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By Daniel Jewesbury

If multiculturalism has become a toxic mix of regressive relativism and biopolitical control, what comes next? Daniel Jewesbury retraces its development and argues that an anti-racist, anti-capitalist politics must move beyond race to a renewed left universalism

Multiculturalism is a term that has never had a stable meaning. It has been both attacked and stalwartly defended by critics at all points on the political spectrum, identified as a central rhetoric in a dominant organisational hegemony, a cynical mechanism through which everyone can be kept in their place while the 'centre' is shored up, or a relativist, cultural studies inspired attack on materialist readings of class and politics; for others still, it is simply a pernicious expression of political correctness, yet another means by which national cultures and values have been undermined.

How could such a promiscuous and apparently universally threatening concept hope to survive? And if we were to try and assess whether it has succeeded, failed, or just ceased to exist, how might we begin, where might we start? *Which* multicultural project might we choose to examine? How would its 'success' be measured – for whom? For those at the 'centre' doling out 'respect' to the various Others? Or for those Others, standing in single file to receive their good citizenship medals? Different imperatives can clearly be identified through the kinds of 'success' being measured by different 'stakeholders' in multiculturalism: for the state, employing multiculturalism as a divisive discourse of 'recognition', its success lies in the ease with which we are now 'interpellated' by a technocratic order which will soon have our DNA on record and our biometric data at command; for the liberal, conversely, success lies in the relativisation of political discourse, and the apparent 'empowerment' of diverse sub-groups around appeals to rights.

Success and failure: the impossibility of respect

Since the first British anti-discrimination laws were introduced in the mid-1970s, multiculturalism has rapidly ascended to a position of dominance in cultural discourse: indeed its rise can be seen as symptomatic of a more general sublimation of the traditionally 'political' into the field of 'culture' (a process still very much underway – witness the emergence, from nowhere, of the Ulster Scots language movement amongst Northern Irish Protestant unionists). The terminological slippage discussed above can actually be interpreted as a progression – multiculturalism's rather confused status has something to do with the fact that, at different times, it has been valorised by different groups for different reasons. This progression can be mapped onto particular moments in recent British cultural history: those first race laws of the 1970s coincided with a reconfiguration of parts of the Left around new readings of colonialism and culture, and with attempts by that 'New Left' to fuse the Marxist analysis of class with a *parallel* concern with race. It was not until well into the 1980s that this exercise reached out of the academy to influence mainstream politics, but by the mid-1990s, it had come to predominate, largely displacing earlier assimilationist ideas – such as Norman Tebbit's 'cricket test'. It's crucial to keep in mind a clear differentiation between assimilation and integration in this discussion, since contemporary multiculturalism weaves a path somewhere between the two, managing to function as an *accommodation* of the minority community exclusively in terms of the 'host culture', and seeking to control the manner of their impact upon the 'centre'. Multiculturalism, as state policy, is unavoidably based on a logic of minority and majority, on an untroubled, essentialist ethnic taxonomy and on the notion of equidistance. It involves keeping cultures separate, at arm's length from one another. The minority is 'tolerated' by the majority, tolerance equating in liberal circles with the respect of difference. Nikos Papastergiadis touches on all these concerns when he writes:

The selective incorporation of the other and the (restricted) permission to celebrate diversity have emerged as the dominant modes for articulating new forms of cultural identity. This inversion of the status of cultural identity has generated a new range of personal choices in private lives and stimulated the gastronomic options in the leisure industry of metropolitan cities, but it has also left within its wake ... the lazy tolerance of cultural relativism which, as Warren Christopher noted, is the last refuge of repression.[1]

The very fact that multiculturalism must be based on essentialism means that it cannot account for inconsistencies, internal differences, within minority groups. An example of the way that multiculturalism enforces its categorisations is in the practice of identifying 'community leaders'. Following, for example, bouts of urban unrest between minority groups and police, these 'leaders' (community workers, local councillors, school governors, and so on) will often be called upon by politicians and the media to persuade the community to refrain from further violence. The fact that large numbers of young, disenfranchised second or third generation black and Asian Britons often feel the need to distance themselves from these 'leaders' who would speak on their behalf – often from the vantage point of a very different social position – must surely underline the problems with such an approach.[2] Why is it that there are never any 'white community leaders'?

