

# Race, Ethnicity and Culture

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The words race, ethnicity and culture and their various derivatives are all very familiar: indeed the terms race and culture, if not ethnicity, are regularly used in everyday speech. Yet just what do they actually mean? Are they merely synonyms for one another, are do they point to very different dimensions of the social order? Although there can be little doubt that the social phenomena with respect to which these terms are deployed issues are amongst those of the most pressing socio-political importance in the contemporary world, a little reflection soon reveals that their precise meaning is still surrounded by clouds of conceptual confusion. Nor is this confusion limited to popular discourse: sociologists hardly do much better. This is most alarming. If n social scientists lack an analytical vocabulary whose meanings are broadly agreed upon, there is little prospect of them being able to construct viable descriptions – let alone insightful explanations – of the phenomena they are seeking to understand, no matter how much the streets may be riven by ‘race riots’, no matter how many holocausts may be precipitated by processes of ‘ethnic cleansing’, and no matter how many aircraft may be flown straight into skyscrapers. In the absence of an appropriate analytical vocabulary not only will the prospect of our being able to comprehend the processes give rise to such confrontations be severely inhibited, but the prospects our being able to identify the best means of resolving the underlying problems will remain remote.

With such challenges in mind, this Chapter has a straightforward agenda. Firstly to identify how the terms race, ethnicity and culture are currently used in popular discourse – and the significance of these usages; secondly to identify how each of these terms can best be defined in technical terms, such that they can be turned into more precise – and hence more effective – vehicles for sociological analysis; and thirdly to explore the ways in which a more carefully constructed analytical vocabulary can enable us to gain a clearer grasp of just how a whole series of pressing contemporary problems have arisen – and how they might realistically be resolved.

## 1 Race and Racism

To what extent is the term *race* a meaningful analytical category? The use of its derivatives *racism* and *racist* is routinely regarded as morally challenging, and it is easy to see why. Racism is not regarded as just another ideological outlook like liberalism, conservatism and so forth: instead it is regarded as a manifestation of profound moral inadequacy. As a result it has become a term of abuse. Since racism is understood as intrinsically evil, charges of racism can be deployed as an unchallengeable moralistic sledgehammer. Nevertheless it is one which is comparatively easy to dodge. Those whose views reek with xenophobic chauvinism have long since learned to preface their arguments with statements about how much they abhor racism, after which they go on to make all manner of scurrilous criticisms of the *behaviour* of people of colour, and the extent to which such practices are undermining the established order of civilization. This leaves an easy way open for developing arguments in which they insist that they are not racists but patriots who dare to confront the issues which our wishy-washy liberal opponents – caught up as they are in political correctness – dare not even acknowledge.

Yet even if we sidestep the fruitless ping-pong of morally outraged accusations and counter-accusations into which such arguments soon descend, just what do the terms *race*, *racism* and *racist* actually mean? Just how should they be deployed – if indeed they should be deployed at all – in the context of sociological analysis? And if so, just when, where, why and how? To be sure we are free to define our analytical categories in any way in which we see fit, for as Alice quite rightly insisted, words can mean whatever we say they mean, neither more nor less. Nevertheless common sense suggests that we should pay at least some attention to popular understandings, although in the process of so doing we should never overlook the insights generated by those working in other spheres of scientific endeavour.

If, therefore, we begin at the beginning, there can be little dispute that the term *race* is that it has something to do with ancestry, with descent, and yet more precisely still, with heredity. In that sense ‘*race*’ is (or at least appears to be) an aspect of – or at least a consequence of – human genetics. Nevertheless the term is actually used in two quite contradictory senses. On the one hand it can be used to highlight emphasise the common genetic characteristics of the entire spectrum of humankind – as in the phrase ‘the human race’. On the other it can also be deployed in quite the opposite sense: to highlight supposed categorical differences between

different sub-sections of *homo sapiens*, as in phrases such as ‘the European race’, the ‘African race’. The social connotations of these two perspectives are also mirror images of one another. Whilst the first underlines our common humanity, the second points suggests that there are immutable differences between different subsections of humanity. Nor is that all. Building on the second theme, popular usage suggests the innate capabilities of different racial groups can be placed in hierarchical series in which with the more ‘advanced’ capabilities stand at the top of a ranked scale which ranges all the way down to those with most limited and hence ‘primitive’ capabilities who stand tight at the bottom.

It is also worth noting that such hierarchies can be constructed in variety of different ways. Hence, for example, those seeking to defend themselves against charges of racism frequently respond by insisting that there is no substance to any moralistic criticisms directed at them, since they very positively appreciate the extent to which people of African origin have dramatically greater capabilities as athletes, footballers, popular musicians and so forth. That said, no prizes are on offer for correctly identifying which ‘racial’ group’s members routinely regard themselves as having intellectual, cultural, artistic, scientific and technological capabilities which are comprehensively superior to those of anyone else – albeit at the cost of having lost the peak of their potential physical and libidinous capacity which they once possessed, or so they also fantasise, way back in the mists of their primitive past (Ballard 1997: 40). Arguments about the relative capabilities of different ‘racial’ groups have had, and continue to have, powerful social consequences. But just how sound are the conceptual foundations on which they rest? Are the fact or are the fiction?

### 1.1 *The human race*

Here we can usefully turn to biology, and especially to human genetics for specialist advice. As far as the unity of humankind is concerned, scientific observation confirms that *homo sapiens* is a single species. To be sure there all manner of local variations within the species, most of which appear to have emerged in the course of many generations of adaptive response to residence in specific habitats; moreover at least some of these adaptations have precipitated more or less observable variations in physical appearance. Nevertheless human beings of all kinds, colours and appearances can successfully inter-breed with one another, and the offspring of all such unions are themselves fertile: these are precisely the criteria which biologist use to identify whether or not a given population constitutes a single species. Nevertheless recent advances in our understanding of the role of DNA in organising heredity

has radically advanced our understanding of population genetics. In particular accurate measurements of the extent of genetic variation as between different populations – or as the geneticists put it, between different breeding pools – can now be made. Such studies have yet again confirmed that at a global level the extent of the genetic differences between such breeding pools is minute as compared with the commonalties between them. Since we are much more similar than we are different, human genetic homogeneity at a global level must now be regarded as an unquestionable reality.

Yet although *homo sapiens* constitutes a single race in this sense, can its members still be divided into clearly marked genetically distinctive subgroups, as the second dimension of popular understanding of the term race suggests? It is easy to see why there *might* be some substance to such a hypothesis, for there can be no doubt that there are all sorts genetically precipitated differences as between various human populations. Members of some groups are exceedingly pale-skinned, whilst others are naturally endowed with the kind of skin colouration which many members of the first group are currently prepared to spend huge sums on sun lamps, or better still on lengthy holidays in the Caribbean, in order to acquire. The genetic heritage of some other groups produces an additional epicanthic fold in the upper eyelid, such that their eyes are distinctively almond-shaped, and for whose removal some people are prepared to pay equally large sums to plastic surgeons. Other populations have a high gene frequency for sickle cell anaemia and/or thalassemia: mutations which renders heterozygotic carriers resistant to malaria, but have fatal consequences for homozygotes;<sup>1</sup> and in Britain that section of the population which is of Celtic carry the gene which causes cystic fibrosis at an exceptionally high frequency, precipitating yet another condition which is fatal amongst homozygotes, although in this case the gene brings no known advantage to its heterozygotic carriers.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly there *is* a limited degree of genetic diversity within the overall condition of homogeneity which is characteristic of the species *homo sapiens*. But are these sufficiently large and clear cut to render talk of human *races* legitimate?

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<sup>1</sup> A homozygote is a person who has received identical copies of a gene for a specific trait from both parents; a heterozygote receives that gene from only one parent. If heterozygotes mate, 25% of their offspring will (on average) be homozygotes, 50% will be heterozygotes, and 25% will be entirely clear of the trait.

<sup>2</sup> By contrast the epicanthic fold appears to be an adaptive response to extreme cold, whilst pale skins may well be a similarly adaptive response to low levels UV radiation in the northern hemisphere.

### 1.2 *Racial diversity*

One of the abiding sources of analytical difficulty in this sphere is that biological differences of this kind are by no means the only source of human diversity: indeed in comparison with the combined impact of social, cultural, political and economic factors on human diversity, the impact of biological factors is relatively small. There is also a further complication: the widespread human tendency to attribute hereditary causes to differing outcomes which are in fact politically and socio-economically precipitated. As one might expect, the beneficiaries of such processes invariably find it extremely convenient to explain – or rather more accurately, to explain away – all such inequalities as having been biologically precipitated, so enabling them to press to one side any suggestion that their own exploitative activities might have played a part in precipitating those outcomes. Needless to say those on the receiving end of such treatment invariably vigorously contest that kind of perspective. Instead they point out – often with considerable asperity – that such arguments are no more than a convenient fiction used by their oppressors as a means of brushing their exploitative practices under the carpet.

