RETHINKING BRITAIN

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Abstracts

The fever of colonisation[1] over with, though not quite so, war-ripped Britain became a magnet for immigrants in dire need of bettering their lot, thus «reversing the journey made by generations of British emigrants»,[2] all the while redefining the sense of Britishness the Britons take pride in. The flow turned from the margins and returned to the metropolitan center in a reverse colonization, making the global local, which gave birth to multiculturalist Britain. Anecdotally, at the very time Britain wanted to rid itself of its colonies, we, the colonised, followed them home to London, a city paved in gold. «We just came to check out whether that was so or not»,[3] Hall says. While colonial encounters represented a contest zone shaping to significant lengths and breadths the inimical perception and conception of an/other, immigration afforded an amphibian terrain, a contact zone very much like a cauldron where the past and the present merge, though not so immaculately as misconceptions still persist.

Parole chiave	Contatti
colonisation, Britain, immigrants, Britishness, margin, center, multiculturalist, contact zone	jamal.akabli@hotmail.com

1. From Colony to Metropolis.

«The proliferation of diasporic populations», occasioned by economic and political factors among others, created «a situation in which it is no longer possible to identify cultures with national boundaries».[4] Cultures have become so fluid as have individuals one cannot lay any claim to any one culture as being insular and self-contained. Misrepresented «in terms of fixity, of certainty, centredness, homogeneity, as something unproblematically identical with itself»,[5] Englishness is, as Young says of it, suffering «an identity crisis».[6] This crisis stems from the difficulty of assigning it particular deterministic traits. The same diversity that is taken to task for making the task of defining Englishness impractical is to be celebrated as that which adds versatility to British character. Britishness ought to be redefined to cater for a composite of

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[1] Althusser made it clear that a softer velvet form of colonization replaced the soldierly and more costly occupation of the land.

[2] M. NI FHLATHUIN, *The British Empire*, in J. MCLEOD (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, Routledge, London and New York 2007, p. 31.

[3] S. HALL, *The Local and the Global*, in A. KING (ed.), *Culture, Globalization, and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1991, p. 24.

[4] B. ASHCROFT and H. KADHIM, eds., *Edward Said and the Post-colonial*, Nova Science Publishers Inc, New York 2001, p. 5.

[5] R. J.C. YOUNG, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Routledge, New York and London 1995, p. 2.

[6] YOUNG, *Ethnicity As Otherness*, in E. MUDIMBE-BOYI, ed., *Beyond Dichotomies: Histories, Identities, Cultures and the Challenge of Globalization*, State University of New York Press, USA 2002. p. 154.

elements that go into its making and remaking. «The indivisibility of place» does not suffice as a precondition for «the individuality of the subject»[7] for one can live in one place and have his heart in another, in both or in none. That is, one can straddle worlds apart and maintain one's sense of wholeness or be at one place all the time and yet experience estrangement. With the undisputable fact that a consensual identification of the self with one's 'homeland'[8] does not collocate across the board and now that the rigid regimentation of borders has come to border on the borderless as a result of globalisation,[9] one can righteously speak of nations without borders and populations with multi-layered identities scattered here and there, everywhere, in this very 'diasporan' age. This is so much the case that in today's terms *'identitarian'* homogeneity appears to be «the greatest foe of cultural and historical diversity»[10] in a world that speaks more languages than one. In a sense, terms such as «cultural authenticity» and «nativism»[11] have grown obsolete and anachronistic in the global village[12] the world resembles while 'unbelongingness', 'free-floatedness' and transculturation[13] have gained currency and frequency. Skeptics fall back on fixedness of identity only «in situations of instability and disruption, of conflict and change»[14] while at times of peace and prosperity, the same question lacks relevance. Yet, the sense of belonging to a polity within the larger community, a community that keeps racism in check, cannot be utterly discarded as it continues to inspire unity. However, the closely-knit, though not so convivial, relationship of Britain with relocation/dislocation extends far beyond that over a period of two hundred years establishing a pattern that ebbed and flowed, at times, holding immigrants in contempt and, at others, in high esteem.[15] In fact, immigrants were not met with flowers upon their arrival. None can deny that the very first reactions were acrimoniously hostile and xenophobic.[16] The antagonism immigrants were shown was the immediate corollary of the economic competition their presence engendered and the lingering «sense of the racial superiority of white people.»[17] As much as Britain sought to rub out and ditch its traumatic past behind, the continued presence of immigrants made this forgetting impossible to attain and obtain,[18] and made lapsing into pastness, wishful and wistful thinking, a daily occurrence. Only belatedly can the traumatising experience be digested, discarded and erased.[19] «If the British Empire changed life in the colonised countries», so was Britain forever transfigured/disfigured by its colonial as well as its post-colonial encounters, Mcleod writes.[20] That common British subjects should hold a grudge against their fellow citizens for taking that which they think is theirs by