Cultural relativism, then, often functions by imposing a presumption of homogeneity upon internally diverse, heterogeneous groups. This has the effect of reifying or abstracting the group, with the result that an issue like the subjection of women comes to be considered a 'cultural' question. Such an approach, Floyd Anthias argues, assists the more orthodox elements within the community in question to disavow other secular or alternative voices in the group:

Debates on cultural diversity confuse culture and ethnicity ... Is it the boundaries that should be kept or the cultural artefacts that are their barbed wire? However, the question is not just about homogeneity, but also about western cultural hegemony.[3]

Slavoj Žižek develops this point when he argues that multiculturalism is:

an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness (the idealised Other who dances fascinating dances and has an ecologically sound holistic approach to reality, while practices like wife-beating remain out of sight...).[4]

This is extremely significant, and leads us to the question of the great logical inconsistency – the radical *intolerance* – that is at the heart of multiculturalism. 'Tolerance' itself – the notion of some 'permission' issuing from a privileged, central position – is clearly problematic, even without further investigation. That the demands for recognition that were the kernel of the struggles against racism in the 1960s have been transformed into a right to be tolerated is, on its own, breathtaking. Stanley Fish, however, goes further, and argues that:

the trouble with stipulating tolerance as your first principle is that you cannot possibly be faithful to it because sooner or later the culture whose core values you are tolerating will reveal itself to be intolerant at that same core; that is, the distinctiveness that marks it as unique and self-defining will resist the appeal of moderation or incorporation into a larger whole ... At this point the strong multiculturalist faces a dilemma: either he stretches his toleration so that it extends to the intolerance residing at the heart of a culture he would honour, in which case tolerance is no longer his guiding principle, or he condemns the core intolerance of that culture ... in which case he is no longer according it respect at the point where its distinctiveness is most obviously at stake. Typically, the strong multiculturalist will grab the second handle of this dilemma (usually in the name of some supracultural universal now seen to have been hiding up his sleeve from the beginning).[5]

Fish goes on to prove that ‘no one could possibly be a multiculturalist in any interesting and coherent sense’, since:

[t]he strong multiculturalist takes difference so seriously as a general principle that he cannot take any particular difference seriously, cannot allow its imperatives their full realisation in a political program, for their full realisation would inevitably involve the suppression of difference.[6]

Clearly, Fish argues, if one is really to respect difference then the first principle of liberal relativism, that a person’s freedom must be protected so long as it does not impinge on the freedom of another, has to be discarded; and since this cannot be done, multiculturalism is nothing but posturing.

Å½iÅ¾ek also objects to multiculturalism but on more traditional ‘materialist’ grounds, arguing that it accepts the logic of global capital and, moreover, actually precludes politicisation.[7] The first point is argued from the position that since the ‘fluid’, cosmopolitan subjectivities of today are only occasioned by the transnational flows of global capital, they therefore represent a *de facto* accommodation with that system. Å½iÅ¾ek appears to argue that the new patterns of labour and consumption that result from capital’s global restructuring, facilitated by the development and growth of networked technologies, should not in turn occasion any contingent, improvised cultural change; or at least, that if they do, there cannot possibly be any interruptive or disruptive potential in these changes. More than being simply a reiteration of the Foucauldian view of Power and its incorporation of resistance, this is a return to the old Marxist saw dictating that any other site of oppression and struggle – race, gender and so on – must be subordinated to the class struggle, which is the basis of all other antagonisms in society. In arguing that multiculturalism precludes politicisation, Å½iÅ¾ek is on firmer ground. His claim – that all previously ‘ideological’ positions have become neutralised in a kind of cathartic post-politics, where we must all live and let live, brings us on to questions of the usefulness of a politics built on liberal ‘rights’ and ‘mutual respect’, and of where and how to *fight against* the violent *disrespect* of (for instance) racism, rather than simply conversing with it, to which we’ll return later in this text.