In the midst of such territory, we must clearly proceed with great care. If we are exploring the impact of racial diversity in *biological* terms, it follows that we must restrict our analysis to those features of human diversity which are indisputably biologically precipitated. Likewise we must carefully differentiate this activity from parallel explorations of the way in which other aspects of human social and behavioural diversity have been explained in terms of theories which are *believed* to be biological sound, but where those beliefs no foundation whatsoever in biological science. Moreover in doing so we also need to remember that biological knowledge has moved on by leaps and bounds during the course of the two centuries, such that scientifically tested hypotheses have gradually replaced often-erroneous speculation.

### 1.3 *Darwin and Social Darwinism*

The most salient consequences of these developments are clear enough<sup>3</sup>. In the first flush of excitement following Darwin's articulation of his ground-breaking hypothesis that speciation could best be explained as the outcome of processes natural selection, such that mutations which were positively adaptive to specific environmental niches gradually became ever more salient in any given breeding population, many of those inspired Darwin's arguments also

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<sup>3</sup> For an excellent review of the issues, see Banton, *The idea of race*, 1977

went on to suggest that all the varied forms of social, cultural, political and religious practice found in contemporary human societies were the outcome of similar evolutionary processes. Had the social Darwinists recognised that these variations were not only the outcome of processes cultural adaptation to the challenges thrown up in differing socio-economic and environmental contexts, but were also *socially* transmitted, they might also have made some equally ground-breaking sociological advances. But unfortunately they made a series of very serious mistake. Firstly they failed to recognise that there was a crucial distinction between biological and social processes, most particularly in the way in which the information in genetic as opposed to social and cultural codes is transmitted from generation to generation; and secondly by assuming that the results of these processes could socio-cultural differentiation could be arranged along a straightforward hierarchy in which certain societies (those which the classifiers identified as more progressive and civilised) could be identified as having made the ‘right’ evolutionary choices, whilst the ancestors of all others (those which the classifiers identified as less advanced, less progressive and hence more ‘primitive’) had – sad to say – made the wrong choices.

It is worth noting that this intrinsically hierarchical vision of human evolution stood comprehensively at odds with Darwin’s crucial insight that each species represented the outcome of a positive adaptation to a specific ecological niche, it was nevertheless an explanatory hypothesis which was received with acclaim by most of the inhabitants late nineteenth century Euro-America. It is easy to see why. Such theories provided apparently unchallengeable ‘scientific’ support for the view that European people, together with their preferred religious, cultural and social institutions, were intrinsically superior to and certainly more advanced than those of the ‘primitive’ peoples over whom they were so busy extending their colonial dominance. Since scientific progress so neatly legitimated all their activities, it should come as no surprise that the principal beneficiaries of processes of European Imperial expansion should have welcomed social Darwinism with such enthusiasm, or that they should have put so much effort into passing on their hegemonic ideological insights to their ‘primitive’ subjects, at whose expense they were forging so rapidly ahead.

Much has changed since support for social Darwinism reached its apogee at the end of the nineteenth century. In the first place it is now virtually universally recognised – except by a tiny ardent rear-guard of socio-biologists – that the social and conceptual worlds within which humans have constructed around themselves, and within which they conduct their

everyday business, are *culturally* rather than biologically generated and transmitted. Secondly it is now equally clear that the human genome is such that members of our species have gained a unique capacity to create linguistic and cultural codes in terms of which to create conceptual universes of their own, to communicate with one another, and hence to organise their interactions, *it is the capacity to do so rather than the contents of those codes* which is biologically transmitted.

Hence whilst the use of language and culture is and long has been both a unique and a universal human trait, the specific language (or languages) any given individual speaks, and the cultural tradition (or traditions) within which he or she routinely operates is contingent on their social experience, and *not* on their biological descent. People of Chinese ancestry are not genetically programmed to speak Chinese, any more than English people are genetically programmed to speak English. Our mother tongues are acquired in the process of childhood socialisation, not as a consequence of our personal genotype. Hence if an individual of Chinese ancestry was by happenstance brought up in an English context, or if someone of English ancestry was brought up in a Chinese context, each would speak the language to which they had been exposed with equal fluency. Whilst our capacity to be cultured in this sense may be as genetically hard-wired as the interior of any computer chip, it nevertheless imposes relatively few limitations on the linguistic and cultural software which can be run on it. Hence our specific linguistic and cultural competences – our stock of software, as it were – is a product of our upbringing and social experience, as well as of our own personal creativity, rather than being determined by our biological ancestry.

Much follows from this. Most obviously the Social Darwinists' attempt to extend biologically inspired arguments to explain patterns of human social and cultural differentiation must be discarded as comprehensively unsustainable – as must their assumption that there were legitimate biological grounds for ranking human societies along a spectrum from 'primitive' to 'civilised'. As we noted earlier the theory hierarchy was always suspect even from a Darwinian perspective, since he was always far more concerned with adaptation than progress. Hence if any attempt is made to represent some societies as being 'more advanced' than others, it follows that that the whole exercise must stand and fall in terms of its sociological and anthropological – rather than its biological – credibility. These issues will be considered at length in a later section.

#### 1.4 Do 'races' exist?

Yet even if we carefully separate socially and culturally precipitated dimensions of human diversity from those which are biologically precipitated, we are still left with forms of differentiation which it might seem legitimate to identify as racial. After all nineteenth century physical anthropologists spent a great deal of time exploring such diversities on an empirical basis. In so doing they produced huge volumes of data on such matters as variations in skin pigmentation, the cranial index, the nasal index and the height and slope of the forehead as between all manner of human population groups. Might not findings of this kind give at least some degree of scientific substance to the biological concept of race?

Let us begin by considering what a viable – but exclusively biologically specified – definition of such a phenomenon might be. If was indeed possible to divide *homo sapiens* into a number of biologically distinct subgroups or races, a number of conditions would have to hold. Firstly each such group would have to have reasonably clear boundaries, such that the vast majority of individuals could reliably be allocated into one such group or another. Secondly, and just as importantly, this process of allocation would have to operate in such a way that the same persons would end up in the same pigeon-holes, not matter which biological characteristic – be it skin colour, blood group or whatever – was used in the allocation process. Only if both these criteria could be fulfilled would it be possible confidently to assert that *homo sapiens* can indeed be divided into a number of racially distinctive sub-groups.

Do such racial groups in this biological sense actually exist? Despite the still extremely widespread popular view that is meaningful to talk racial groups in this sense, and thus to *act* on the assumption that they do (which is, of course, another matter altogether), all efforts to demonstrate that racial groups in a biological sense can indeed be identified have ended in failure. Even though late Victorian physical anthropologists put a great deal of effort into acquiring the relevant data, hindsight allows us to observe that there is much that was odd about the procedures. Although their efforts had the merit of being grounded in empirical observation rather than on the armchair theorising favoured by the Social Darwinists, and although many of the characteristics on which they focussed are very largely genetically controlled, they invariably set out to measure the patently *visible* aspects of human difference, and especially those which manifested themselves in the facial and cranial region.



In other words they focussed on precisely those parts of the body on which humans concentrate when engaged in *social* acts of recognition.

From the point of view biological taxonomy, however, all physical traits are of equal significance, and from that perspective the nineteenth obsession with physiognomy was clearly wholly arbitrary. Moreover since then we have learned a great deal about another source of human variation which, although invisible, is nevertheless just as comprehensively controlled by genetic factors: blood groups. Moreover because these have to be carefully matched if transfusions are to be successful, it is easy to gain access to an immense amount of data on the subject, much of which can also be straightforwardly classified in terms of the population group from which the donor was recruited. It is studies of this data which have tolled the death knell for classical race theory.

In his massive global study *The history and geography of human genes*, Cavalli-Sforza (1994) shows why this is so. Although he demonstrates that there are indeed all manner of spatial variations in the distribution specific genes, he makes two crucial points. Firstly that all these variations are *clinal* in character: as a result there are no clear cut boundaries between this populations which possess or lack any given gene.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, and even more fatally for classical race theory, the clinal distributions for almost all of almost the genes which he has so far been able to examine (and there are many more which it would be equally reasonably to consider) display very little spatial congruence.<sup>5</sup> Hence whilst Cavalli-Sforza shows that there is indeed a great deal of local variation in the frequency with which specific genes appear, it is equally clear the distribution of these variations is rarely, if ever, congruent with the patterns which race-theory predicted.

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<sup>4</sup> A convenient way of understanding this point is by analogy with the distribution of isobars – lines joining points of equal barometric pressure – on weather maps. Although the isobars serve to map out areas of high pressure, low pressure and so forth, there are no sharp disjunctions between high and low, only more or less steep inclines between them. In other words pressure variation is *clinal*. The distribution ‘isogenes’ (although that is not in fact the term used by population geneticists to describe them) which join points at which there is an identical frequency of incidence of a specific gene or genetic mutation within the local population can also be mapped out in just the same way. This procedure generates patterns which are very similar in character to those found on weather maps.

