Joined-up Politics and Postcolonial Melancholia

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WRITING AT the dawn of the Cold War, George Orwell likened the predicament of socialists to the position of a doctor struggling against the odds to keep a ‘hopeless case’ alive. More than 20 years beyond the finest flowering of this country’s anti-racist youth movements, its residual anti-racists have grown accustomed to similar feelings of obligation, determination, constraint and misplaced hope. This consideration of the diversification and transformation of our country must begin by honouring those who, like the Lawrence family and their core support, have struggled for so long to make Britain a freer, more just and more humane place. I would like to communicate respect and appreciation for those brave and diligent people who have worked in climates of hatred, ridicule and indifference to try and make what we used to call ‘anti-racism’ part of the process of calculation engaged in by governments, markets and other social institutions. I feel that we value them and their half-hidden and often disreputable traditions of political action most effectively at this point, by moving firmly against the recent but nonetheless mythical notion that Britain has sorted out the discrete issues of ‘race’ and ethnicity in an exemplary manner and is now a wholly successful multicultural society to which the rest of Europe can turn for inspiration and guidance. That view is tempting. It has a certain superficial plausibility, but we must be cautious about buying into it. It is attractive above all because it suggests that there is nothing else to be done. The hard work is in the past. From this angle, the belated official response to the murder of Stephen Lawrence and the institutional failures that compounded that tragedy provide solid proof of an irreversible commitment to taking racism out of our civic culture. This convenient view fits easily into the idea that widespread shame at the failures of our police and courts has made some degree of opposition to racism an essential component in the...
cathartic redefinition of British decency we have just witnessed – a historic triumph which may in due course be claimed for the tattered regimental honours of New Labour.

In contrast to that mistaken approach, I want to suggest that a great deal more hard work lies ahead. This apprehension also obliges me to say unambiguously that, especially when seen through the blood-stained frame of racialized politics, New Labour's postcolonial Britain is in a precarious, divided and volatile condition. Everything is not all right. Social inequalities may be decreasing but economic inequality is growing. The politics of ‘race’ is inescapably intertwined with them both. Better tests of Britain's cultural diversity will materialize when economic conditions are worse than they are now.

The great tide of sympathy for the Lawrence family suggests that some denizens of Middle England have turned away from the sly, self-effacing but always statesmanlike, populist race-talk of Enoch Powell and his many followers, but that historic opportunity has not been seized upon by New Labour and identified as a powerful means to communicate their ‘modernizing’ break with that unsavoury past. We need to consider exactly why it is William and Ffion rather than Tony and Cherie who felt they had something to gain by demonstrating their command of the postcolonial art of jumping up in the Grove. The role of Paul Dacre's Daily Mail in the Lawrence case confirms that the Tories know something about the political calculus of ‘race’ and gender that Millbank is still waiting to learn. Our rulers appear to be caught between one world, where the idea that Britain has nurtured relatively peaceful encounters with difference is a minor political asset, and another more important one where being tough on immigrants of all types affords them real political advantages. The media narration of the Lawrences' tragedy demonstrated a reversal of the comforting Powellite scenario in which feral black youth preyed on frail, vulnerable and aged inner-city whites. But where the vestiges of Powell's construction persist, contact with aliens, blacks and any other outsiders can represent only the decline of the United Kingdom and the debasement of time-worn British identity. As you know, that noble history is already being sullied and undone by the corrosive influence of immigrants and the malign activities of stealthy foreigners hell-bent on seizing that critical element of Britain's deepest identities: its currency.

Whatever the spin doctors and public relations people currently suggest, 'diversity' is one area in which Tonyism is loathe to take risks and follow the race-shedding cues offered by the globalizing corporate world to which it usually defers. The problems articulated around ‘race’, culture and plurality are not amenable to being solved on a once-and-for-all basis. They cannot be divorced from widespread anxieties over nationality and the integrity of national culture under pressure from globalization and transnationalism. They cannot be placed in cold storage by a grand governmental gesture, nor can they be left quietly to sort themselves out under the benevolent eye of a beefed up CRE, until the next shocking revelation comes.
along to trigger some new spiralling plunge into the depths of amnesia. This very indeterminacy suggests that nothing much can be done. There will always be a more urgent reason to avoid any risk to Labour's electoral apple-cart. Tony may walk on water but even he and Clare Short\(^8\) cannot bring Joy Gardner\(^9\) and the rest back from the dead.

In pointing out these difficulties I am not making the romantic argument that racial identification enjoys an ontic, primordial or spiritual character that resists political initiatives. I want to emphasize that consistent, wholehearted and serious governmental solutions have not been attempted. If things are to improve, if the body-count is to decline, and the legacy of compounded injustice diminish, then the conflicts and hurt that racism creates have to be articulated as political problems and brought fully into the formal language and rationality of political and judicial processes. There are obvious difficulties in securing that outcome, particularly where racialized inequalities are exceptionally recognized as matters of minority concern but are not thought to be sufficiently important to merit sustained attention. The power of race-thinking to divide, destroy and distort constitutes one dense layer of conflicts, the characteristic patterns of refusal and denial that surround it in British political life present substantial problems of a rather different order. Recognizing this double task suggests that making ‘race’ political enough is a far larger task than it may initially appear to be. It is certainly more difficult than many well-intentioned people would like. Just appreciating the scale of that democratic commitment is an important first step. The refusal to concede its dimensions can be interpreted as a recurrent effect of an underlying malaise that resides in the distinctive combination of two closely aligned responses: the inability to take racism seriously and an iron-jawed disinclination to recognize the equal human worth and dignity of people who are not ‘white’.