Fish and Å½iÅ¾ek differ fundamentally from one another in their characterisation of the central figure of the multiculturalist. Fish argues, convincingly enough, that the multiculturalist bases his or her ‘respect’ of the Other in terms of a kind of permitted particularity:

Taking pleasure in one’s ‘particular identity’ is perfectly all right so long as when the pinch comes, and a question of basic allegiances arises, it is one’s universal identity that is affirmed...[8]

The universal to which he’s referring here, then, is the already existing ‘host culture’, which not only somehow remains intact and unchallenged, but itself becomes transcendent – becomes the standard. The multiculturalist is sitting at the centre, giving expression to his or her culture without let or hindrance; moreover, that culture is shown to be innately superior, since it is *defined*, in part, by the tolerance and respect that are largely absent from the Other’s culture.

Å½iÅ¾ek argues that this presentation of the situation, whilst persuasive, is mistaken, and that it evacuates the relationship of any political dimension:

What about the rather obvious... argument that the multiculturalist’s neutrality is false, since his position silently privileges Eurocentrist content? This line of reasoning is right, but for the wrong reason. The particular cultural background or roots which always support the universal multiculturalist position are not its ‘truth’, hidden beneath the mask of universality – ‘multiculturalist universalism is really Eurocentrist’ – but rather the opposite: the stain of particular roots is the phantasmatic screen which conceals the fact that the subject is already

thoroughly ‘rootless’, that his true position is the void of universality... today’s capitalist... still clings to some particular cultural heritage [but] this very reference to a particular cultural formula is a screen for the universal anonymity of Capital. The true horror does not reside in the particular content hidden beneath the universality of global Capital, but rather in the fact that Capital is effectively an anonymous global machine blindly running its course, that there is effectively no particular Secret Agent who animates it. The horror is not the (particular living) ghost in the (dead universal) machine, but the (dead universal) machine in the very heart of each (particular living) ghost.[9]

Given this brief overview of contemporary accounts of multiculturalism, it would appear to have been rather successful as a political discourse; paradoxically, this success could hardly be said to have benefited many of the groups who championed it at its inception. Somewhere in its rapid transformation from leftist stratagem to dominant liberal discourse, multiculturalism managed to divide many of those who were its chief proponents. Furthermore, recent events have demonstrated that it simply cannot be the basis of a viable approach at times of great political conflict, particularly when these come disguised as cultural conflicts.

After multiculturalism – universalism and disrespect

The *alternatives* to multiculturalism are not so easy to identify at first. Multiculturalism is now so firmly established that any government celebration of ‘Britishness’ is sure to feature it as an unchanging standard of what makes us who we are; Gordon Brown has recently been wrapping himself in the Union Flag, proclaiming that for him it is not the scarlet banner, but the ‘butcher’s apron’ (as it’s sometimes known abroad) which is the hope and pride of our people, of every race and religion.

In America, where multiculturalism was always a substantially different animal, separatist politics such as those of the Nation of Islam have continued to hold great currency amongst minority groups. Separatism has also found growing appeal amongst British Muslims, and not only since the launch of the disastrous and ill-conceived ‘war on terror’ (Hanif Kureishi’s film *My Son the Fanatic*, his representation of the political climate in a Muslim community in the north of England, was first screened in 1997). Seen in one light, separatism is a clear rejection of multiculturalism, and as such it is a radical reinvention of the demand for recognition. Should the anti-relativist Left therefore applaud it as an ‘authentic’ articulation of the oppressed? The answer, quite unambiguously, must be no: the only grounds on which such applause could be offered would be on the basis of a reinvented multiculturalism anyway, a spurious, patronising ‘toleration’ of that which is ultimately utterly inimical to our own political goals (inimical as these may themselves be to liberalism).[10] Contemporary separatism, as perhaps distinct from various Afrocentrist and pan-African projects of the 19th and 20th centuries, rejects anti-racism outright, because it actually seeks to mimic (and outdo) the oppressive structures which foster and create racism, but ‘for us’ rather than ‘for them’. Paul Gilroy identifies and anatomises, within black separatism, a fascist drive that is indistinguishable from that within white supremacism or mainstream racist capitalism.[11]