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[7] S. WEBER, *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media*, ed. A. CHOLODENKO, Stanford University Press, California 1996, p. 4.

[8] M. SHACKLETON, *Canada*, published in *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, Edt J. MCLEOD, Routledge, London and New York, 2007, p. 89.

[9] Said maintains that it is rather «imperialism [that] consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale». E. SAID, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 407.

[10] A. DIRLIK, *Placing Edward Said: Space Time and the Traveling Theorist*, published in *Edward Said and the Post-colonial*, cit., p.5.

[11] ASHCROFT and KADHIM, *Edward Said and the Post-colonial*, cit., p. 7.

[12] The term is associated with the theorist and media specialist Marshal Mcluhan.

[13] Malcontent with the insinuations 'acculturation' gave way to, Ortiz coined the term 'transculturation' to make up for these deficiencies. The latter is understood to better express the transition from one culture to another, a process involving not only the sponging up of alien cultures but also the relinquishing of one's own known as 'disacculturation'. For more on this distinction, I refer you to C. TAYLOR, *Latin America*, in MCLEOD, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, cit., p. 123.

[14] YOUNG, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, cit., p. 3.

[15] P. PANAYI, *Multicultural Britain: a very brief history*, British Politics Review, Journal of the British Politics Society, Multicultural Britain: Issues and Controversies. Norway, Vol. 6, No.2, Spring 2011, p. 4. 2.4 million people have made their way to Britain prior to 1945. This number quadrupled after 1945.

[16] I am thinking of Mehdi Hassan's accounts of his father who, having just come from India and feeling proud after attending Churchil's funeral, "had dog mess posted through his letter box". Retrieved from http://www.newstatesman.com/society/2011/04/multiculturalism-british. An example of this schizophrenia lies in the fact that athletes are hailed for their accomplishments and no mention is made of who they are. It's only when an aberrant immigrant errs that emphasis is laid upon what he is.

[17] M. NI FHLATHUIN, *The British Empire*, in MCLEOD (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, cit., p. 31.

[18] *Ibidem*.

[19] A. WARD, *Psychological Formulations*, published in *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, cit., p. 196.

[20] MCLEOD, *Beginning Colonialism*, Manchester University Press, UK 2000, p. 205.

birthright may be condoled but not utterly condoned, but that politicians with no axe to grind should see in this rift a last-ditch opportunity to rally the masses for the wrong cause can in no way be spoken for. In an alliance of common interests, both politicians and journalists have a predilection to favour fellow citizens over what seems to be semi-citizens thus driving a wedge between migrants and natives. They seem to do so with a clear conscience arguing that «The justification for giving priority to the interests of fellow citizens boils down to a pragmatic claim about the value of the nation-state» without which «the nation-state ceases to have much meaning. And most of the things that liberals desire – democracy, redistribution, welfare states, human rights – only work when one can assume the shared norms and solidarities of national communities».[21] What was Enoch Powell thinking when he delivered his controversial and infuriating Rivers of Blood?[22] Even now, many wonder if his words were not prophetic and visionary after all as was recently demonstrated by a documentary the BBC aired at a very telling juncture as if seeking to stir up further sensitivities by showing the bigot to be an intellectual visionary missionary.[23] The dilemma British nationals were confronted with is very much reminiscent of the maddening speech of a rabid hailed as a nationalist and is best captured in Yasmin Alibhai-Brown's own terms in *After Multiculturalism*:

White Britons were failed historically by the political elite who did not prepare them for the changes that came after the war…One moment people in Britain were being taught that they were the imperial masters who had the God-given responsibility to civilize the barbarians they controlled – the next minute these black and Asian people were in the work canteen demanding to be treated as equals.[24]

In an ambivalent and perplexing attitude impossible to disambiguate, Britons were cautioned against immigration and its repercussions and simultaneously instructed to show those already arrived some measure of motherly respect befitting the sons of the empire or, perhaps I should say, the empire of the sun.

2. Multiculturalism or benign racism/racialism.

Because race and culture have lost their dissimilarity as appears from the confusion of taking one to stand unequivocally for the other, «the issue of multiculturalism was racialized from its inception».[25] In their dealings with the influx of immigrants[26] pouring in from the ex-colonies, the Britons still breathed a condescending and supercilious air of superiority, the very same that ran high in the heyday of colonial dominion serving to bring to their knees the indomitable semi-savages. Certes, «many of today's racial anxieties in Britain may be traced back to Britain's colonial past and its historical relationships with its formerly colonized countries»,[27] but there is more to it than meets the eye. The multicultural or, perhaps more correctly so, the multiracial debate, for the two have become almost synonymous, originated and reignited with «the perceived difficulties of assimilating these newer communities to the host national cultures»[28] as was commonly circulated. In this regard, distinctive traits as those represented by skin colour, language and religion were said to constitute insurmountable hindrances in the way of accommodating and melting the new-comers, the children of the empire, fully and utterly in the national character, of hyperbolically grafting extraneous limbs onto a body already in full swing.[29] Indeed, multiculturalism is sure to run into a *cul de sac* if «the historically dominant majority»[30] continues unawares to wallow in constructed

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[21] D. GOODHART, *The baby-boomers finally see sense on immigration*, The Observer Sunday 24 February 2008. From http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/feb/24/immigration.immigrationpolicy

[22] To watch the speech, one is invited to tune in to https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MtIF6tw-Io

[23] To watch more of this documentary, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUCGcpojEyw

[24] Stated in *After Multiculturalism* by Y. Alibhai-Brown.

[25] A. RATTANSI, *Multiculturalism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, UK 2011, p. 9.

[26] Demographically speaking, British Muslim community has increased from 20000 in 1950 to almost 2000 000 today, the equivalent of 3 percent of the population. Y. SULEIMAN, *Contextualising Islam in Britain: Exploratory Perspectives*, Centre of Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge 2009, p. 9.

[27] WARD, *Psychological Formulations*, in MCLEOD, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, cit., p. 201.

[28] RATTANSI, *Multiculturalism: A Very Short Introduction*, cit., p. 10.

[29] *Ibidem*.

[30] W. KYMLICKA, *Multiculturalism: Success, Failure, and the Future*, Migration Policy Institute: Queen's University, February 2012, p. 9.