That precious ‘whiteness’ should not be reified either and may yet have important implications for the future of Europe. So far there is no consensus about its ethnic or cultural contents. The idea of purity, with which it has been associated, requires and creates a void – a blank, bleached space. No actually existing culture can possibly measure up to the impossible standards of perfection that this racializing discourse demands. The same void makes anxious folk vulnerable to the appeal of a casual, normative, white supremacism that conceals and negotiates its own disappointments and discomforts by endlessly holding off the moment in which it has to confront its own strange reflection. To keep that critical, edgy encounter between perfect, abstract whiteness and empirical ‘white trash’ at bay, white supremacism promotes the colour-coded concepts of national belonging that can cancel all premature celebrations of the cool multiculturalism that is yet to come. Today, the notable sporting achievements of Linford, Lennox, Incey and Denise Lewis\(^10\) notwithstanding, to be recognized as belonging means being just like those decaying chalk cliffs which we are told met the anxious gaze of the invader in this country's finest hours. It is to be immobile, silent, apparently unchanging and blankly, blindness-inducingly, white. Whatever,
the actual ecology of that great symbolic fortification – reported recently to be slowly turning yellow much to the disgust of more metaphysically patriotic locals – its frontier refers us to stories of our nation at war. Heroic tales of danger, fraternity and enhanced self-understanding are everywhere as comedy, tragedy, sport, news and politics. They are repeatedly invoked not only because they still construct immigration as another invasive military campaign but because of an enduring capacity to isolate and exclude aliens and, in doing so, to produce the pleasures of an impossibly unanimous nation in all its imaginary simplicity. These militaristic operations tap into the murkiest layers of the English vernacular. The masculinist ‘two world wars and one world cup’ mentality they celebrate is, of course, also absolutely incompatible with all notions of cultural diversity, however meek, mild and piously Christian they might aspire to be. In a sense, then, when it comes to ‘race’ and nation, we have grown used to living under martial rules. Until that cultural and psychological complex begins to shift, nothing else will be able to change.

The choice posed by Enoch Powell’s death was a pivotal moment: an early chance to examine New Labour’s determination to practise what they call joined-up politics. They passed that test at no discernible cost. Perry Worsthorne’s apology for the way that he had been led astray by the great man was the first lonely swallow in another British summer that never came. Still, after those brown faces had been spotted in the crowds weeping over Diana, few respectable commentators wanted to be seen to be racists, and that was well before the iconic presence of Stephen Lawrence blazed through the media heavens and the righteous tenacity of his parents had underlined Britain’s present difficulties. But even after that episode, many voices, inside and outside the bounds of political institutions, were alert to the conspicuous payoff that can follow from manipulating the tacit, race-friendly and race-producing codes of Brit nationalism. Those cynical operations can still conjure racialized sentiments into logic-defying life and they nurture several distinctly unwholesome desires. They feed an old bipartisan yearning to keep the idea of ‘race’ away from the centre of political calculation and are equally determined to see those rare moments when the damage done by race-thinking to British law, morality and politics becomes apparent, not just as embarrassingly, but as useless, unproductive and unhealthy. Rather than being actively claimed and then used to build up and enhance our flagging democracy, these unsought opportunities must be closed down as quickly as possible lest they distract proper political sentiment and divert precious political resources towards ignoble and unworthy goals.

This is the influential current in which the eloquent immigrant voice of Michael Ignatieff has been raised. He says that there are important political and ethical points at stake in his obstinate refusal to acknowledge the power of racism to distort and corrode democratic social and civic interaction. These days, Ignatieff speaks in the name of ‘liberal realism’ seemingly from somewhere inside the trouser turn-ups of the late Isaiah Berlin. The blank refusal distilled in Ignatieff’s recent warning: ‘If racism is in the
eye of the beholder, we will never be finished with it’, is itself a revealing
gesture, and was not born from the author’s impatience at the wretched speed
at which a race-less world is emerging. It was designed, apparently, to relay
stern instructions to the mouthy, justice-seeking minorities who, Ignatieff
believes, ‘often inhabit unfathomably different universes’: stop whinging, he
tells them, straighten up and fly right, or it’s back to your unfathomably
different universes you must go.

In his response to the Macpherson report, Ignatieff (1999) presented
police incompetence and police racism as mutually exclusive alternative
explanations of the wrongs suffered by the Lawrence family. There was no
sense that racism had to be addressed specifically as an aspect of the in-
justice he claims to abhor, no understanding that after all the deaths in
custody, all the choke holds, the sticky tape, the forced deportations and the
contemptuous, dismissive official silences, it might be worth taking the
patterned indifference that would deny blacks full humanity, seriously at all.
For him, the guilty and wrong-headed developments associated with anti-
racist training are unwelcome because they tune citizens in to the wrong
channels of their civic identities. They make the easily influenced over-
sensitive to the spurious claims of differentiation. Britain’s ageing institutions
may need to be reformed in this area but the truly modern answer to any
race-based discrimination is to train state servants to treat those they inter-
act with as sovereign interchangeable individuals rather than representa-
tives of any larger collective groups. Why this has not happened already does
not need to be considered. Rejoice, we have the technology. Politics can
either be safely renounced because it doesn’t apply in this zone or re-
directed towards other more profitable areas of intervention. Ultimately, the
grey poetry management-speak takes over.