The definition of a political identity according to one’s supposed race is not only a reactionary move but also a profoundly limiting one. Gilroy, amongst others, has argued for a cultural politics that is capable of superceding categories of race altogether.[12] In a gesture that epitomises the confusion that marks these debates, Gilroy persists in describing his project as a ‘multiculturalist’ one; even more confusingly, he labels it a ‘conservative’ for his criticisms of the kind of multiculturalism that he (Gilroy) is specifically not advocating himself.[13] Gilroy’s position is not simply a banal multiculturalist ‘colour blindness’, which amounts to a refusal to acknowledge actual discrimination on the basis of ‘race’; rather it is a refusal to constitute one’s politics on the basis of the racialised rationale for that discrimination. In other words, the marker by which one is discriminated against –

which is arbitrary, and which is anyway a product of the racist European imperialist imaginary – should not be the foundation from which one sets about countering that discrimination.[14] Gilroy is following Frantz Fanon in arguing for a radical humanism that extends anti-racism beyond merely a well-mannered plea for ‘equality’. The terms on which any equality might be shared have to be completely re-imagined: rather than being based on the granting of a token of admission into ‘equality with’ a centre that remains unrevised, the centre must itself be completely revised so that the achievement of equality is a *mutual one*. Given that the nationalist, patriotic cultural identities of the ‘imagined community’ of the centre are themselves structured on racist bases – on global economies arising from historic inequalities and exploitations, on structural exclusions within the territory of the state itself, on racialised immigration controls that exclude from that territory – there can be no simple accommodation of the excluded with these privileged identities.

So a *parallel deconstruction* of the identities of the marginalised and of the dominant (what I would argue it is still valid to call a hybrid process of identification) is required. The only genuinely anti-racist approach to identity is one which seeks to expunge the destructive, artificial category of race from the conversation altogether. Separatist appeals to an ‘alternatively racialised’ future, as historicised by Gilroy, must, he argues, now be exceeded in the name of an internationalised anti-racist project for humanity.[15] The well-known recent critiques and revisions of ‘whiteness’ (again, drawing in part on Fanon’s profound reading of the psychology of race as well as on W.E.B. Du Bois) have rendered ideas of racial separatism even more problematic.[16] A processual, situational reading of identity has begun to gain ground, with more widespread acknowledgement of our multiple inflections and affiliations. Against this, any attempt to search for ‘freedom’ on the basis of the ‘overdetermination from without’ that is race is not just counterproductive, it may be actively racist, inasmuch as it seeks to perpetuate race as a marker of affiliation (albeit a supposedly progressive one).

And yet, since violent discrimination continues to be practiced *on the basis of race*, is it not a little abstract to advocate the deconstruction of the category at a time when its existence continues to be sharply felt by those to whom it is applied? Is it necessary, in other words, to maintain the category in order to most effectively organise a resistance? This would obviously be the reaction of many Marxists and anti-colonialists: just as the anti-colonial struggle had to be organised around movements of *national* liberation, at least in the first instance, so any struggle against a particular type of domination must be gathered together in terms of that affiliation which is being attacked, or denied. The idea of ‘strategic essentialism’ is an attempt to confront this situation:

Such a position enables minority groups to ‘preserve’ identities that facilitate struggle, resistance and solidarity while maintaining a critique of reified notions of ‘race’. Asked to expand upon the implications of strategic essentialism, the term’s progenitor, Spivak, comments: ‘The only way to work with collective agency is to teach a persistent critique of collective agency at the same time... It is the persistent critique of what one cannot not want.’[17]

Whether such a strategy is feasible in terms of anti-racist struggle in a post-colonial (or neo-colonial) context is not clear. Here we re-encounter the schism between those who would argue for a broad class-based politics and those who stress that such an approach re-inscribes the marginalisation of the already marginal. We’ll return to this problem a little further on.