<sup>5</sup> The best way of comprehending this point is by imagining that one obtained weather maps for the north Atlantic which had been collected at a monthly intervals over a six month period. Each map will show a clear pattern of highs and lows – although with inclines rather than step-boundaries between them. Now imagine all the maps are superimposed over one another; there will clearly be very little congruence between the patterns found at each level. A comparison of ‘isogene’ maps reveals a similar lack of congruence.

If population genetics provides no evidence to support the suggestion that *homo sapiens* can be divided into a number of clearly differentiated sub-groups, it follows that human races in the sense in which they are still understood in popular discourse must now be regarded as nothing more than a figment of the imagination.

Lets us be quite clear what all this means. Cavalli-Sforza is not, of course, suggesting that there are no biological differences both within and as between all manner of human population groups. Of course there are. Although there is always a substantial degree of variation around the mean, the members of some local population groups manifestly have much paler skins than others; in some groups broad noses are frequent, whilst in others narrow noses are the norm; in some populations group blood group A is commonplace, whilst in others it is extremely rare; members of some populations are particularly well adapted to cope with arctic conditions, whilst others – those who have lived as herdsmen for many millennia, for example – may well have developed a body structure which makes them exceptionally capable long-distance runners. Such variations – and there are clearly many more – are real. Where race theory was mistaken was in its assumption that all these variations were *necessarily* congruent with one another, such that all people with black skin would by definition also have wide noses, advanced athletic (and sexual) capabilities, and a correspondingly limited intellectual capacity. Racial groups in that sense are no more than a figment of fevered imaginations: they are not a biological reality.

However the fact that these fantasies can now be shown to have no grounding in scientific biology does not prevent them being acted upon. Quite the contrary. If such ‘races’ in the classic sense are *believed* to exist, and if actions are regularly taken on the basis of those beliefs, the social consequences can be only too real. European Jews may or may not have been a racial group in a biological sense, but that did not prevent millions of them being consigned to the gas chamber on ‘racial’ grounds. People of African or Asian descent may or may not belong to distinctive racial groups in a biological sense, but this does not prevent people of European descent from regarding the alterity<sup>6</sup> displayed by people of colour as an

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<sup>6</sup> Alterity is in effect a more latin synonym for a much more familiar anglo-saxon term: otherness. In this context, however, I deploy the term alterity to highlight a tendency very frequently displayed in context of racial and ethnic polarisation – the tendency of those involved to attribute all things evil and negative to the otherness/alterity of their rivals. This tendency is invariably accompanied by several powerful sub-texts. In the first place those who adopt such a view implicitly identify their own self-perceived characteristics as wholly and wonderfully positive (see Ballard 1996); secondly this process most usually works both ways, such that each

indication of comprehensive social and intellectual inferiority, so justifying all the actions they consequently take to exclude such persons from scarce resources. Race may indeed be a fiction, but as long as people who regard themselves as ‘white’ treat those with a hereditary skin colouration which is significantly darker than theirs as aliens, racism will remain a very concrete social reality. So, too, will its consequences. If one section of the population uses skin colour in this way they will not only have begun to construct an exclusive fence around their own position of privilege, but by erecting those social barriers they will also – by definition – impose sorts of unwelcome social and economic handicaps on those with the misfortune to stand outside it.

## 2 Culture

Whilst ‘race’ – if the phenomenon it exists at all – is best understood as an aspect of a person’s biological and hence genetic heritage, both culture and language (for the two phenomena are closely akin to one another) are *socially* transmitted. Hence whilst our unique capacity to construct our own linguistic and cultural codes is genetically hard-wired into our very being, this is emphatically not the case with respect to the content of the codes which each of us actually deploys. Hence a child born to European parents who was by some happenstance brought up by foster parents in rural China would grow up speaking fluent Chinese, and with as much facility in Chinese cultural styles as their step-brothers and step-sisters who were genetically wholly Chinese. The same would also be true the other way round – even if in physical terms both might stick out like ugly ducklings. So in addition to one’s physical appearance, it is the capacity to deploy speech as a mode of communication, and a similar ability (and indeed expectation) to code one’s behaviour in cultural terms which is hereditarily transmitted – not the actual content of the language or the culture in terms of which we *learn* to operate. Such codes are acquired as a product of social experience, and not as a result of biological heredity.

It is also worth noting that culture does not code behaviour *per se*, but rather the rules and conventions in terms of which such behaviour is organised. Hence just as the path-breaking linguist de Saussure (1960) taught us the difference between *langue* (the grammatical and

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party develops an equally negative image of its alters; thirdly the largely fictitious judgements thereby constructed can have yet more serious consequences when they are surreptitiously incorporated into sociological discourse. Hence far from being a form of pathogenic ‘deviance’, the alterity of those disregarded others often turns out, on closer inspection, to be a highly positive source of strength.

lexical principles around which any given language is constructed) from *parole* (an actual stream of speech which has been ordered on the basis of those principles), so it is equally important to distinguish culture from behaviour.

Just as with speech, all behaviour is coded: not only are both sets of activities ordered in terms of a specific code, but unless the hearer/observer has access to the relevant code they will not be in a position accurately to interpret what is being communicated – or indeed to decide whether the signals being transmitted are coherent and hence meaningful, or whether they are merely a jumble of incoherent and meaningless white noise. What is also extremely striking is just how immensely varied such codes can be. It therefore follows that linguistic and cultural variations are a much more substantial source of differentiation as been human populations than are the relatively low-key genetic variations discussed in the previous section.

### 2.1 *Cultures as cognitive structures*

Human cultures are cognitive structures; and since culture also provides a vehicle for communication, the phenomenon is best understood as *the set of ideas, values and understandings which people deploy within a specific network of social relationships use as a means of ordering their inter-personal interactions and hence to generate ties of reciprocity between themselves; in so doing it also provides the principal basis on which human beings give meaning and purpose to lives*. Culture – like language – is the foundation for the worlds of meaning which we create around ourselves. But such meanings are never self-evident: they are always culturally coded. It follows that those who are not familiar with the relevant code will always have difficulty in making accurate sense of what is going on. Just as human speech is incomprehensible to listeners who are unfamiliar with the linguistic code being used by the speaker, so too with behaviour. Whilst one can always attempt to “read” behaviour in terms of a more familiar code of one’s own, any observer who is naïve enough to do so necessarily imposes his or her own interpretation on what has been observed. Those who deploy such a strategy – whether they do so consciously or not – may well feel quite satisfied with their own ‘understanding’ of what they have observed, no matter how comprehensively they have misapprehended the purposes and intentions of those whose behaviour they have observed.

Whilst human beings are unique in being able to create the terms of their own existence, the actual content of the cultures they have constructed in so doing are as diverse – no less in their grammar than in their vocabulary – than are human languages; and since almost every aspect of our behaviour is culturally conditioned, it follows that ‘normality’ is an extremely elusive concept. Just which forms of behaviour are considered normal and conventional – and which are considered to be disturbed and disturbing – varies enormously from context to context. There are few, if any, universally applicable yardsticks.

Cultural systems are not God-given: rather they are always and everywhere the creation of their users. As a result they are never fixed and static, but are constantly being rejigged, reinterpreted and indeed reinvented by their users. In that respect processes of cultural change are simply a mark of human creativity. New ideas, new perceptions, new inventions and new fashions frequently spread like wildfire, no matter how ‘remote’ observers in the Euro-American metropolis may regard the contexts within which these developments are taking place as being. That said, changing environmental circumstances – which are often precipitated by the intrusive activities of distant others – are always powerful driving force towards cultural change, if only because every culture is at heart a strategic solution to a particular set of material circumstances. However it should never be forgotten that there are innumerable equally viable solutions to any given environmental challenge. Every cultural system may indeed be a strategic response to a given set of circumstances, but the relationship between circumstances and solution is never deterministic. Culture, no less than language, is an *autonomous* human construct. Although contextually responsive, it cannot be reduced to anything else.

## 2.2 *Culture and Power*

Whilst every cultural system is positively adaptive as far as its users are concerned, observers invariably perceive those deployed by those unlike themselves as being bizarre at best, and at worst as wholly misguided. Those fortunate enough to occupy positions of socio-economic and political privilege are particularly likely to take such judgements to heart. By routinely adopting the view that their own cultural premises are intrinsically superior to those deployed by everyone else, it appears that it is precisely their use of those values which has enabled them to gain, and to maintain, their position of privilege. To those safely entrenched within such a position, it seems quite self-evident that the cultural systems deployed by others are not only inferior to their own, but also that their social subordinates’ positions of poverty and

powerlessness are no more than the inevitable result of their relative 'primitiveness', 'backwardness' and general lack of civilisation.