The path identified by Ignatieff in his role as Witchfinder General to
Britain’s B52 liberals has been followed to the snowy peaks of Uncle Enoch’s
Shangri-La by a number of others. The dust in Old Compton Street had
barely settled before Ros Coward entered the lists as a would-be champion
of the ‘ordinary’ British people who react against minorities with violence
because they, like her, are inclined to see Britain’s ethnic populations as
being privileged rather than discriminated against. For these two rather des-
perate but usefully typical refugees from the debris of the Left, all politically
correct remedies against discriminatory attitudes and behaviour are worse
than the unavoidable ailments at which they have been aimed. Misguided
reforming initiatives prompted by the purveyors of ‘identity politics’ supply
conclusive proof that the world has been turned upside down, not so much
by the racists and homophobes but by the alien interlopers whose impossible
demands to be recognized if not more actively tolerated, have triggered
the reasonable and comprehensible antipathy of their hosts.

Coward’s blame-the-victim utopia was an especially strange place in
which Britain’s minorities were required, in fact, not to be minorities at all
and where, if we are to avoid the all-too-understandable violence directed
at us by ordinary British folk, we must learn to be confident in the power of
the phantom presence she blithely labels ‘the shared values of the majority’. Minimal exposure to one of Ali G’s\(^4\) great ethnographic expeditions into darkest England is sufficient to detonate the anachronistic assumptions there. It is not only that any shared values are no longer binding but that the absence of cultural mortar from the national necropolis is a significant source of amusement and pleasure for as many people as it alarms. The sharp divisions exposed not only by responses to the Lawrence case but by a whole sequence of other profound political conflicts over hunting, say, the monarchy or recreational drug use, should surely have undermined the resort to such simplistic formulae, but no, Coward went on to blame the fallout from Macpherson’s enquiry for producing the bad responses involved in her unsatisfactory experiences at the local swimming pool. My perspective, the precise inversion of hers, would argue that it is only episodes like the Lawrence family’s tragedy that make this nation’s dwindling fund of common values momentarily apparent.

Though the news evidently couldn’t reach Coward in her suburban eyrie, under the exceptional conditions that followed the publication of Macpherson’s strategically overpriced report, most liberals and some conservatives could agree with the hitherto contentious proposition that ‘race’ is an unhelpful fiction best set aside and kept out of respectable politics. However, their minimal sense of what that extensive task involves often undermined their good intentions. They make the Herculean labours involved in purging race-thinking from Britain’s body-politic appear too easy, quick and straightforward. There is a real danger that this critical insight could be abused. The argument runs like this: if we agree that ‘race’ doesn’t exist, then why do we still need special arrangements to address its consequences? In the practical terms now favoured by government, this stance would mean that police anti-racism, and any other forms of special intervention designed to de-legitimize prejudice, make temporary restitution or promote equality of opportunity, can quite reasonably be done away with. This is something that figures like Ignatieff and Coward seem prepared to flirt with when they endorse the idea that ‘special pleading for minorities actually confers advantages that “ordinary” people don’t have’. That chorus is set to grow and it must be answered with a tactical emphasis not on ‘race’ but on the lore and relations of inequality that bring it to life.

These depressing arguments have not as yet won the ear of government but it’s easy to see how they will eventually provide an obvious get-out from the conceits of misplaced governmental efforts at social engineering. Their complacency has been rather unsystematically denounced by the voices of a second, broadly differentiated constituency. Affiliates of this group may not agree over what to do about it, but they share a sense that racialized difference and the violence that flows from it have to be recognized as something substantive. This group encompasses those who bravely argue that encounters with difference can be enriching and see diversity as constitutive of society. It also includes some voices from defensively minded community-based organizations which, in their efforts to take the destructive
impact of race-thinking seriously, have sometimes become too comfortable with the cheap and automatic solidarity offered by ethnic absolutism. When their ultra-nationalist, fraternalist and occult antics get out of hand, it's worth remembering that Britain's black communities have repeatedly turned away from all attempts to articulate their miseries as part of a separatist political agenda. For a whole host of demographic and historical reasons, their battles over identity, religion and ethnic tradition have been more intensely conducted in the hidden spheres of home, family and interpersonal relations. At the moment, their fledgling fundamentalisms are essentially private matters. As far as public and political conduct goes, for decades now, they have usually been inclined to engage the 'host' society with the greatest possible patience and politeness, seeking colour-blind justice in more than their own immediate interests at a time when most people in this country give little thought to its enhancement. Remember too that monolingualism is not their norm. Specific grievances have been patiently translated into local and regional idioms. There have been no riotous protests in the name of Stephen Lawrence. Britain's struggles for civil liberties and judicial and constitutional reform are both heavily indebted to long-standing minority efforts, which have been built through a moral economy and with a political rhetoric that project community as more than a spatial concentration of strange or different people. Ignatieff boasts provocatively and dismissively that Britain's black community is an entirely fictional entity, however this second group sees that fragile counterpower springing to life intermittently, not necessarily as some essential collective but as a transitional but nonetheless effective, political and moral response to repeated wrongs. It is understood by many of them as a practical example of the responsible democratic activity proper to a citizenship more authentic than anything they knew in the officially forgotten days of the colour bar, the paki-bashers, the skinheads and those 'virginity tests' in Heathrow airport. Like all that shocking black grief over Diana, the conspicuous dignity of the Lawrences is only really a surprise if you are used to imagining black people as hyper-emotional, child/savages. The vivid associational life of the community in which they stand has been constituted from its contemporary mobilizations as much as any ethnic inheritance. That black community emerges in seeking justice as an interpretative community and a community that, in recognition of its internal differentiation and its transient status as an effect of prejudice and discrimination, sometimes even looks forward to its own abolition. The language of community should be welcomed rather than disparaged; historians will eventually note that the conflicts in which it has circulated have functioned to integrate immigrant people and their descendants almost exactly as the political theory of procedural liberalism would anticipate that it should.