myths of ego-centredness, not to say Brit-centredness, to carve the public sphere after their living image. While race thrived on biological differences, ethnicity lives on cultural differences and so divorcing the two does not stand to reason.[31] Racial differences accounted for much of the inequalities blacks suffered at the hands of their white oppressors, and so ethnic/cultural differences may be said to explain the rule of the majority over minorities. The markers of difference being transplanted onto ethnicities, one is allowed to be different but still remains unequal.[32] Race served as the basis for discriminating against people of color, ethnicity operates as «means through which [the dominant] group can control and construct its forms of otherness».[33] Drawing upon centuries of imperial ego-centrism,[34] opposition to and indignation with immigration has found in multiculturalism a fertile soil to mushroom. The tendency to read out the funerary rites of racism and to bury it alive should be reconsidered. To claim that multiculturalism is contingent upon assimilation, in Chris Allen's commentary, «offers only hegemonic solutions to hegemonic problems».[35] In this obtuse way, assimilation, or perhaps more rightly so annihilation, has been «mobilized to serve as an alibi for a cultural colonialism that is so thorough that it is nearly impossible to speak about».[36] In simpler terms, latent discriminatory practices cloaked in a multiculturalist guise, not to say disguise, have come to replace by and large the more blatant racist misdemeanors.

Multiculturalism is indicted with giving group prerogatives precedence over individual or even communal civic rights.[37] Purists feared lest such an amalgamation of races would create an alloy that would eventually contaminate the upper purer race of the [puppet] masters.[38] It remains to be stated that the adamant clinging to the myth of cultural essentialism is a stumbling block in the way of «a constructive debate about multiculturalism».[39] In Britain, most notably, multiculturalism was often seen as an adjunct to integration. Only integration in the 'Britishcentric' epistemic sense of the term meant obsessive subordination as well as oppressive subjugation dismissive of the lesser worthy abject subjects/objects. It seems as though the postcolonial legacy still hovered so disturbingly and obsessively in the deepest recesses of the once-upon-a-time emperors that they failed miserably at reconciling themselves with their status quo as masters-over-no-one but themselves, let alone perceiving others as equals. The treatment immigrants received at the hands of their erstwhile masters differed very little, if it did at all, from the disdainful and residual ways in which they had been treated of old as despicable natives in the colonies.[40] No sooner did the bastardised natives begin to set foot in the mainland than their dream of joining the mother country and being put on a par with its legitimate children was dashed against the wall. Migrants «were wanted for their labour and they had to leave their customs and culture behind»[41] and thaw unquestionably and unconditionally into the mainstream culture without further ado. But to dichotomise so multifaceted an issue in terms of past versus present, master versus slave, colonised versus colonised or even father versus child as I have done thus far would be akin to taking up the Hegelian dialectic[42] the way Said had and stretching it out beyond its

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[31] YOUNG, *Ethnicity As Otherness in British Identity*, cit., p. 158.

[32] Ivi, pp. 158-159.

[33] Ivi, p. 160.

[34] For British people, Britain is the center while all the rest of the world is peripheral. I am thinking of Ella Shohat and his seminal work *Unthinking Eurocentrism*

[35] C. ALLEN, *The Death of Multiculturalism: blaming and shaming British Muslims*, Anthropology Journal, UK 2007, p.14.

[36] ASHCROFT and KADHIM, eds., *Edward Said and the Post-colonial*, cit., p. 9. Althusser distinguishes between an overt and heavy as opposed to a covert and soft occupation. The first implies soldierly presence on the ground while the second, which is far more detrimental, involves divesting a people of their culture without their perceiving the act of encroachment.

[37] T. HYLLAND ERIKSEN, *Two Tales of Cultural Diversity*, British Politics Review, Journal of the British Politics Society, Multicultural Britain: Issues and Controversies, Norway, Vol. 6, No.2, Spring 2011, p. 3.

[38] The fear of miscegenation is most apparent with Iago, a character most intent on keeping the Venetian blood unblemished by "the sooty bosom" of the black ram.

[39] RATTANSI, *Multiculturalism: A Very Short Introduction*, cit., p. 27.

[40] Ivi, p. 21. Passage to India amply records instances of this mistreatment. Dr. Aziz goes out of his ways to make the Britons feel comfortable, but he is still accused of rape and shown to have no scruples. Moors are only good when they are made to serve, not to lead. The moment Aziz takes on another role scantily befitting his position, chaos consumes him up.