*Hegemony* is therefore best defined as the outcome of a process in which members of a dominant group use such ethnocentric judgements to justify their own position of socio-economic privilege, and simultaneously to explain – or rather to explain away – the disprivileged position of those others on whose successful exploitation their own position of socio-economic advantage is in fact grounded. Imperial elites, class elites, racial elites, ethnic elites and gender elites all routinely adopted such neatly self-justifying hegemonic arguments. Those who create such structures around themselves are invariably extremely reluctant to acknowledge the extent to which they are operating with the context of a self-justifying ideological framework of their own making. So long as they are able to identify their own perspective as the epitome of universal values of justice, civilisation, freedom and fair play, the prospect of their being able to acknowledge that the terms on which they insist on engaging with the rest of the world are grounded in a specific, and hence non-universal, set of cultural assumptions will remain remote.

Face to face encounters with those who differ rarely serve to dislodge these comfortable assumptions. Those who occupy a position of hegemony normally make few if any effort to familiarise themselves with – let alone to respect – the linguistic and cultural practices of their 'barbarian' subordinates. This is not necessarily a view that the 'barbarians' share. But although they may consequently dismiss these hegemonic assumptions with the contempt they deserve, the plain fact is that if they are to have any kind of interaction with their dominators they have little practical alternative but to do so on their dominators' own terms. This has several consequences. In the first place those who stand on the other side of the fence are normally infinitely more familiar with the culture and linguistic practices of their dominators than their dominators are with theirs. But this can also leave the powerless confronting a severe dilemma. Are their own preferred linguistic and cultural traditions *really* as inferior as their dominators invariably insist, or is that judgement merely a ploy, actively promulgated to persuade their subordinates of the justice and inevitability of their subordination? On the face of it the answers to all such questions should be quite self-evident, but for one crucial factor: the intensity of the efforts which dominators invariably put into

persuading those whom they dominate that their personal, linguistic and cultural capabilities really are comprehensively inferior to their own.

Albert Memmi provides an extremely insightful analysis of the psychological dynamics of these tangled processes when he argues that

“Ultimately, *the feeling of guilt is one of the most powerful engines of the racist operation*. Racism presents itself as one of the primary means of combating all forms of remorse. That is why both *privilege and oppression make such heavy use of it*. If oppression exists, someone has to be blamed for it; and if the oppressor will not own up to it himself, which would be intolerable, then the blame must fall on the oppressed. In short, *racism is a form of charging the oppressed for the crimes, whether actual of the potential, of the oppressor*”. (italics in the original, Memmi 2000: 139)

Moreover if that was not preposterous enough, the circle can be fully sealed if the oppressed can be persuaded – or in practice can be ‘educated’ – into *accepting their own inferiority*, such that they begin constantly, and gratefully, to apologise their dominators about the consequences of their own supposed genetic and cultural inadequacies.

Far fetched though that outcome may initially seem to be, the pressure on the excluded to act and think in this way is frequently so intense, and so deeply institutionalised that it it does indeed produce the desired results. The results of all this are far-reaching. The more comprehensively the oppressed can be persuaded to conspire in their own oppression – and the principal contemporary means of doing so is by carefully embedding a commitment to the innate superiority of the values and beliefs of the locally dominant group at the heart of every educational system – the more comprehensively dis-empowered members of the dominated group will steadily become. Hence as Steve Biko (1987) so memorably put it, “the greatest weapon in the hand of the oppressor is the *mind* of the oppressed”. By the same token – as Biko goes on to argue – retaining (or when the process is really deeply entrenched, by regaining) the capacity to think for oneself on one’s own terms is the first and most necessary step towards re-gaining the capacity to *resist* the persistent impact of such hegemonic processes.

### 2.3 *Can cultural systems be ranked?*

Under the influence of social Darwinism, late nineteenth century social theorists devoted an immense amount of time an effort into the construction of evolutionary hierarchies. The schemes which they developed were legion. In politics, it was argued that there was a necessary progressive movement from tyranny through oligarchy to monarchy and ultimately

to democracy; kinship theorists argued that there had been a necessary progression from group marriage through polygamy to monogamy, accompanied by a parallel movement from matriarchy to patriarchy; theorists of religion staked out a similar process of development from animism through polytheism to monotheism, and if they were daring enough, through to scientific atheism. Amongst the most influential of these schemes was one devised by Karl Marx. Arguing that it was processes of dialectical materialism which provided the driving force behind historical development, he outlined a sweeping theory of history in which the social order had moved inexorably forward from its initial condition of primitive communism through feudalism to capitalism and bourgeois liberalism, which would in turn necessarily be replaced – or so he predicted – by socialism and ultimately communism. In other words the evolutionary hierarchies of racial, cultural and social evolution devised during the nineteenth century were all constructed on a similar basis.

What are we to make of all this as we enter the twenty first century? Whilst there can be little doubt about the idealism of many of those who constructed these schemas, nor about the popular appeal of their ‘progressive’ theories, the whole exercise was nevertheless grounded in several fatal flaws. Most obviously there was very little empirical evidence to support these theories of history: at best they were rooted in conjectural history – imaginative accounts of what the human past must surely have been like. However there was another way in which what was taken to be empirical evidence could be wheeled in to support of these theories. Given the immense influence of social Darwinism, it seemed self-evident that those human cultures and societies which differed markedly from those of which the constructors of these theories were drawn – such as those located in those parts of the globe which Euro-American were busy incorporating into their ever-expanding Empires – were at an earlier and more ‘primitive’ state of evolution.

From there on in, the path led downhill all the way. Not only could the very alterity of the non-European world be ‘discovered’ and exhibited, so providing endless empirical grist for the mills of those constructing evolutionary hierarchies, but the whole enterprise could also be deployed to provide moral justification for all aspects of Imperial expansion. If European styles, values and assumptions – or in other words the whole gamut of Western European social, linguistic, religious and cultural conventions – had been ‘scientifically’ proved to be the acme of civilization, it followed that the logic Imperialism could now be comprehensively redefined. No longer a process of conquest, it could now be represented as a civilizing



mission, under whose aegis all manner of barbarities practiced by the ‘primitive’ peoples who had could now be justified. A new conceptual order had been constructed. Not only was the validity of cultural ranking taken for granted, but European values – and even more specifically the values and the fantasies aristocratic gentlemen intellectuals of northern European descent – were placed right at the peak of the new hierarchical vision. Meanwhile everyone else trailed more or less distantly down its lower slopes.

Of course most of those hierarchical schemas – at least in their more explicit formats – have long since been discarded as mistaken and unsupportable by the great majority of social scientists. But the ideas which underpinned these schemas still live on in two crucial ways. On the one hand they have remained embedded, albeit in a somewhat diluted format, at the very core of Euro-American popular culture.<sup>7</sup> This is hardly surprising. Not only were such ideas explicitly articulated in school curricula for the best part of a century, but when they were eventually withdrawn they were rarely, if ever, directly challenged. And to the extent that they continue to serve a valuable ideological purpose it is hardly surprising that such ideas still live on in the popular imagination, regardless of the fact that they are no longer receive the enthusiastic academic endorsement that they once did. However the second route along which echoes of Victorian progressivism have been sustained is not only altogether more subtle, but reached into the heart of academia itself. Whilst the greater part of the academic establishment has by now comprehensively disengaged itself from the worst excesses of Social Darwinism, it is now becoming clear that one of its core assumptions – a commitment to the inevitability of unilineal progressivism – still lies buried at the heart of the received understandings of most liberal thinkers.

#### *2.4 Cultural pluralism*

As John Gray (2000) has recently argued at some length, whilst the liberal premises around which the greater part of contemporary theorisation in sociology, social policy and political science have been constructed are ostensibly extremely critical of any perspective which positively evaluates any form of institutionalised social hierarchy – and consequently to most aspects of the Social Darwinist program – those premises still provide ready-made houseroom to one key aspect of that vision of progressive social evolution. This is the notion

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<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the best way of checking this out is by exploring the way in which Hollywood has routinely treated these issues, all the way from Westerns to Tarzan. And even though some recent products such as *Dancing with Wolves* may appear to have reversed the format, the hero of the whole enterprise is still invariably a European.

– which pre-dates the Darwinian revolution, since it can be traced back to the enlightenment thinkers of the previous century – that mankind is set on a course rational development which will eventually lead to the evolution of to single universally agreed-upon set of values about what the good life consists of, and how society can best be structured in order to ensure that those values – of freedom, liberty and so forth – can safely be sustained. Hence whilst contemporary liberal thinkers routinely highlight their commitment to freedom and personal autonomy, for these provide two of the key yardsticks against which they rightly insist that the good life should be measured, they nevertheless do so within the context of a very specific set of value assumptions around which they also expect that all reasonable others will eventually converge.