This second group can be both liberal and not so liberal. Where it becomes explicitly anti-racist, its members have been drawn into a loose coalition because they can discover no significant compromise of civic or democratic principles arising from the suggestion that the workings of
racism, past and present, might be acknowledged as an important public issue by government and its agencies. For many on this side of Ignatieff’s Alamo-style line in the dust, the abstract universality so beloved of liberals who will not concede the destructive transnational power of race-thinking, has had to be set aside because it has proved to be an insufficient cloak against bullets, bombs and blades. On this side of the street, individuals are more likely to be seen as culturally specific though not always as culture-bound. Here, it is easier to appreciate that though people can mould their ‘ethnicity’ more than they sometimes like to admit, there are no good reasons why it should be driven from the public realm to seek its only legitimate expressions in private.

I want to speak now as an anti-racist and as anti-anti-racist simultaneously. I confess that I share a lot of hospitable liberalism’s hankering after a race-free world. Unlike them, I favour a planetary rather than a market universalism but I agree that we’d all be better off without reified racial and ethnic categories mystifying the world at a time when our relationship with our own species life is assuming a new and potentially wonderful complexity. It has been good that liberals have queried the easy resort to particularity and interrupted the cheap invocations of incommensurability that have trivialized both political solidarity and the hard work involved in learning once again to translate, listen and evaluate, contrast and compare across the leaky but not insignificant boundaries of discrepant cultures. The anti-racists are right where they have challenged the mistaken view that an undiscriminating, ‘universal love of mankind and the world’ necessarily involves diminishing the value of love. On the other hand, they have been wrong where their view of pluralism as a motionless mosaic capitulates weakly to the narcissism of minor differences. The difference-mongers have sometimes placed the image of the victim at the heart of political hopes that have been articulated in rather too anthropological terms, but they have made other good points where they have advocated not only an indivisible but an explicitly non-racial justice; where they have drawn attention to the stubborn links between inequality and racialized hierarchy; and where they have defended the presence of other cultures in an expanded and invigorated, cosmopolitan public sphere endowed with new strength as a result of its ability to experience exposure to otherness as more than the danger, stress and loss we’re always told it must entail.

It’s important to appreciate that just understanding these contrasting responses to the trials of multiculture necessitates a journey to the limits of our available political language. Liberals, civic and ethnic, old, new and neo- are still, after all, liberals, and they can be present on both sides of Ignatieff’s fence. Similarly, racial conservatism knows no colour line and, now that socialists are silent on these matters and feminists have been diverted by their own paralysing encounters with the idea of absolute difference, this argument over the status of ‘race’, nationality and ethnicity can be recognized as a dispute about what liberalism is to be in future. Is it compatible with the recognition of particularity? What forms of tolerance can it
endorse? Considering the wrongs involved in race-thinking creates a test of social pluralism as well as a compass with which to locate liberal responses in a rapidly changing political topography.

It should be obvious that the real divisions here are more than simply ideological. They are moral and philosophical. They ask us honestly to address not real or even reified racial differences, coded on or in the body, but the systems of thought that produced and still produce difference as gross inequality and catastrophic violence. The deepest divisions are thus between those who are committed to a lengthy and serious detour through the history of race-thinking's corrosive impact upon the very democratic political traditions that liberals prize without ever taking their compromised character into account, and those who dismiss that terrifying task as trivial, loony or politically correct. Against them I would say that if Britain's fragile democratic resources are to be renewed and extended, their long, complex and deeply ambivalent relation to the idea of 'race' must be brought to light. Only then might the precious idea of universal humanity be plausibly offered back to those who have been excluded from its inner circle on raciological grounds.

