

'Better off without them'? Politics and ethnicity in the twenty-first century*

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What is it we want really?
For what end and how?
If it is something feasible, obtainable,
Let us dream it now,
And pray for a possible land
Not of sleep-walkers, not of angry puppets,
But where both heart and brain can understand
The movements of our fellows;
Where life is a choice of instruments and none
Is debarred his natural music ...

When Louis MacNeice wrote those lines, nearly 70 years ago and on the brink of war, he was dreaming and praying for a sort of space. He hoped for a possible land between the continents of fascism and Stalinism and of free-market capitalism. In those days, it could have been called democratic socialism, something untried but feasible. In these days, we dream less in ideologies and more about ways of living together.

The whole world is on the move now, migrating and hoping. In the last century, one European nation felt that it was a *verspätete Nation*, a latecomer determined to smash its way to the imperial power and privilege enjoyed by other states. That determination cost 50 million lives, and nearly destroyed us all. Today, we in the rich world face the rising determination of a hundred latecomer nations, once silent under the blanket of colonialism and backwardness. How do we learn to live together, as an international system and as countries whose cities are filling with the latecomers, in ways which understand the movements of our fellows? What is our design for possible lands—our own, as we still call them—in which life is a choice of instruments?

My topic in this article is the notion of multiculturalism. It is a new term, but I want to argue that it is already growing old and obsolete. What I have to say

* This is an edited text of the Martin Wight memorial lecture delivered at Chatham House on 13 November 2003.

falls into two parts: a hopeful, forward-peering part, and a melancholy part about the past and present. This negative part comes first.

Multiculturalism is an ideal which currently dominates political discourse. If there is to be a gleaming city on the hill, then—in this age of migration and human rights—it is held to be a city in which many ethnic communities live peacefully side by side, even celebrating each other's cultural traditions. The older 'melting-pot' assimilationist image of a national future is being replaced by the 'salad bowl' metaphor: a healthy, crunchy mix of contrasts. None are to be debarred their natural music. In London, many non-Hindu children enjoy Diwali and for years huge crowds have attended Caribbean carnivals or lined streets to watch Chinese dragon-dances. Maybe, one day, Catholic families in Portadown will clap tolerantly as the Orange marchers pass, seeing nothing more threatening than a picturesque ethnic rite.

This sort of multiculturalism is supposed to embody a decisive move away from the politics of ethnicity. But it does not. The trouble is that multicultural policies are still contained within the concept of ethnicity. It is true that they represent a move away from the goal of assimilation, from the idea that ethnicity politics can only mean the enforced monopoly on power and culture of one ethnic group. But what is now being said is that ethnic nationalism can be tamed by a sort of equality proclamation. To claim that only one ethnic self-assertion—my own—is valid: that's bad. But to say that all ethnic nationalisms are born equal and as good as each other—that at least sounds good.

Perhaps it is wiser to say that multiculturalism is not so much a programme as a way of rationalizing what is happening or has already happened. And much of what is happening—in some big British cities, for example—is encouraging: in a general way, with some terrifying fits and starts, people of different cultures and origins are living together with increasing intimacy and enjoying the experience.

But in Bosnia, to take a very different context, the happening which is being rationalized is highly contested. I quote from an interview in *Bosnia Report* with Zlatko Hadžidedić:

The concept of multiculturalism ... assumes the separate and parallel existence of various 'cultural groups' within the political space described as the nation-state. The term ... implies the mutual incompatibility of different cultures within the nation-state, with 'culture', in fact, representing a euphemism for racial—or racial and confessional—identity ... this model has nothing to do with the single-culture-model, the model of joint existence we had in Bosnia-Herzegovina before 1992 ... the doctrine of multiculturalism means that these identities have first to be physically separated, then mechanically arranged alongside each other regardless of the fact that through a centuries-long practice they have demonstrated not only their mutual compatibility, but also their capacity for creative mutual interaction.¹

¹ *Bosnia Report*, No. 35, Aug.–Sept. 2003.

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Why do apparently successful multi-ethnic communities like Bosnia break down? One answer is simply the introduction of violent ethnic nationalism from outside. Historically, this is to do with the infection of nineteenth-century nationalism by the doctrine of homogeneity—the notion that the existence of minority ethnicities is a threat to the security and cohesion of a national state. In Poland, Roman Dmowski taught that the ‘true Pole’ was a Catholic Slav: an independent Poland would never survive if it harboured large populations of Ukrainians, Belorussians and above all Jews. In Turkey, Kemalism—though anti-Islamic—set out to replace the multicultural Ottoman empire with a mono-ethnic Turkey cleansed of Armenians and Greeks. And the doctrine of homogeneity reached its peak of international acceptance after 1945, with the expulsion of twelve million Germans from east and central Europe. This gigantic ethnic cleansing, in which the British took an active part through ‘Operation Swallow’, was justified by the need to offer stability and security to the liberated nations of the region. Churchill in particular, guiltily anxious to offer Poland some recompense for its betrayal to Soviet domination, felt that offering the new Polish state ethnic homogeneity as well as new frontiers would at least guarantee that state internal stability and a future free from subversive minorities.

