in the way of Allah so that Allah's Word and religion reign Supreme. And it is the religion of unity and agreement on the obedience to Allah, and total equality between all people, without regarding their colour, sex, or language. [Letter to the American People, November 2002]

In Britain, multiculturalism (the make-shift post-imperial doctrine of diversity as the route to equality, of unity through managed disagreement) is under attack, not only from its traditional monocultural opponents, or from the classical liberals who've always disliked its whiff of groupthink, but from those who previously supported it most staunchly, the mainstream social democrats now scrambling to abandon it and sit on the high hillock marked shared values. Multiculturalism was, for many on the centre left, always a second-best option. Along with feminism and associated positions it grew in strength just at the time when the economic argument was being won hands down in Britain by the Chicago School monetarism of Keith Joseph, Margaret Thatcher and the Institute of Economic Affairs. In the '70s, traditional Keynesianism had ceased to produce good outcomes and by the mid-'80s the right was holding all the economic policy cards, so the left retreated to the terrain of language,

visibility and culture, ground appropriate to its stronghold in the universities, the arts and the media. It was from this 'red base' that those of an egalitarian bent made forays into areas like social policy: multiculturalism, diversity and anti-discrimination legislation was the result. In doing this they ceded the economic ground entirely. Not much has changed. Thatcherism became Blairism. Management of inflation is still the primary goal. Redistribution remains a dirty word. However, New Labour now feels it 'owns' economics again and diversity can safely be dropped for a more muscular approach to community. David Blunkett's combative style as Home Secretary was particularly telling in this respect. The big stick was always lurking behind his talk of 'belonging'. Join in, Pakis, or we'll put you in Belmarsh.

Lacking belief in the power of their politics to produce fairness (the market being the mechanism of choice for that) our politicians are offering up the pageantry of respect as a consolation prize. Islam will be valued in law, on government websites and in glossy brochures as part of the tapestry of British diversity, but individual Muslims will remain poor and marginalised. A hyper-sensitivity to issues of language and representation (exploited by cultural conservatives of all stripes and encouraged by religious offence legislation) is the pessimistic remnant of the multiculturalist dream. Instead of a new hybrid culture, we're offered what Amartya Sen has called 'plural monoculturalism', with power in the hands of self-identified community leaders who are defensive, patriarchal, hide-bound and antagonistic to change. Women, homosexuals and the young all suffer.

Perhaps the picture isn't all gloomy. Once upon a time the terrain of argument about difference was biology. Little by little, biological racism was demolished and culture became the main battle-ground. Even the BNP (which does cling to biology) now uses multiculturalist language to make its case. Its monthly magazine is called *Identity* and its defence of 'native British culture' is presented as a protectionist bulwark against a coffee-coloured global capitalism which wishes to erase difference to assist the transnational flow of labour, goods and services. Cultural essentialism is now in play everywhere from Nick Griffin's pamphlets to the pages of *Prospect*. The notion of shared values (as opposed to the crude group identity of 'culture' in its current political incarnation) as the basis for community is far from stupid. However, within the context of the war on terror (and that's the only context we're going to have for the next generation or so) the pressure will all flow in one direction. Immigrants will have to prove their right to belong, not just by hard work, but by displaying the approved set of values. Gordon Brown is already getting misty-eyed about flags on lawns and the pledge of allegiance. British Muslims are undergoing a near-constant media interrogation. If we're to avoid shared values becoming assimilation by the back-door, we need to ensure that the smug guardians of the mainstream put their own *idées reçues* under the spotlight, primarily the notion that bad values are an adequate explanation for the alienation many (not just young Muslims) feel from the current dispensation of things.

FOOTNOTES

[1] http://www.canadianheritage.gc.ca/progs/multi/what-multi_e.cfm

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