The national convulsion which followed the publication of Macpherson's report was not the healing moment that it could have been. The apologies were mostly too easy or grudging, and sometimes they were patently insincere. Frequently, they were offered by the wrong people, exceptional individuals who had themselves been fighting long battles for non-racial justice inside the organizations they were required, on this special occasion, to represent as their in-house proprietors of the race problem. The language employed was often emotional but it was not charged with any moral significance and, for the celebrity apostles of the Third Way, compromised by the traditional habits of an emphatically anti-modern police service, the post-Macpherson spasm amounted to a spot of bad weather that could soon be made to blow over. This rare moment offered plenty of additional proof as to how much Britain's chronic political crisis became and remains intelligible principally as a crisis of national identity, but its patterns of media representation and information were only briefly outside those of the governmental machine. Once the looming figures of predatory White Wolves were replaced by the far less menacing image of a dangerous but isolated eccentric, the work involved in tracing and unravelling the web of associations that linked Tyndal to Tebbitt, Baldwin to Blair, Enoch to the A courts and Straw to Howard, Hurd and Clarke could be closed down. Any remaining political ground was swiftly ceded to the lawyers who could be left to dispute Macpherson’s more contentious recommendations over freedom of information, inquests and the accountability of the Metropolitan Police, many of which were replete with echoes of more radical work done towards the same ends by the GLC Police Committee during the 1980s. Once again, the government's taste for practical solutions turned out to be less than consistent.

A fully independent system for managing complaints against the police is as far away as ever, but there were new departures. In one decisive step
beyond the analysis offered by Lord Scarman, getting rid of racism emerged from this episode as a matter of administrative and managerial technique. The idea that 'institutional racism' could have significant implications for how political processes were conducted or understood did not appear to dawn on anybody. Here, again, the populist legacy of Conservative rule was the main intimidating factor. Paul Boateng, his youthful GLC days long forgotten and now eagerly playing a fawning Smithers to the whims of Jack Straw’s Monty Burns, was first dispatched to defend Commissioner Condon against the un-joined-up demand that he resign, and then to warn the nation’s black muggers and marginals that they would not be able to ‘use the Macpherson Report as a cloak for their criminal activities’. He continued: ‘Stop and search is there to be used as part of the police’s armoury. We expect the police to use it. There’s no softly, softly policy there’s no hands-off policy. We believe in stop and search . . .’. In this lost world of politics without conflict, division or even debate, the spin doctors are always right. You can have business as usual in the street-level operations of police power but you can also ‘use’ stop and search ‘in a way that attracts the support of the whole community black and white’. The compromised imperatives of sensible, joined-up politics dictate that no one is to be estranged, offended or perturbed, everyone can board this privatized bus to post-political utopia. You can please all of the people all of the time. So much for hard choices.

Power is there to be administered and Middle England will never be inner London. Politics, joined-up or otherwise, eventually yields meekly to the different rules of statecraft. In the key constituencies where control of government will be lost or retained, the British love of playing fair does not currently include recognizing the possibility that blacks can belong. Far better, then, to manage the problem of diversity and inclusivity, theatrically and aesthetically by, for example, putting up Trevor Phillips to be a celebrity mayor, or by gilding the withering boughs of the House of Lords with the delicate blooms represented by a few carefully selected ethnic peerages. Minority business people, mentored and marshalled by Keith Vaz and then cheered on by Lord Taylor of Warwick will supply the incontrovertible proof that this country is, after all modern! Their knee-bending legions are to be the final evidence that Britain really has changed for the better. Under the arc lights, colour turns out to be a critical index after all, and, surprise surprise, the American corporate model is once more decisive. To quote Vaz: ‘Bill Clinton showed an acute appreciation of the fact that in the modern world good race relations and good business practice are synonymous’. It’s hard to see how this deluded profundity might have helped Stephen Lawrence, but then he seems to have passed outside the present. That wrong resolved, to all intents and purposes, into a financial transaction that provides an uncomfortable alternative to more substantive forms of judicial restitution.

By now we have no excuse not to know that our political culture is being transformed by management technique, celebrity and a host of bad
habits drawn from unchecked commerce and rampant corporate life. But how does that big shift impact upon the politics of diversity? Is the best we can hope for the idea that, driven onward by the rhythms of a planetary economy, racial division will wither away and become an ephemeral, in-substantial moment in the operations of regionalized consumer preference? The situation is dominated by the anti-historical fantasies of the advertising people whose creative input sculpted Labour's brand identity and fed their corporate populism. Meanwhile, mass electoral abstention and routine image manipulation tell a different story about the health of British democracy.

According to media legend, Macpherson's biggest achievement was his unanticipated redefinition of institutional racism to include the 'un-intentional' in addition to the unwitting and unconscious behaviours previously identified. This, taken together with his timely consumerist emphasis on collective organizational failure, compounded our present difficulties by breathing new life into an anachronistic definition drawn from the wilder backwoods of early-1970s ethnic sociology. His report yields a view of racism as either everywhere equally, mysteriously coating the institutional landscape like an unexpected fall of snow, or as far too closely specified: exclusively concentrated in the bleak environment favoured by Kentish London's criminal shock troops. This utterly false and paralysing choice cannot produce anything helpful. The best response to it relies heavily on the slow and unglamorous labour that can reveal racism to be a persistent factor in political and economic relations, by demonstrating, for example, where the injustice of the judicial system and the incompetence of the police in the Lawrence investigations operated with and through the language and concepts of racial and ethnic division. Sadly, outside the theatres where it has done a roaring trade, this worthwhile alternative is still being dismissed as unthinkable. To follow that path away from Eltham and to carry the same type of analysis into the corridors of Whitehall, the Inner Temple or White City is dismissed defensively as manifestly stupid or, in quieter tones, as a disproportionate reaction. Nobody seems inclined to acknowledge the ways that race-thinking has shaped the wider common assumptions of the political culture – its premium identities, its shifting sense of nationality, its ideas of belonging, of progress, of democracy and, indeed, of history. All of this while the time-reversing, anti-cosmopolitan nail bombs were going off and Hitler was getting reincarnated in the form of 'Slobba'.