Recently, Western liberals have been tying themselves in a range of rhetorical knots following the publication of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammad in a number of European newspapers, and the subsequent violent protests carried out by Muslims across Europe. Discussions regarding the defensibility of both the publication of the cartoons and of the Muslim response to them invariably centred around ideas of free speech and freedom of expression. Unfortunately all these recourses to ‘principle’ were incapable of deciding what should happen when one person’s exercise of their ‘rights’

drastically undermines another person's ability to exercise theirs, or when the 'expression' concerned is itself calling for the curtailment of the freedom of expression. Most commentators were left trying to construct elaborate exceptions to the rule, with John Stuart Mill's dictum on the limits of freedom being reconfigured in a number of ingenious and tortuous ways. Did they think that the cartoons should have been published? Well, yes, the newspapers must have the freedom to publish the images, but it was probably unwise to do so; yes, they should have been published and are a demonstration of the robustness of our democracies in which any idea can be expressed and the people are the judge; yes, of course, although it was a relief that the British newspapers chose not to republish them. Should British Muslims have been allowed to call for the execution of the editors of these newspapers? Yes, this is their right, and however much we detest what they say, we must protect that right or we end up in the kind of societies that these people so energetically endorse. On and on and on the commentators opined, uneasily offering the endless permutations and qualifications of their arguments.

I was struck that no commentator that I came across said that they thought that the cartoons were racist, offensive and should not have been published, but that the protests were also odious and inflammatory and should have been prevented. Such a point of view, of course, would be wholly incompatible with a rights-based response to the situation. And yet, as an anti-racist and a socialist, this would have been my approach. Returning to Fish and to Å½iÅ¾ek, we find some helpful insights into the question of how to avoid perpetual liberal hand-wringing. Fish asks, 'will speech codes dispel racism?' Will the multiculturalist's insistence, in other words, on giving one's opponent the freedom to speak and hoping to disprove their arguments actually work?:

If you think of hate speech as evidence of moral... confusion you will try to clean the confusion up by the application of good reasons; but if you think that hate speakers rather than being confused are simply wrong – they reason well enough but their reasons are anchored in beliefs (about racial characteristics, sexual norms, and so on) that you abhor – you will not place your faith in arguments but look for something stronger.[18]

In other words, we must be able to restore some faith in *universal ideas*, not disguised with a phony 'tolerance' which can be withheld when it proves inconvenient, but openly stated: racism is not a relative value, there is no right to express racist ideas, and my 'freedom' to state this is derived not from an abstract 'right' but from my own convictions. Å½iÅ¾ek is also clear in this respect, stating first of all that:

there is no way to avoid being partial, since neutrality involves taking sides... humanitarian liberal equidistance can easily slip into or coincide with its opposite and effectively tolerate the most violent 'ethnic cleansing'.[19]

Å½iÅ¾ek then dismisses the 'easy' gesture of demonstrating that a particular interest hides behind an abstract *universal* – such as, for instance, saying that white male interests are served by multiculturalism – and argues that precisely the opposite approach is required: to identify a *universal* interest at the most *particular* point in society, at the very 'point of exclusion' from society: to identify the cause of the immigrant, or the homeless, with the cause of humanity in its totality.

One could illustrate Å½iÅ¾ek's theory with a story, one that as it turns out is not true, but which is nevertheless extremely handy, and whose dubious veracity is itself part of the story. During the Second World War, it came to be believed that the King of Denmark, reacting to an order by the occupying Nazi army that Danish Jews all wear the yellow star, went out on his horse the very next day wearing the star himself, and that as a result of his courageous identification with the Jews, the order had to be rescinded. In fact, no such decree was ever issued, and Christian X was never required to perform this act. It seems likely that the source of the myth was a cartoon, published in a Swedish

newspaper on 10 January, 1942. The king was shown with his former prime minister, who asked him, 'What are we going to do, your majesty, if Scavenius [the Nazi puppet prime minister] makes all the Jews wear yellow stars?', to which the king replies, 'We'll all have to wear yellow stars.' Perhaps, now that we've learned to take cartoons seriously, we should try to react to them with the courage of our convictions.