If so it follows that there is indeed an ideal form of human social organisation which is intrinsically superior to all others. To be sure we may not yet have reached goal, or even fully identified all of its parameters, whilst some societies (usually those which are ‘less free’) are regarded as very considerably further removed from reaching that destination than others. Hence whilst that destination may still lie at some distance over the horizon even for the inhabitants of the world’s most ‘progressive’ societies, universalism – at least in the sense of a universally applicable and agreed upon set of values – still remains a deeply cherished liberal goal. As Gray also makes clear this vision of progressive social evolution – now largely stripped of the racialised underpinnings which it acquired during the nineteenth century – has much older roots than Social Darwinism. Not only can this vision be traced back to the idealism of Plato and Socrates, but it was also powerfully reinforced by Augustine’s arguments about the duty of all Adam’s offspring to seek to step into the City of God, thereby leaving the sinful world of nature far behind them. Many centuries later the philosophers of the eighteenth century Enlightenment generated developed similarly structured ideas about human perfectibility and progress, albeit with the proviso that the path forward was not God-given, but best discerned on the basis of rational analysis and debate.

Yet although it is now increasingly clear that the Social Darwinists’ insistence that biological forces were a key component in the whole process was mistaken, rational progressivism – now largely stripped of its parasitic biological appendages – has been pressed forward by an immensely diverse range of thinkers, from Marx, Durkheim and Weber to Popper, Rawls and Dworkin, and most recently of all by the fevered prose of George W. Bush’s speech-writers.

Yet just how realistic is prospect of the wonderful goal of universal peace, justice and liberty actually being achieved within this much-championed conceptual framework? Is the power of its comprehensive commitment to human freedom such that the ‘end of history’, as Francis Fukuyama (1992) so dramatically predicted, is now close at hand? Or has the apparently impeccable liberal vision of future progress which underpins – whether implicitly or explicitly – the great part of contemporary public discussion already begun to encounter the fruit of the long-sown seeds of its own downfall? In a word, has the established vision of freedom and justice championed by mainstream Euro-American thought already passed its sell-by date?

### 2.5 *Two faces of liberalism*

In addressing this question, Gray is no enemy of either freedom or diversity. Rather he sets out to ask whether this established vision of the good life is really as compatible with cultural pluralism as its proponents suggest, or whether, to the contrary, it has been constructed around a specific set of cultural values which render many values with others may hold equally as unacceptable and ultimately quite intolerable. One does not have to search far to find such contradictions. At this point two examples – although both have far-reaching consequences – will have to suffice.

One of the central tenets of contemporary Euro-American thought is that the pursuit of personal freedom, and hence of individual autonomy, is a fundamental right, and which should – as far as is humanly possible – remain untrammelled by the demands of others, up to and including one’s own family members. To those operating within many other cultural traditions such expectations are not only unrealistic, but are actively destructive of all meaningful social relationships, and most especially of the collective reciprocities of kinship. For them, loyalty to the group, and most especially the family, must always out-trump the pursuit of personal freedom, for otherwise the mutuality and security of the family (which for obvious reasons is normally understood in extended rather than nuclear terms in such contexts) will of necessity be undermined. Which of these options is to be preferred? The one offers the prospect of almost unlimited personal autonomy, at the necessary cost of undermining – and perhaps even eliminating – personal security; the second offers the prospect of almost unlimited personal security, but at the equally necessary cost of undermining – and perhaps even eliminating – personal freedom. Which of these two prospects is the better? Clearly there is no answer: each view has its own merits – and

demerits. Ultimately they are incommensurable, like apples and oranges. To an apple lover oranges may indeed be fruit, but of a kind which is a very poor substitute for oranges; and of course orange-lovers make exactly the same judgement of apples.

Mainline liberal thought also has much the same problem with religion – the phenomenon which Marx resoundingly denounced as the opium of the people. Whilst only a minority of contemporary Euro-American social philosophers would go that far, the vast majority nevertheless take the view that if religion is to play a social role at all, adherence to religious principles (whatever they may be) should not only be a matter of personal choice, but also that all activities stemming from them should firmly be restricted to the personal and domestic sphere. But even if we leave the question of how far this commitment has *actually* been implemented to firmly one side,<sup>8</sup> we still need to address a yet wider question still: how can religious traditions which impose all manner of public behavioural and ideological obligations upon their followers, and in doing so drive a coach and horses through the conventional liberal expectation that religious belief and practice should be firmly excluded from the public realm, possibly be tolerated. The conventional answer has of course been that all we needed to do was to have patience, and these illusory notions would fall into the dustbin of history where they properly belonged. However it now seems quite clear that all such notions must be firmly abandoned on empirical grounds. First of all, the long-awaited disappearance of religion from the public – and above all the political – sphere shows no sign whatsoever of taking place: on the contrary if there is one very firm lesson which we can draw from the latter half of the twentieth century it is that in every part of the globe, religion has become an ever more salient – and may well by now be *the* most salient – vehicle for political mobilisation, and as we enter the new millennium, there is no sign whatsoever of any deviance from that pattern. Secondly, and consequently, mainstream liberalism's self-proclaimed commitment to toleration appears to have entirely evaporated in the face of these developments. Although objective observers could only conclude that the genie has long since left the bottle, mainline thinking still proceeds as if the stopper was still very nearly in place. One of the central consequences of all this is now all too clear: their much proclaimed insistence that only proper place for religion is in the private domain provides the powers that

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<sup>8</sup> Once one bears in mind how comprehensively such symbols as the American Flag, the French Republic, and most dramatically of all, Lenin's mausoleum have been publicly fetishised, it becomes extremely difficult to take seriously the commitment to laïcité to which all three of these very differently constituted states nominally subscribe. However fuller discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this chapter.

be with an extremely effective vehicle through which to seek to impose their hegemony over followers of those benighted traditions which remain perversely committed to a different set of values.

In his closely argued analysis of the *Two Faces of Liberalism*, Gray sets out to confront these conundrums directly. Taking his cue from Hobbes rather than Locke, he begins by arguing that there is no single ideal cultural system on which all humanity has, can or ever could reach agreement. Hence

‘If liberalism has a future, it is in giving up a search for a rational consensus on the best way of life ... rational inquiry in ethics ... shows that the good life comes in many varieties. (Gray 2000: 1 – 3)

The span of good lives of which humans are capable cannot be contained in any one community or tradition. The good for humans is too beset by conflict for that to be possible. For the same reason, the good life cannot be contained in any one political regime.’ (*ibid*: 6)

Hence he goes on to insist that the most appropriate basis on which to proceed is to abandon the search for the chimera of a single ideal regime, liberal or otherwise, to which all can adhere. Instead supports Hobbes’ view that the object of toleration is not to lay down the foundations for consensus, but instead to promote mutual coexistence in contexts of inevitable diversity. Hence:

‘A theory of *modus vivendi* is not the search for an ideal regime, liberal or otherwise. It has no truck with the notion of an ideal regime. It aims to find terms on which different ways of life can live well together. *Modus vivendi* is liberal toleration adapted to the historical fact of pluralism. The ethical theory underpinning *modus vivendi* is value-pluralism. The most fundamental value-pluralist claim is that there are many conflicting kinds of human flourishing, some of which cannot be compared in value. Among the many kinds of good lives that humans can live there are some that are neither better nor worse than one another, nor the same in worth, but incommensurably – that is to say, differently – valuable.’ (*ibid*: 6)

Although the resultant condition of cultural pluralism is a *de facto* reality in virtually all contemporary societies, it is scarcely a novel phenomenon. Nor is this state of affairs necessarily problematic: in most pre-modern societies resolving such dilemmas, and promoting a mutually satisfactory *modus vivendi* between competing interests of this kind was a central component of statecraft. By contrast most contemporary societies – and most especially those which proudly identify themselves advanced liberal democracies – regard the prospect of being forced to tolerate the presence of value-pluralism within their own boundaries profoundly unacceptable. Why should this be so?

## 2.6 *The homogenising impetus of conventional forms of liberal democracy*

Bhikhu Parekh takes up this issue quite directly, suggesting that the contemporary vision of the modern state – whose roots he traces to the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 – is by its very nature strongly committed to the erosion of all public value-differentials amongst its citizens..

Hence in contrast to

“premodern polities which were embedded in and composed of such communities as castes, clans, tribes and ethnic groups, (the modern state) has increasingly come to be defined as an association of individuals. It abstracts away their class, ethnicity, religion, social status, and unites them in terms of their subscription to a common system of authority, which is similarly abstracted from the wider structure of social relations. To be a citizen is to transcend one’s ethnic-religious and other particularities, and to think and act as a member of the political community. Because their socially generated differences are abstracted away, citizens are homogenized and related to the state in an identical manner, enjoying equal status and possessing identical rights and obligations” (Parekh 2000: 181).