The widespread re-appearance and imitation of fascist political styles in various parts of Europe ought to warn us that race-thinking is in transition too. It is being updated to offer certainty and consolation to its anxious adherents and stabilizes their uncomfortable experiences of an accelerating world. It gives them meaning, hope and even love. Where national and ethnic identity are represented raciologically and projected as pure, exposure to difference threatens them with dilution and compromises their prized purities with the ever-present possibility of contamination. Crossing, as mixture and movement, must be guarded against. New hatreds and violence arise not, as they did in the past, from supposedly reliable anthropological
knowledge of the identity and difference of the Other, but from the novel problem of not being able to locate the Other’s difference in the common-sense lexicon of alterity. Different people are certainly hated and feared, but the timely antipathy against them is nothing compared to the hatreds turned towards the greater menace of the half-different and the partially familiar. To have mixed is to have been party to a great betrayal. Any unsettling traces of hybridity must be excised from the tidy, bleached-out zones of impossibly pure culture.

Our transitional predicament obliges us to try and understand these local preoccupations in their larger historical setting. The disappointing responses to the Lawrence tragedy raise urgent and immediate matters for Britain, but they also represent only one instance of an equally pressing and more general set of difficulties: the wider political and moral crisis being identified in overdeveloped nation-states under the sign of multiculturalism. All the key terms in these debates are blurry and yet the divisions between their protagonists produce unexpectedly strong feelings. In Britain, these currents are so strong and so bitter that there are good grounds to wonder what else is at stake. Whatever the immediate institutional setting – poverty, criminal justice, work and education – the familiar abstractions about multiculture, diversity and plurality become intensely animated. Across Europe these debates are haunted by other histories, usually but not only those that involve colonial guilt and postcolonial shame. The residues of imperial and colonial culture live on wherever ‘race’ is invoked. Locally, they promote a nostalgia and sanction a violence which ensure that Britain stays paralysed by the inability to really work through the loss of global prestige and the economic and political benefits that once attended it. ‘Race’, or rather the presence of supposedly alien peoples for which it supplies the cipher, constitutes the visible link to a cultural pathology that is hard to analyse but which reaches nonetheless into the innermost ways in which British society operates. We might tentatively name this ugly formation postcolonial melancholia. It bears repetition that it is not some-thing precipitated by the intrusive presence and unsettling, noisome habits of migrants, their children, their grandchildren or any other permanently strange folk. They have been caught up in it but it preceded their settlement and it is not their problem. It is, at root, the morbid core of England and Englishness in remorseless decline, the same strain that feeds interminable and increasingly desperate speculations about the content and character of the shrinking culture that makes England distinctive.

That observation provides an opportunity to turn towards the idea of culture and the distinctive accents it acquires when brought into the field of national and racialized identity. Taking elementary defensive action against openly belligerent crusaders for ethno-unanimity and essential or absolute difference – whatever ‘colour’ they may be – should not mean that we overlook the different perils surrounding the insubstantial pluralism which has largely failed to answer their calls to arms. Though that pluralistic mentality may provide assistance in the storms ahead, it is a flimsy formation
that suffers in particular from the limited ways in which it conceptualizes culture. During the last 30 years of British political history it has been engaged not so much with the project of assimilation but on the different tasks involved in giving minorities their difference and then expecting them to celebrate it interminably, usually under the beneficent eye of governmental institutions fed by their gratitude. Perhaps that form of official recognition is something we can now do without? The agenda it promotes is problematic, first, because it leaves the position of the majority intact. The hard, moral and political work involved in negotiating the fears of the majority and accommodating their expectations need not even be identified. From this angle, as well, politics is clearly not an issue. Culture, conceived reductively and mechanistically provides an alternative form of solidarity as well as a principle for recognizing, rationalizing and manipulating difference and the various identities it supports. Each warring element of the fixed mosaic totality is projected as separate, entire of itself and sealed off – no civic cement in this model – from the influence of other similar formations which can only be mutually destructive and compromising. Just as they were in the 19th century, the dangers are greatest for those at the top of the heap, for the culture that has the most to lose in its tumble from the top rung of the developmental ladder.

In the postcolonial twilight, to encounter difference produces only jeopardy. In response to that threat, the historic obligation to conserve culture produces a different conservatism: readily racialized, nationalized and now gene biologized under the brittle shells of protective, know-nothing ethnicity. It has acquired many compelling variants. Englishness, Scottishness, Irishness even Welshness can construct the same little parcels of ossified culture equivalent to the steel pans and samosas that were once the synecdochical meltdown of torrid, colonial histories. Culture is now analysed as property rather than process.