[41] J. BOURNE, *In Defence of Multiculturalism*, Institute of Race Relations, London 2007, p. 2.

[42] According to Hegel, contact between the master and the slave is sorted out by means of "negation and sublation", i.e. the act of taming otherness and preserving its essence of savagery. S. MORTON, *Postcolonial Formulation*, published in *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, cit., p. 162. Both Fukuyama and Said are

narrow scope. To gauge the situation with Sartorial eyes, contact between people does not suffice unto itself to lead to bloodshed, but economic factors such as pauperisation, materialist critics contend, can and often do incite the impoverished to take action.[43] For practical reasons, it would only be opportune and propitious to lift the discussion from the realms of academia onto the political scene.

3. Multiculturalism politicised.

In an attempt to consciously uproot racial inequalities, policy-makers sought to even out the discrepancies by dispensing with the assimilationist package that sought to bring all under one and the same banner of the union Jack in favor of an all-integrative, but not quite so, egalitarian approach,[44] granting constitutive communities the prerogative to live and die by standards they had set themselves a priori, but ones that do not collide with the British ethos and ethnos at large. The then Home Secretary Roy Jenkins spoke out wisely and eloquently in defense of a diversified multicultural mainland where everyone partook of equal opportunities. Though lengthy, his words are worth recording, and thus he spoke:

Integration is perhaps a loose word. I do not regard it as the loss, by immigrants, of their national characteristics and culture. I do not think we need in this country a 'melting pot', which will turn everyone out in a common mould, as one of a series of carbon copies of someone's misplaced vision of the stereotyped Englishman…I define integration, therefore, not as a flattening process of uniformity, but cultural diversity, coupled with equality of opportunity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance if we are to maintain any sort of reputation for civilised living and social cohesion, we must get far nearer to its achievement than is the case today.[45]

Mehdi Hassan, the son of an immigrant, comments that this «was a turning point for relations between majority and minority communities».[46] This may be a shift away from earlier combustible discourses used and misused to destabilise and mobilise the mob. It is noteworthy that the emphasis, for the minister, is laid specifically on respect for diversity together with equality of opportunity as a guarantee for a co-existential state of being and being together,[47] on Britain as a community of communities. His pithy words carry more wisdom than he could have possibly forethought. Inherent in his declamation is the inseparable nature of culture from nurture, i.e. education, housing and job opportunities among other things, which I will come to in due course. For all the appeal his speech may have garnered and the applause it might have received, nothing of significance came out of his words as far as policies were enacted. Tariq Modood contends vehemently that a policy cutting across the board is sure to fail to respond adequately to disparate ethnic groups.[48] There are as many Muslim communities as there are contexts to accommodate them. To consider minorities as a pack and deal with them as one entity would be to miss the point and err monumentally. Modood asserts that treating all minorities as a singular fixed bundle of meanings, the sense of groupness as he prefers to name it, is sure to bring forth «an unequal 'us – them' relationship».[49]

To replenish the cultural deficit that many held contributive to the state of chaos that had reigned in 1981, the Thatcher government hastened «to actively promote cultural policies as a means of combating

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deficient in the sense that they used up these dichotomies to explain everything that came into their way without the slightest attention being granted to the bigger picture.

[43] The Arab Spring is a living proof testifying to the veracity of Sartre's view. For more details on this, see *Critique de la Raison Dialectique.*

[44] BOURNE, *In Defence of Multiculturalism*, cit., p. 3. According to A. Sivanandan, assimilation and integration are to be distinguished, the first requiring absorption of minority into majority cultures while the second encourages co-existence. See page 2 of the same article.

[45] RATTANSI, *Multiculturalism: A Very Short Introduction*, cit., p. 9.

[46] M. HASAN, *How we rub along together*, p. 1, retrieved from: http://www.newstatesman.com/society/2011/04/multiculturalism-british

[47] Islam is a staunch advocate of co-existence. The Qur'an states that «O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other».