But whilst Parekh acknowledges that this individualistic vision of civic participation has undoubtedly led to the institutionalisation of a remarkably wide range of positive benefits, since it:

“raises the individual above religious, ethnic and other forms of communal consciousness and creates an unprecedented regime of personal liberties and rights. It eliminates personalized rule and replaces it with an impersonal system of government in which the citizen is subject only to the authority of the law. It establishes equality between its members, bypasses the social hierarchies of status, caste and class, and nurtures their sense of dignity. It also provides them with an impersonal and enduring object of allegiance and loyalty, widens their moral sympathies, creates shared citizenship and a space for collective action, and represents the triumph of human will over natural and social circumstances...It provides space for personal autonomy and cultural and religious freedom. It fosters a sense of community among its otherwise unrelated members ... and creates conditions for a relatively inviolate private realm, an autonomous civil society, and an autonomous public realm governed by publicly articulated and debated norms of rationality.” (*ibid*: 183-184)

Yet this whole magnificent edifice of the liberal democratic state is simultaneously riven by a severe internal contradiction: its deep-rooted expectation that the *demos* which organizes should be – or failing that should become – politically and culturally homogeneous. As Parekh argues,

“This is not a contingent failing or an aberration, but is inherent in the way it has been defined and constituted for past three centuries. All its citizens are expected to privilege their territorial over their other identities; to consider what they share in common as citizens far more important than what they share with other members of their religious, cultural and other communities; to define themselves and relate to each other as individuals; to abstract away their religious, cultural and other views when

conducting themselves as citizens; to relate to the state in an identical manner, and to enjoy an identical basket of rights and obligations. In short, the state expects all its citizens to subscribe to an identical way of defining themselves and relating to each other and the state. This shared political self-understanding is its constitutive principle and necessary presupposition. It can tolerate differences on all other matters but not this one, and uses educational, cultural, coercive and other means to ensure that all its citizens share it. In this important sense it is a deeply homogenizing institution (*ibid*: 184)

Why, though, should these expectations be so seriously flawed? The answer should by now be clear enough. Whilst states based on such principles may well be extremely effective vehicles for engineering good policy and practice in societies which are either culturally homogeneous or willing to become so, the whole project can all too easily have precisely the opposite consequences if and when it hits the rocks of pluralism:

In multi-ethnic and multinational societies whose constituent communities entertain different views on its nature, powers and goals, have different histories and needs, and cannot therefore be treated in an identical manner, the modern state can easily become an instrument of injustice and oppression and even precipitate the very instability and secession it seeks to prevent (*ibid*: 185).

Moreover such conditions of cultural pluralism are hardly exceptional: on the contrary they were very much the norm in the pre-modern world. Hence the sense of homogeneity around which almost all contemporary states are constructed is not only intrinsically fragile, but in large part a product of the state's own efforts to promote and celebrate a vision of its own national linguistic and cultural uniqueness. Yet although that sense of uniqueness is invariably conceptualised as a 'bottom-up' phenomenon, arising in an almost mystical way from 'the people' themselves, programs of state-formation were in fact much more frequently implemented from the top down. It is easy to see why: since the populations living within the boundaries of newly crystallising nation states were very often far more linguistically and culturally heterogeneous than the new nationalistic ideology suggested that they should be, the first task of many newly formed post-monarchical and post-Imperial governments was to create the nation which was to be the object of its attentions.<sup>9</sup>

Much energy has of course been committed to fostering a sense of national coherence and integrity, and the outcome of such efforts has been broadly successful – even though they have often been vigorously contested by regionalist movements in France, Spain, Italy and

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<sup>9</sup> As Massimo d'Azeglio remarked on the occasion of the first meeting of the parliament after Italy had been united, "We have made Italy; now we have to make Italians" (Hobsbawm 1992: 44)

most spectacularly of all in Yugoslavia. However during the past half century the resultant trends towards ever higher levels of cultural and linguistic homogeneity within most European nation-states has begun to be confronted with a new and largely unexpected challenge. The arrival of an ever-mounting inflow of migrant workers, almost all of whom are of extra-European origin.

The result of these processes is now plain to see: far from following a straightforward trajectory of cultural assimilation, most settlers – as well as their locally-born offspring – are sustaining a strong sense of their own distinctive cultural and religious heritage, whose resources have invariably proved to be a valuable source of inspiration in constructing strategic responses to the worst consequences of the forces of exclusion to which they so routinely find themselves exposed (Ballard 1992). As the new minorities have clustered together to create what can best be described as *ethnic colonies* in the heart of most of Britain's (and Europe's) major cities (Ballard 1994), it is quite clear that their ever more salient – and numerous – presence has raised all the dilemmas highlighted by Gray and Parekh right to the top of the socio-political agenda in almost every corner of the Euro-American world. Moreover these are not contradictions which we can afford to leave untouched in the hope that they will be gradually be resolved by normal democratic processes. Quite the contrary: for reasons that both Parekh and Gray highlight, they are much more likely to blow up in our faces if we fail to address them with a much greater level of skill and insight than is currently being deployed.

### 2.7 *Living with plurality*

Before considering what those skills, as well as the institutional arrangements constructed around them might actually consist of, we must first return to basics. In particular, just how should we expect face-to-face social relationships be organised in contexts of cultural plurality? To those raised with the assumption that religious, cultural and linguistic homogeneity is wholly normal, the prospect of a face-to-face encounter with beings drawn from an alien order is invariably viewed with considerable alarm. 'Will they understand me?' 'Will I understand them?' 'Are they friends or foes?' 'Will I be able to differentiate the one from the other?' are thoughts which will almost inevitably spring to mind in such circumstances. But not only are 'the others' in such contexts invariably viewed as both mysterious and potentially dangerous, there is also a strong tendency to assume that both 'my language and culture' and 'their language and culture' are freestanding, reified and



immiscible entities. The saying ‘East is east and west is west, and never the twain shall meet’ points directly to this mode of thinking.

However the most salient feature of all plural societies is that they include a whole series of arenas in which those who differ do regularly meet, and successfully interact with one another: it is only in comprehensively homogeneous societies that no-one has any experience of such transactions, so giving rise to the mistaken illusion that that cross-border transactions are somehow unusual, unnatural and unproblematic. Such a reading of what goes on in such situations could hardly be more inaccurate.

### 2.8 *Cultural navigation*

Most human societies are culturally plural: that is they contain within themselves a variety of differently constituted social arenas, within each of which a distinctive set of cultural conventions are normally deployed. Pluralism in this sense is a commonplace experience: there are subtle (and sometimes not so subtle!) differences in the way in which we code our behaviour when at home with parents, when sitting in a classroom at school, or when we go out clubbing with friends, for example. Since everyone plays different roles in different situations, we all of us constantly adapt the ways in which – and very often the cultural codes in terms of which – we present ourselves as we navigate our way through the changing circumstances of our everyday lives. Hence even in the most nominally homogeneous societies our self-presentations (or so called ‘identities’) vary from context to context.

It also follows that the extent of the cultural variations which any given individual encounters is profoundly influenced by the social context in which they find themselves. Hence, for example, urban lifestyles are normally much more plural than those in rural areas, and the population of some cities is a great deal more culturally plural than others. Hence the degree of cultural pluralism to which any given individual is exposed can vary enormously: in some cases it may be no more than variations on a theme, whilst in others they may find themselves exposed to a maelstrom of radically differing traditions. However the main point to remember is that cultural pluralism is (and always has been) a routine feature of human social organisation; and that multiculturalism – or in other words exposure to, and hence some degree of familiarity with, a range of cultural codes is therefore a *normal* human experience.

Human beings are therefore no more necessarily mono-cultural than they are intrinsically mono-lingual: are brains are perfectly capable of coping with several differently constructed operating systems. Hence just as those exposed to more than one language will quickly become bi-lingual, so it also follows that those exposed to more than one culture will likewise become bi-cultural. In other words as soon as someone has acquired the requisite degree of *cultural competence* – or in other words the capacity to act and react appropriately in a number of differently structured arenas – they will *be* multicultural; and the greater the degree of cultural competence they acquire, the wider will be the range of arenas through which they can successfully navigate. Having such a capacity is no more a threat to one's personal integrity than bi-lingualism is a cause of brain-damage. Quite the contrary: those with ability to navigate competently through a wide range of cultural and linguistic arenas are advantaged, rather than disadvantaged, as compared with those who lack such capacities.

However the rules of cultural hegemony – which insist that certain codes are more advanced than, more civilised than and are consequently in all senses superior to all others – blanks out awareness of what should be a self-evident truth. This also precipitates a further paradox: whilst members of dominant groups tend to be much less linguistically and culturally competent than those whom they view as their social inferiors, they invariably find themselves hard-pressed to recognise – let alone to ascribe any kind of positive value to – the full range of linguistic competences and navigational skills routinely deployed by those whom they dominate. Instead such skills and competencies (not that they are normally identified as such in the dominant discourse) tend routinely to be used as a mark of inferiority.