That powerful fantasy of how culture operates has some reputable sociological hallmarks. It is nonetheless locked in an inescapable confrontation with the easy, informal and downbeat urban culture that contributed heavily to the climate in which ‘Cool Britannia’ looked plausible, and which still draws young people from right across Europe towards London. Its postcolonial character means that difference is routine. This otherness is magnetic but need not be exotic. There are still conflicts, but there is also a savvy, agonistic humanism around. It has become vital to the sustenance of metropolitan life and to the confidence of the fragmentary but really cosmopolitan public culture that has established itself in unbleached parts of this city. This precious life-form has crepuscular habits. It rarely emerges into full daylight. It has certainly not been planned or orchestrated from above by visionary municipal thinkers or a modernizing political leadership. It is not amenable to being disciplined, ventriloquized or iconized. If we desire to develop and protect it as a civic asset, we have to be aware that it exists in spite of governmental interventions and is all the more precious because of its profound antipathy towards many of them. We must remember, too, that
This surreptitious multiculture is not always a prestige object in the economy of governmental signs. It is too disreputable, too spontaneously democratic, too closely associated with youth culture, too hostile both to class hierarchy and to the shiny corporate authority that strives to replace it, for that.

Though I am inclined to be utopian, I am not naive. I know that the joys of shuttling between little Englandism and generic xenophobia have found some of their most enthusiastic practitioners among Britain's young people for whom those endlessly stylish Nazis are German first and Fascist only secondarily, if at all. Nothing here can be taken for granted, but the dissident forms of youth's surreptitious multiculture require that we re-think the habits of the redundant culturalist analysis produced to account for racial and ethnic divisions in the era of Jenkins and Hattersley and scarcely touched since then. Think, for example, of the crude generational and cultural models that govern political and institutional analysis. Their time horizons will hardly stretch beyond two generations. The first, the immigrants, has been succeeded by the second. It is composed of their offspring: younger people caught effectively between the ethno-cultural monolith that shaped their parents and the altogether different body of culture that constitutes the life of the host community into which they are thrown: ill prepared, reviled and disadvantaged both by their own migrant burdens and the explosive antipathy of their English not-quite-peers. Cross-cultural contact is contaminating, tragic and dangerous. The decisive moment in the larger scheme of identity crisis emerges from the lives of the second generation. Right and left, radical and conservative, all endorse variants of this stale script held together only by a disavowed subscription to hidden racial codes. It will make life more difficult in the short term, but we will have to learn not to judge the behaviours of different groups against a spurious characteristic sense of how we think they should be living out their ethnic differences. The politics of diversity, tolerance and recognition is being played out differently at various generational stages. Even when draped in archaic ethnic symbols, modern, protectionist demands for the coherence and integrity of minority groups conflict sharply with the unstoppable postmodern desire to make and play with mutable individuality. That desire to be free and to be free from 'race' and ethnicity can be both destructive and liberating. Understanding this complex context provides a better grasp of its cultural dynamics and its political possibilities. For me, it enhances the value of the libertarian and cosmopolitan forms that have been the finest gifts of Britain's most recent black settlers to their fellow citizens and to the world.

The global selling of black bodies as a prestigious element in the economy of health, sports and fitness industries means that blackness is now largely uncoupled from the theme of immigration which overdetermined it for so long, but the pattern set by bipartisan policies oriented to the twin benefits of restriction and integration endures today in the brutal and unjust regime that keeps asylum seekers and refugees at bay and is, as we have seen, also fortuitously the best means to keep Middle England content. Against the expectations of the rigid two-and-then-three-cultures model,
Britain’s black populations are increasingly differentiated culturally, economically, ideologically and politically. If the automatic links between blackness and poverty have been partially broken, most postcolonial settlers do remain both socially excluded and economically marginal. For every hypervisible corporate or entrepreneurial success, there are plenty of other grimmer tales to tell. Racial division is still integral to the workings of schools, courts and markets, and the political goals that follow from imagining a world without racial hierarchies are still being trivialized. Our prisons – until very recently being run by Richard Tilt, someone who thought that his black charges had different necks from the rest of the prison population, and who has now been rewarded with a Knighthood for his pains – are brimming over. Young black and Asian people are shut out from education, harassed in the streets and criminalized with the connivance of the media, eager to initiate celebrations when British multiculture becomes a matter of occasional national festivity, but more or less routinely nostalgic for simpler, easier times, when it was possible to pretend that this was an exclusively white country. That yearning is yet to find a respectable political vehicle, but even in its mute state it still gives real cause for alarm. I hope it is not melodramatic to suggest that a storm is on the way, and that both peace and democracy will be at stake when it breaks.