And yet ‘big politics’ are not the full explanation for why so many old multi-cultural societies break up. We need to understand the tragic process of ethnic sundering at the grass-roots level. The eye of television caught this process taking place in villages and small towns as Yugoslavia came apart. Within months, ordinary people of different religions (but the same speech) who had been friends all their lives began to feel wary about one another. No more visits for coffee in the kitchen after shopping. Soon they were avoiding one another’s eyes on the street. Differences previously kept in the background—religion, customs—suddenly swelled with ominous significance. ‘I have nothing against her, but “They” have always been our enemies, waiting their moment ...’ When the houses burned and families were herded into lorries, the neighbours pulled the curtains, dabbed their eyes but felt an angry relief.

These separations are happening all over the world. As Europeans, we have been much more aware of them since 1989 and the end of Soviet communism. In reality they have been taking place regularly throughout the second half of the twentieth century, and—when we know what we are looking for—we can recognize them even earlier. But recognition, and even watching the process on TV as it unfolds, does not amount to understanding much more than the symptoms. Why, really, do people who have lived together in something like peace for centuries suddenly discover that they cannot bear to live together any more? What is the catalyst for this mysterious chemical reaction, in which the particles of suspicion and cultural distaste which have been bobbing about harmlessly in solution suddenly precipitate into a hot, dark sludge of hatred? Put in that form, the question eludes an answer. Nonetheless, a harsher, less fond look at the dynamics of old multi-ethnic communities suggests—to me, at least—that this sundering is much less surprising than it seems.

This is the hypothesis. Many such mixed communities coexisted for centuries, throughout Eurasia and the Maghreb, and more recently in parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Their inhabitants could often speak each other's languages. When education and modern armies came in, they sat on the same school bench and served in the same regiments. Their mothers and grandmothers laughed and exchanged gossip as they waited for water at the same pump. And yet somewhere there was always a sense of otherness, of strange things which the neighbours might be doing or saying, behind closed shutters or in their own shrines. This was the shadow which was never quite absent from the apparently stable mixture of Azeris and Armenians in Karabakh, of Muslim Bosnians and Orthodox Serbs in Yugoslavia, of Abkhazians and Mingrelians in Georgia, of Hindus and Muslims in British India, Jews and Arabs or Berbers in North Africa, Polynesians and Indians in Fiji ... the list is almost endless.

If this shadow of suspicion persisted, then how did these communities stay together? I think the crude answer is: fear. All those multi-ethnic societies lived in the context of arbitrary power. What their different ethnicities had in common was subjecthood—under a tsardom, a colonial empire, or one or another form of autocracy which offered them few or no political rights and imposed its will ultimately by the use of force. And these subjects had good grounds to fear what a brutal outside authority would do to them if their mutual tolerance broke down. The Cossacks, the Askaris or the special forces units sent out from the capital would repress them impartially: all would suffer and no faction would emerge better off.

But when that external pressure—the caliphate, the Ottoman, French or British empires, the Soviet power, the post-Tito communist regime—was removed, then the current of fear which enforced that mutual tolerance was switched off. This is, I know, a disagreeable hypothesis. It suggests that in such societies the condition of 'freedom' tempts people to look at their neighbours in new, less forgiving ways. A heavy lid is lifted. Culprits and collaborators are sought in order to account for historical wrongs, as liberated peoples begin to reinvent their past. And in the condition of 'democracy', people are invited to choose sides, to identify what divides them rather than what unites them. In countries where no network of free local institutions, no civil society, had been allowed to develop, the dividing category which comes to mind is not wealth or class or social function, but ethnicity.

Peoples live together for generations or centuries, never fully trusting each other and yet unable to imagine life without each other. Then, suddenly, some form of liberation takes place and everything changes. Surges of violent anti-Semitism followed Poland's regaining of independence in 1918 (and, on a smaller scale, its liberation from the Nazis in 1945). Surges of resentment against the Asian population followed independence in what had been British East Africa, culminating in Idi Amin's expulsion of the Uganda Asians. And so on.