This by now deeply institutionalised tendency to devalue linguistic and cultural alterity can indeed be a source of severe psychological distress. It those subjected a system of institutionalised exclusionism which constantly invites them to devalue all aspects of their ancestral heritage succumb to those pressures, and hence, for example, try to 'think themselves white', they will soon find themselves facing the most alarming contradictions. Not only do are they thereby required to turn their backs on the entire community – with all the benefits of its internal reciprocities – within which they have been raised, but if the 'racial' boundary is congruent with the cultural boundary which they are seeking to cross, they must also find some way of denying a very salient component of their very physical being. Labelling the resultant psychological confusion 'culture conflict' – as very often

occurs – is not only erroneous, but almost wholly obscures the real nature of the underlying contradictions.<sup>10</sup>

These contradictions, no matter how severe they may sometimes become, are best understood not so much a sign of personal weakness, but rather as an inevitable consequence of over-exposure to the forces hegemony. The more comprehensively members of excluded groups can be persuaded that their own linguistic and cultural heritage – and indeed their own physical being – is inferior to that of their dominators, the more comprehensively disempowered they will become; and since education is the principal means whereby this outcome is achieved in the contemporary world, it is precisely those who are most upwardly mobile in educational terms who find themselves most seriously exposed to these contradictions. In this context it is worth remembering that the highest form of education lies in retaining (or regaining) the capacity to think for oneself. As Biko repeatedly emphasised – ultimately at the cost of his life – this is the first and most necessary step towards re-empowering oneself, and hence of gaining the capacity comprehensively to *resist* hegemony.

### **3 Ethnicity: the construction and maintenance of cultural boundaries**

Whilst the boundaries between arenas ordered in terms of differing cultural codes are readily crossable – at least by those who have acquired the relevant cultural competence – such boundary-crossing activities do not necessarily lead to an erosion of the boundary between the two arenas. Cultural systems have their own situationally adaptive logic, and those who use them sustain and revise their contents as suits their purposes, whatever they may be. In that sense the boundary which defines the limits of any given cultural arena is far from static. Instead it is best understood as a strategic construction whose height and permeability is likewise constantly readjusted by those who sustain it (Barth 1969).

#### *3.1 The dynamics of ethnic polarisation*

In certain circumstances, however, cultural boundaries may be quite deliberately elaborated, thus giving rise to a process of *ethnic polarization*. In most cases it is not so much the depth of the cultural difference between the contending parties which drives such processes of boundary elaboration, but rather differences in their economic and political interests and concerns. The sharper those contradictions become – or at least they are perceived as being –

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<sup>10</sup> Some of the best insights into the dynamics of these contradictions can be found in the work of Fanon (1968), Memmi (1965) and Biko (1987).

the more vigorous the resultant processes of ethnic consolidation, and hence of polarization, will tend to become.

Hence ethnicity needs to be carefully distinguished from culture. Ethnic consolidation is not a product of cultural distinctiveness *per se*, but is best understood as the outcome of *the articulation of cultural distinctiveness in situations of political and/or economic competition*. As a result it normally erupts in response to patterns of inequality of one form or another. Hence just as privileged groups routinely close ranks in ethnic terms to exclude their social subordinates in the hegemonic patterns described earlier, so the excluded frequently respond by closing ranks themselves, the better to resist and subvert their subordination. When each side reacts in turn against the other, the outcome is very often a rapid and escalating process of mutual ethnic polarisation.

It follows that ethnic closure is by no means a strategy which is solely pursued by excluded minorities. Rather it is a far more general phenomenon: those at the top of the social order routinely close ranks in order to sustain their position of privilege; those at the bottom have a parallel interest in closing ranks the better to resist the exclusionary pressures to which they are subjected; meanwhile those in the middle frequently practice dual closure in an effort to keep those below them at bay whilst simultaneously setting out to challenge those more privileged than they (Parkin 1979). In this sense ethnicity adds a crucial additional dimension to class theory. Whilst it accepts that social divisions are primarily the outcome of dialectic processes of mutual competition for scarce resources, it nevertheless insists that we should also acknowledge that cultural symbols – and hence of ethnicity – play a key role in way in which the contending parties construct their boundaries and generate a powerful sense of moral solidarity amongst all those contained within them. It is precisely that sense of solidarity which enables a collection of people to transform themselves from being nothing more than an objectively observable social category ('a sack of potatoes', to use Marx's graphic phrase) into a subjectively conscious social group whose members can thereby set off in active pursuit of their own collective interests. If so, it follows that far from being a peripheral phenomenon, ethnicity – and above all processes of ethnic mobilization – should occupy a far more salient position in sociological theory than most established models have hitherto recognized.

### 3.2 *The logic of racial and ethnic polarisation*

Not only does this perspective suggest that we should re-examine all conventional accounts of social class formation with an eye to the extent to which the dynamics of such processes of social mobilisation were underpinned by moral – and hence ethnic – factors, but it also gives us an additional analytical edge in terms of which to explore all sorts of contemporary conflicts which are currently frequently described either as ‘racial’ or ‘racialised’.

Those terms are most usually deployed when those involved act in what critics hold to be wholly arbitrary and indeed irrational fashion by using hereditary characteristics such as skin colour as an inescapable marker of both alterity and inferiority, so justifying all manner of exclusionary practices directed at those so identified. Given such a vision of the nature of the problem, the best way forward would appear to engage in a massive process of re-education whose central aim would be expose the irrational character of these judgements, and hence to replace rampant prejudice with mutual respect. Yet although these broad objectives are clearly wholly well-meant, one still need to ask whether the initial diagnosis was sufficiently accurate for the remedy to have any realistic prospect of having the desired effect: after all these allegedly irrational beliefs show little or no sign of disappearing no matter how better educated we have all become. In the face of all this Wellman has incisively developed an alternative approach. Rejecting the concept of prejudice as a means of getting to grips with these processes of exclusion, he argues that white racism is best understood as “a culturally sanctioned, *rational* response to struggles over scarce resources” (Wellman 1977: 35). On this basis he goes on to argue that

“The issues which divide black people and white people are grounded in real and material conditions. The justifications for this division have an element of rationality to them: they are not simply manufactured reasons, misperceptions or defenses for personality defects. In crucial ways they are ideological defenses of the interests and privileges that stem from white people’s position in a structure based in part on racial inequality.” (*ibid*: 37)

What Wellman is arguing, in other words, is that whilst skin colour may be a trigger both for social exclusion, as well as for fears that one’s hitherto successful efforts to exclude may come under serious challenge in the course of face-to-face interactions with the excluded, the underlying rationale of the whole process is in fact much more straightforward: namely to preserve one’s own interests and privileges, and to ensure that others do not transgress them.

And whilst Wellman sets his argument in the United States, where the principle contradiction at the time at which he wrote was between the white majority and the African-American minority, it is easy enough to transpose his arguments to contemporary Britain, where similarly structured contradictions have now erupted viz-a-viz members of the South Asian and Afro-Caribbean minorities, who are currently seen not only as threatening the material interests of the indigenous majority by allegedly ‘taking our houses’ and taking our jobs’, but also as offering an unacceptable threat to the integrity of Britain’s *cultural* order.

Is there any substance to such charges? Following Wellman’s line of argument, there clearly is – provided that we accept as given the proposition that members of Britain’s indigenous population have an inherent right to occupy a position of privilege, and that the only legitimate role for those who differ is to act as subservient helots to their betters, eternally grateful for being granted access to any crumbs that fall from the table above them. The new minorities, reasonably enough, see things differently. They may have begun in such a sub-proletarian position when they first arrived: newcomers have little alternative but to accept the scraps that they offered, no matter how significant an economic role they may be fulfilling. However the new non-European settlers had no more intention of putting up with such a position in the longer run than did their Irish and Jewish predecessors who fulfilled exactly the same role during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They aimed to move upwards and outwards as soon as possible, and if they themselves were unable – given their relatively limited linguistic and cultural competence – to break out of the proletarian positions to which they were so routinely ascribed, then they certainly expected their British born children to do so.

### 3.3 *Ethnicity and social mobility*

But exactly how was the objective of upward socio-economic mobility actually to be achieved? Although gaining sufficient cultural and linguistic competence such that they could fluently participate fluently in English cultural arenas was clearly a necessary prerequisite, it soon became quite clear that that was not sufficient: they also had to find some means of piercing – or at least circumventing – these deep-seated barriers of ethnic exclusionism which were strewn in their path by members of the dominant majority. In successfully doing so, three factors appear to have been of particular importance. Firstly a powerful belief that the excluders really could be beaten at their own game: or in other words a thoroughgoing rejection of hegemonic attempts to persuade the minorities of their own inferiority, such that

they were bound to fail no matter how hard they tried. Secondly a willingness to accept the view – as their parents insisted – that if the only way to break through was to be twice as competent, and twice as well qualified as the competition, then so be it: go for it – and don't allow yourself to be intimidated. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, their ability to access what can best be identified as an alternative ethnic 'backstage' in Goffman's sense: the rich resources of an alternative of moral, ideological, spiritual, social and conceptual heritage, which offered constant inspiration in the process of unexpected devising (and hence highly effective) strategies of resistance.