[48] T. MODOOD, *Multiculturalism, ethnicity and integration: contemporary challenges*, University of Bristol, March 2006, p. 2, retrieved from: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sociology/leverhulme/conference/conferencepapers.pdf

[49] MODOOD, *Is Multiculturalism Appropriate for the 21ST Century?*, Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Citizenship, University of Bristol. From a paper written for the conference on *Multiculturalism and its Discontents*, University of Colorado at Boulder, April 23-24, 2007, p.5.

disaffection within minority ethnic communities».[50] What had initially been thought of as a grassroots movement passed to being institutionalised with the much undesirable effect that minorities were pitted one against the other competing bitterly for funds.[51] Such an institutionalisaion, as it were, meant that policies were dictated from above, and once more the voice of the subaltern went unheard and unheeded. A decade later saw multiculturalism putting on a new persona indicative of the rupture with and departure from earlier forms with the inclusion of the «demands for cultural recognition» as an essential component[52] of what came to be labeled «a period of identity politics»[53] with questions of identity being prioritised. Some twenty years later, the Parekh report on Multi-ethnic Britain pointed the finger at an ailing and aching Britain unable «to grant the status of 'English', 'Scottish', 'Welsh', or 'Irish' to its non-white citizens» abandoning them to grope their way for an identity within an ill-defined Britishness.[54] The current animosity with which Muslims are met may be seen as the twin brother of the anti-black sentiments black immigrants experienced and were subjected to from the 1960's up into the 1980's.[55] Blacks trapped in this tornado responded by fighting «for self-representation»[56] within the societies that underrated them. So internalised is the idea of the black immigrant that «the signifier "immigrant" still signifies "black" in a Britain even when the landslide majority of immigrants happens to be white».[57] Even when blacks now turned white are born into Britain, they are still thought of as immigrants. In the same vein, it has become customary to blow off steam by taxing and vexing minority groups in every humiliating manner every time the economy is at the precipice of a cliff. Culture, as Raymond Williams views it, «can challenge but… cannot be neatly separated from economic factors».[58] At an age of severe austerity measures leading to social insecurity tinged with the fear of the threat the other poses, multiculturalism is perceived as the repository and receptacle of the many ills tearing Western societies asunder. In this sense, the misgivings of a precarious present and, more so, of an uncertain future have been shifted onto immigration as the source of all evil[59] and so immigrants will foot the bill for the calamitous economic decisions in which they had no say and of which they are the first to be victimised. Far from being the instigator of this ripple, multiculturalism ought to be seen as «part of the solution»[60] to a much more structural problem.

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[50] BOURNE, *In Defence of Multiculturalism*, cit., p. 3.

[51] *Ibidem*.

[52] RATTANSI, *Multiculturalism: A Very Short Introduction*, cit., p. 11.

[53] Ivi, p. 15.

[54] Ivi, p. 25.

[55] PANAYI, *Multicultural Britain: a very brief history*, cit., p. 4.

[56] C. WEST, *The New Cultural Politics of Difference*, in J. RAJCHMAN, ed., *The Question In Identity*, Routledge, Great Britain 1995, p. 159.

[57] S. BISWAS, *The "New Cold War". Secularism, orientalism, and postcoloniality*, in *Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations and Global Politics: Reading race, gender and class*, eds. G. CHOWDHRY and S. NAIR, Routledge, London and New York 2002, p.199.

[58] P. BRANTLINGER, *Edward Said and /versus Raymond Williams*, cited in ASHCROFT and KADHIM, eds., *Edward Said and the Postcolonial*, cit., p. 68.

[59] RATTANSI, *Multiculturalism: A Very Short Introduction*, cit., pp. 4-5.

[60] MODOOD, *Is Multiculturalism Appropriate for the 21ST Century?*, cit., p. 23.

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