Å½iÅ¾ek is not just restating a deterministic Marxism; he argues stridently that the appeal to sectional causes undermines or negates the more general and immediate struggle to be fought against global capitalism, but his own appeal to the 'point of exclusion' identifies those very people whose exclusion specifically does not simply arise on arbitrary economic grounds, but on grounds of racism, sexism, xenophobia and so on. Racism is an effect of capital, and in order to confront capitalism one must confront racism (and vice versa). Therefore the argument extended for 'strategic essentialism' is redundant: any call to rally around the undeconstructed signs of one's exclusion merely defers a greater struggle, one which, likewise, is not 'prior' to the anti-racist or anti-colonial struggle, but which is logically inseparable from it. As Fanon noted in his essay on 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness', [20] written at the height of the anti-colonial movement, the cost of the national liberation struggle is that it always ends while it is still incomplete, before the true 'liberation' takes place; and a new obstacle is barring the realisation of that goal, a national bourgeoisie who assume control and who set about administering a capitalist economy for their own profit. So too with any anti-racism that is not at the same time aware of the influence of capitalism: a legalistic accommodation might be reached, an extension of 'rights', but at the expense of the installation of a leadership whose position depends on the maintenance of the very racialised categories which were contested in the first place. [21] Such an outcome clearly represents no challenge to Power at all.

So Fanon, Gilroy and even Å½iÅ¾ek can, with a little creative appropriation, be used to construct a *post-multiculturalism*, centred around a reinvigorated Left universalism, and dependent on the disrespect of the 'cultures' of racism and sexism, wherever they might be manifested.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Nikos Papastergiadis, 'The Elastic Metaphor: Modernity and the critique of the self' in Dan Fleming, ed., *Formations*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000, p. 149.

[2] The Cultural Policy Collective have commented on the phenomenon of 'community definition' in the context of 'ethnic festivals', observing that they 'tend to be dominated by the preferences of the first generation gerontocracy whose memory is often of romantic and conservative cultural values'. Cultural Policy Collective, *Beyond Social Inclusion: Towards Cultural Democracy*, Glasgow: Cultural Policy Collective, 2004, p. 29.

[3] Floyd Anthias, cited in Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) 'Ethnicity, Gender Relations and Multiculturalism' in Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood, eds., *Debating Cultural Hybridity* (London: Zed Books), p. 198.

[4] Slavoj Å½iÅ¾ek, cited in Jodi Dean 'Å½iÅ¾ek Against Democracy' in *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 1:2, 2005.

[5] Stanley Fish 'Boutique Multiculturalism, or Why Liberals Are Incapable of Thinking About Hate Speech' in *Critical Inquiry* 23, 1997, pp. 382-3.

[6] Ibid, p. 384.

[7] See Dean (2005) for a fuller account of Å½iÅ¼ek's argument on these points.

[8] Fish (1997) op cit, p. 380.

[9] Slavoj Å½iÅ¼ek 'Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism' in *New Left Review* 225, 1997, pp. 44-5. Unfortunately, for the sake of brevity, I've had to omit Å½iÅ¼ek's joke about how one starts with an innocent group sex orgy and ends up sharing meals in a Chinese restaurant, but trust me, it doesn't really add much to one's understanding of the basic argument.

[10] See Ardeshir Mehdad and Yassamine Mather, 'Political Islam's Relation to Capital and Class', in *Variant* 25, 2006, www.variant.org.uk.

[11] See Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps*, London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 2000, particularly chapter 9.

[12] Ibid; also *The Black Atlantic*, London: Verso, 1993.

[13] Gilroy (2000) op cit, p. 242.

[14] This is not to say that British Muslims are necessarily putting forward their religious, cultural and political objectives solely *in response* to their discrimination: Islam is not merely a reflex action, some necessary dialectical 'corollary' of Western racism.

[15] Gilroy, op cit, particularly chapters 7 and 9.

[16] For a recent critical overview of theories surrounding 'whiteness' see Andrew Hartman 'The Rise and Fall of Whiteness Studies', in *Race & Class* 46:2, 2004, pp. 22-38.

[17] Alastair Bonnett 'Constructions of Whiteness in European and American Anti-Racism', in Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood, eds., *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism* (London: Zed Books), 1997, p. 187.

[18] Fish, op cit, p. 393.

[19] Å½iÅ¼ek, op cit, p. 50.

[20] See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, chapter 3.

[21] An excellent description is given in Linton Kwesi Johnson's dub *Di Black Petty Booshwah*, available on the album (Island Records).

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