I repeat: all this is circumstantial evidence, and there is as yet no satisfying sociological explanation for why the sense of freedom translates into the wish to

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be free alone—without the Other. But the consequences are clear. All over the world, and especially in the last 15 or 20 years, there has been ethnic separation (the statesman's euphemism used to be 'transfer of population') as minorities have been driven from their homes. Sometimes, but rather seldom, a pragmatic case can be made for separation on the grounds that the forced integration of people who have grown to hate one another is a hopeless policy. But the 'international community' (and what happened to that? Once able to marshal great armies, it seems to have evaporated from the political vocabulary in the heat of the Iraq war) still sticks to the ideal of reintegration. So far, this policy seems to have produced exactly what it hoped to avoid: a row of impotent ethnic protectorates. I have immense respect for those who work patiently to make the return of refugees possible. But it must be accepted that the old multicultural communities can never be simply restored. Separation creates new senses of identity, and the way in which ethnic communities—those who left and those who stayed—can again live together in one village or town will be very different and more formally defined. Maybe, just maybe, it will be more stable. It can be argued that groups in conflict need to part, at least for a time, so that they can gain the self-confidence about identity which will allow them to live together again in a new context of rights and freedom.

All that is an analysis of the past. Of course, ethnic separations of this kind are still taking place in the present, and there will—if this theory holds water—be many more in the future as varieties of 'liberation' happen across the globe. But there are also new dynamics at work in the twenty-first century. Multiculturalism, as we cautiously celebrate it in the West, is not a permanent condition. Just as it replaced older ideals of assimilation, so multiculturalism will prove to be a way-station on the road to something else.

Several commentators have pointed out that multiculturalism, as it exists in British cities, for example, enfranchises the conservative elements in an ethnic group—those, usually of the older generation, who want to enforce the religious and cultural orthodoxies of their tradition. But in the long term, this is a battle the elders cannot win. Cultural fusion is irresistibly taking place, in the context of vast cosmopolitan cities and continuing migration. What lies ahead—indeed, it is already emerging—is what has been called 'hybridity': a new kind of urban society which is neither a bouquet of contrasting cultures nor the adoption of the patterns of the old indigenous majority, but a fresh synthesis. It is produced by the spread of the human rights culture, by the melting away of protected career structures in favour of a bewildering succession of short-term job opportunities, by intermarriage, by all the economic and social pressures which give priority to individual life-choices over group conformity.

In an essay entitled 'Myriad Byzantiums',² Tom Nairn argues that 'multiculturalism is the transitional way-station towards civic communities of the future. Assorted immigrant communities have first of all to stand up for

² Tom Nairn, 'Myriad Byzantiums', *New Left Review*, 23 Sept.–Oct. 2003.

themselves, by insisting on equal status and maintaining inherited speech and customs. But ... these claims tend to be limited in both effect and duration. They are really rites of onward passage.' The formula of 'hybridity', in contrast, means 'the acceptance of irrevocable mixture as starting-point, rather than as a problem'.

Starting-point? Can it be that even hybridity is transient, and, like multiculturalism, is in turn just one more way-station towards the future? We can more or less imagine a cheerfully hybridized urban society, in which group 'diversity' (those carnivals and dragon-dances) has melted into 'irrevocable mixture'. But what is a post-hybrid society supposed to look like?

Nairn thinks he may know the answer: it will look political. In other words, once all the emphasis on culture (which in this context has usually meant the distinctness of cultures) has worn away, people will at last be free to get down to the business of democratic arrangements and innovations. They will have attained not just freedom from oppressive rulers—whether imperial, foreign or merely home-grown dictatorial. They will also have freed themselves from domination by the cultural and ethnic categories which for so long have been held to be the basic texture of human associations. This is something like what the French revolutionary Clermont-Tonnerre said in the *Assemblée nationale* in 1791, when the future of racial minorities was being debated: 'To the Jews as a nation we give nothing; to the Jews as individuals we give everything.'

Of course, there is a sort of threat implicit in language like that. I have used it as if it were an early vision of hybridity, a revolutionary democracy composed of individuals with individual rights. But it can also be read as an imperial programme of assimilation imposed by the majority community. It can be read: 'We will grant you the Rights of Man and full citizenship of this *république unie et indivisible*—on condition that you reduce your own culture to an evening hobby, speak French in public places and observe only republican holidays.'

So what will it mean to be a Somali or a Kurd or a Filipino or a Scot in the hybrid cosmopolis? In many ways, nothing very unlike what it means now. Many London families whose ancestors came from Bangladesh will still be Muslim, and the older ones may speak more Bengali than English, but Brick Lane will no longer be 'our street'. There are more intriguing questions. If the torrent of migration continues to pour almost exclusively into the cities—it is many years since immigrants even to North America or Australia headed for the farms and small settlements—what happens to the relationship between town and country, between the hybrid cosmopolis and the hinterland of villages and small towns which remain often almost monoethnic?