It is here that we should be prepared to become immersed in the historians’ task of periodizing changes to the economic and political institutions of the overdeveloped countries under the impact of the great communicative, technological and scientific revolution that may be bringing the time of nation-states to an end. Brazilianization is not quite the right concept with which to begin the work of enumerating these processes, but it points towards the poorer parts of our planet as places in which significant clues to our own fate may lie. We need to know where the divisive, race-entrenching tendencies, far better described as the South Africanization of our social and economic life, cut into our cities and polities. That investigative, forensic work has so far proved difficult to combine with more abstract considerations of diversity, recognition and difference promoted by the speculative, philosophical writings of Charles Taylor, James Tully, Michael Walzer and company (see for example Walzer, 1997). The more open-ended discussions cannot be abandoned, particularly where they have raised the question of whether non-specific theories of political recognition are an adequate vehicle for the elaboration of what might be termed a principled multiculturalism. Rather than find a conclusion in that direction, I prefer to suggest that, for Britain at least, the turn towards those epochal questions, diversity, recognition and difference, might itself be interpreted as a hopeful sign – something promising that communicates more than the exhaustion of political culture as it has been practised in the past, and the redundancy of many of the theories that purport to explain its postmodern workings. Consolidating that promising shift presupposes not so much the inexorable decay of our immediate political culture, but a longer and more detailed history of 20th-century cultural politics. This was something quite different
from both typically ancient and modern definitions of political practice and assumed coherent shape only recently. A disenchanted Walter Benjamin offered a notable early diagnosis of it, based on glimpses of its novel technological bases as well as its links to war, ultra-nationalism and Fascism. His contemporary, Edward Bernays, began to try and systematize it into what he saw as a properly scientific and usable technique for managing the inter-relation of information and power. With their prescient analyses of the aestheticization and theatricalization of politics and commerce in mind, we can perhaps accept that this discussion of the challenge posed by multiculturalism must approach it as more than one small but telling manifestation of Britain’s chronic post-imperial decline. The justification for that change of perspective lies in the ways that Britain’s crisis is still routinely being registered as ‘race’, lived as ‘race’, most vividly projected and powerfully symbolized in racialized terms. We cannot then hide from ‘race’, but to understand how that continuing crisis has been articulated as a matter of ‘race’ and nation, culture and identity is not for a moment to suggest that it can be resolved at those levels, in that decaying hall of mirrors.

Notes
1. Stephen Lawrence was brutally and tragically murdered in Eltham, south-east London on 22 April 1993, initiating a process of political struggle that changed the way that Britain understood itself. See Macpherson (1999) and Cathcart (1999).
2. Enoch Powell, an esteemed Conservative politician from the Midlands, articulated a populist and ultra-nationalist politics around the catastrophic intrusion of blacks and other aliens into the heartlands of Britain. He is remembered now for his mentoring of Margaret Thatcher and for his April 1968 speech which used the idea of ‘rivers of blood’ to prophesy race war in England. See Gilroy (1999).
3. This refers to the leader of Britain’s Conservative opposition party and his spouse.
4. Tony Blair and Cherie Booth, his consort.
5. Britain’s leading conservative daily newspaper, read predominantly by women.
6. This is the address of the Labour Party’s strategic office. It has come to refer to the work of their ‘spin’ doctors.
7. The Commission for Racial Equality is the paragovernmental body charged with the task of implementing Britain’s race-equality legislation.
8. Minister of Overseas Development who, before her elevation, took a strong interest in race politics.
9. A Jamaican woman living in north London who died in front of her small son as a result of being forcibly manhandled by immigration authorities intent on deporting her from the country.
10. These are England’s most prominent black athletes.
11. The Labour Party greeted news of Powell’s passing with an appreciative commentary on his parliamentary competence and statesmanship. There was no mention of his aggressive and obscene racist commentaries on Britain’s undesired black settlers.
12. Sir Peregrine Worsthorne was one of the journalists who had taken the political
imperatives of Powellism over into the pages of respectable print media. After Powell died he acknowledged that he had been wrong in endorsing the prophecy of race war.

13. This refers to a bomb placed in the Admiral Duncan pub in the centre of Soho's gay district on 30 April 1999. Three people were killed by the blast, Andrea Dykes, John Light and Nicholas Moore.

14. Ali G is the creation of comedian Sacha Baron-Cohen. He is a rude boy who specialized in interviewing pompous and right-wing members of Britain's political establishment using terminology drawn from the black vernacular that they could not possibly have been expected to understand. A video of his material was Britain's best-selling comedy item towards the end of 1999.

15. The Acours were two brothers implicated in the murder of Stephen Lawrence; Straw is Jack Straw the Labour Home Secretary. Hurd, Howard and Clarke were his Conservative predecessors.

16. This refers to initiatives undertaken by the Greater London Council towards the goal of police accountability during the early 1980s following the riots in Brixton and elsewhere. A number of New Labour figures were associated with this development though the figurehead for it was Ken Livingstone, MP.

17. Lord Scarman produced a judicial inquiry into the riots that had erupted all over Britain during the summer of 1981 (Scarman, 1981).

18. Sir Paul Condon was Commissioner of the Metropolitan (London) Police during the years when the Lawrence tragedy was at its most intense.

19. Mr Phillips is a long-standing member of the Labour Party who has also made several careers as broadcaster, television presenter and businessman.

20. Lord Taylor is Britain's most prominent black Tory.

21. This is a reference to the killers of Stephen Lawrence who came from the southeast area of the city, i.e. the area closest to the county of Kent.

References