This is not just a question for geographers. It is intensely political—one of the key areas in which global migration and the decay of multiculturalism will begin to open the way to a new politics. Democratic government in nation-states is still a matter of majorities, and the list of countries in which big-city population outnumbers the rest is still fairly short. In this sense, most nation-states are still practising the politics of ethnicity. But this balance is tipping fast. The new

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post-hybrid politics will probably involve the emergence of something like independent or at least autonomous city-states, political units which may control the semi-rural regions around them. This would reduce the rest of an old national territory to incoherence and condemn it to political impotence.

Even in Britain, a confused awareness of this process is arising. Witness the broad muddle of resentments and apprehensions represented by the Country-side Alliance in England, or the sense among farmers that their function is no longer essential, or the official and unofficial interest in regional devolution, or the erratic growth of something like an English nationalism searching to recover or reinvent identity which seemed (briefly) to be tempting the Conservative Party into the guise of an 'ENP'—a xenophobic and anti-urban English National Party.

All this warns that the decline of the old politics of ethnicity will not be smooth, but will generate many kinds of conflict. And, unhappily, some of those conflicts will be very familiar. The break-up of old multi-ethnic communities which I described earlier is far from complete, and has a very long way to run. The world is full of lands where governance has never been other than arbitrary and top-down, and in which the experience of liberation, or democratic revolution, or whatever we term it, is yet to come. More neighbours will find that they cannot live together any longer. There will be more floods of helpless refugees, millions more asylum-seeking families. Some, with the return of peace and the devoted work of volunteers on the ground, may eventually return home—or at least, their children may. Some will be consigned to the 'Gaza Archipelago' of refugee camps which already stud the world. Most will end up in the *favelas* or tower-blocks of foreign cosmopolitan cities.

Plenty has been written about the decline of the nation-state, which will be a slower process than many people think. It is still true that nationalism is the most powerful political force in the world, and that the idea of the independent nation-state is the vehicle on to which most people load their hopes. But what will it mean—to take one example—to be a Scot in Scotland at the end of the twenty-first century? This is a good example to guess about, because modern nationalism in Scotland is only marginally about ethnicity in the sense of biological lineage, language, religion or other aspects of an identifiable Scottish culture. The late Professor Gwyn Alf Williams once said that anyone was Welsh who lived in Wales and was committed to Wales. Most Scottish politicians would give the same answer about Scottishness. Some nonsense is talked about Scottish immunity to racial prejudice; there is plenty of recent evidence to disprove this. But nobody talks seriously about genetic racial identity: a Kingdom of Scotland, made up of Gaels, Picts, Anglians and Norse settlers, existed well before anyone spoke of a 'Scottish people'. I remember how, eleven years ago now, the novelist William McIlvanney was cheered by a crowd of 30,000 people when he proclaimed that 'Scottishness is not some pedigree lineage. This is a mongrel tradition!'

In short, the signs are that Scottish identity will be basically political rather than ethnic. Loyalty will be to institutions: to a constitution, or to particular

democratic structures, or even to public services—‘In Scotland (let’s imagine) we have the most fair and efficient health care, or the best schools, or (pushing that imagination to sheer fantasy) the most advanced public transport system in Europe.’ Institutional patriotism, of course, exists already in many parts of the world. Americans venerate the Stars and Stripes in a highly old-fashioned way, but their loyalty is to the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence and even to the office of President of the United States—whoever occupies it. In Canada, there is a conscious effort by some historians to rewrite the Canadian past as the history of federal and provincial institutions, replacing the conventional narrative of political events. Even in Britain, our old Ukania, Mr Gordon Brown not long ago proposed that Labour should redirect patriotism towards pride in the National Health Service. If Scotland were to follow some of those models, it would at least be facing in the right direction as it passed through multiculturalism and the hybridity of a Forth–Clyde cosmopolis towards the new politics of the future.

To conclude, the politics of ethnicity are far from burned out. People will continue to turn against their neighbours and minorities as political lids come off. ‘Freedom’ in such suddenly decompressed societies will continue to release the worst instincts (‘better off without them’) as well as the best (‘now we are free to join the world’). But development is as uneven as it ever was. In other parts of the world, the politics of ethnicity is in irrevocable decline, and that decline is a process which seems to be spreading. Assimilation, as an ideal, is rapidly giving way to multiculturalism. And multiculturalism, in turn, will slowly yield to the infinite varieties of hybridity, against the background of ever-increasing migration and of the expansion of cosmopolitan cities.

Then, perhaps, comes something called post-hybridity. But it is better named a return to politics—new forms of politics. And somewhere in that new politics comes a final emancipation of the individual. Free at last of ethnic symbols and boundaries, he or she can recognize what is meant by a common human nature. Yes, that is feasible and obtainable, in a possible land.