Whilst success was greatest when all three of these factors mutually reinforced each other, the last was in many respects the key to the whole process. On the one hand their ethnic alterity gave them the confidence not to take no for an answer, and instead to look for chinks in the barriers of exclusion through which that might begin to press their way forward; and on the other it was the massive resources of both encouragement and mutual support available within those ethnic arenas and their attendant networks of reciprocity which enabled them to make the most of whatever opportunities they identified, and in so doing to exploit them to the full. The results of processes of this kind are now plain to see in most of Britain's major industrial towns and cities. Far from fading away into the ethnic mainstream in a process of assimilation – as many commentators naïvely expected would occur – the great majority of South Asian and Afro-Caribbean settlers who were initially drawn into Britain in the midst of the post-war economic boom still live clustered together in more or less tight knit ethnic colonies, whose members organise the personal and domestic lives according to values and conventions which are still primarily inspired by their ancestral cultural, religious and linguistic heritage (Ballard 1994, James 1993).

Given the arguments developed in this chapter, it should be much easier to understand why they should have behaved in this way. Such responses are not the outcome of pig-headed conservatism, nor of mindless efforts of authoritarian parents to keep their freedom-seeking offspring in check: rather they are much better understood as an adaptive – and hence as a strategic – response to the circumstances which the users of these cultural conventions have encountered, as a result of which there are both utilising and reinterpreting the resources of their cultural heritage the better to pursue their own similarly constructed interests and

concerns.<sup>11</sup> Nor is there anything unique or novel about such processes of ethnic colony construction. Careful inspection of the way in which the current crop of minorities' Irish Catholic and eastern European Jewish settlers established themselves in Britain during the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries soon reveals that they, too, used exactly the same strategies (Fielding 1993, Brook 1989)

To be sure there are some very significant differences between these two sets of minorities. Because the majority of post-war migrants were of non-European origins, they were *visibly* distinctive. This had far reaching consequences. Not only did their ready identifiability make them much easier targets for exclusion, but also rendered any attempt to hide their distinctiveness futile; by the same token this also provided fertile ground for constructing arguments which suggested that their 'racial' alterity was the central issue at stake. However this was never the sole cause of contention. In addition to their physical distinctiveness, the majority of post-war settlers also brought with them a social, cultural and religious heritage which was equally strongly non-European in character. Moreover that dimension of the newcomers' alterity was very soon held to offer just as much, if not more of a threat to the integrity of the established social order than did their mere physical distinctiveness – as anyone who cares to read Enoch Powell's 'racist' speeches can immediately perceive.

#### 3.4 *Ethnicity and social exclusion*

What is frequently forgotten, however, is that popular paranoia about 'the immigrant threat' which Enoch Powell re-articulated with such success during the course of the late nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies was in no sense a novel phenomenon. Fears about the alleged threat offered by the ever-growing presence Irish Catholic settlers during the latter part of the nineteenth century and by Eastern European Jews during the early decades of the twentieth century were if anything even more intense – *even though those settlers physical and cultural heritage was European*. However this did not prevent exactly the same kind of arguments being deployed against them. Not only were both the Irish and the Jews viewed as persons of grossly inferior racial stock, but their culture – and above all their determined

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<sup>11</sup> By way of clarification, I do not wish to suggest that these very rational choices are necessarily consciously worked out by those who deploy them. Rather I would suggest that they are an outcome of both commonsense (within the context of the commonplace assumptions current within that group) and trial and error. If certain strategies and adaptations turn out to work, in the sense of producing manifest benefits, others are likely to follow. Such adaptive processes do not require conscious planning.



maintenance of a sense of ethnic solidarity – was viewed as plain evidence of their conspiratorial purpose. Hence whilst the Irish presence was seen in many quarters as part of a dastardly Papist plot to overturn Englishness, Protestantism and the Crown, the Jewish presence was seen as part of an equally insidious effort to implement the protocols of the Elders of Zion. Both charges were mere paranoid fantasy, of course, but they nevertheless served a rational purpose: they could be – and indeed were – routinely utilised to legitimate all manner of exclusionary practices against members of both the Irish and the Jewish minorities whenever and wherever they were perceived as unwelcome competitors for houses, for jobs, for golf club membership or indeed for any other kind of sought after but scarce resource.

Yet despite these handicaps – which were often severe – members of both groups have achieved a considerable degree of prosperity as the decades have passed. In this respect the achievements of the Jews have been particularly spectacular. Having been relegated to the position of a comprehensively marginalised sub-proletariat when they first arrived, the second generation moved into skilled (but still working class) occupations of one kind or another, whilst their successors are by now overwhelmingly concentrated in the upper echelons of the social order, either in business or in one or other of the professions. And although adept at passing – or in other words at obscuring virtually all overt indications of their Jewish heritage – it is certainly not the case that Britain's Jews have simply disappeared into the undifferentiated mass of the population at large. Not only do they still exhibit a marked tendency to cluster together in residential colonies within which manifestly distinctive personal and domestic lifestyles are still sustained, but the breadth and strength of Jewish ethnic networks can only be described as spectacular. But although those reciprocal ties serve just the same purpose as do 'old-boy' networks amongst the native English, their significance is read in a wholly different way: hence extensive efforts are routinely made to play them down, and hence obscure their existence.

Bearing all this in mind, the differences between the exclusionary pressures with which members of Britain's Irish and Jewish minorities initially found themselves confronted and those into which African, Afro-Caribbean and Asian settlers subsequently ran manifestly differed little in their structural character. Indeed there are good reasons for suggesting that the arrival of a new set of scapegoats was one of the principal reasons why hostile attitudes towards their less visible predecessors declined in force. Secondly, and just as importantly,

there are equally strong parallels between the ways in which members of all four groups responded to exclusion: all of them clustered together to form mutually supportive networks amongst themselves, and from within the relative safety and security of those colonies set about utilising the resources of their cultural, religious and linguistic capital – whatever form it might happen to take – to build strategies and networks the better to challenge and circumvent the obstacles they found themselves confronting. In a word, they have reacted to their experience of exclusion by developing strategies of *ethnic* consolidation, and as a result have managed to achieved a far more extensive degree of upward social mobility – although this has also been tempered by a great deal of inter-ethnic variation (Modood 1997, Ballard 1996, 1999) – than most sociological observers had either predicted or expected.

### 3.5 *Winding and unwinding the dynamics of mutual ethnic closure*

It goes without saying that the actual content of these strategies was far from uniform. Each group drew on its own distinctive resources, each of which was product of its members' own specific social and historical heritage, whether as peasant farmers in Punjab, Fukian, the Yemen or Nigeria, as the Jamaican and Guyanese heirs of Caribbean systems of enslavement and resistance, as Irish peasants with a history of many centuries of resistance to English colonialism, or long-suffering Jewish craftsmen fleeing the *shtetls* of eastern Europe in search of better opportunities elsewhere. And precisely because the resources which the members of each such group brought are so diverse, the goals which the members of each one have sought to implement, the trajectories of adaptation and resistance which they have devised, and the speed with which they moved along them have been exceedingly varied. All have set about resisting exclusion: but the precise content of the ethnic strategies they have devised whilst doing so has as been as diverse as their respective heritages. Whilst all are therefore equally ethnic in their alterity, the one thing which these groups are not is homogeneous as between themselves.

This also raises a further question, is just the minorities whose strategies it is appropriate to identify as ethnic – or should majority reactions to these developments also be identified as ethnic? In terms of the definition set out earlier, the answer should now be clear. If ethnicity is understood the construction of a collectively self-interested sense of social solidarity which is achieved through the articulation of a specific set of cultural symbols, it follows that the reaction of Britain's indigenous majority to the perceived threat posed by all these varied competitors for access to positions socio-economic advantage has been equally ethnic in

character, for even if the native Brits (and especially their dominant ethnic component, the English) often still find themselves hard pressed to identify themselves in positive terms, they have long found it very much easier to identify what they are not: it is each successive minority group's alterity – physical, cultural, religious and linguistic – which has routinely been used to define what Brits are not, such that it is in counter-distinction to such alterity, rather than in a positive sense of their own distinctiveness, that the British have been most easily able to discern a sense of common meaning, purpose and mutual solidarity. If so it is hardly surprising that the sense of collective hostility to the challenges offered by a succession of groups who could be defined as enemies within – be they Irish 'papists', Jewish 'yids', Afro-Caribbean 'yardies' or Pakistani 'fundamentalists' – should have been so strong. If it is indeed the case that Britain's English natives have only been able fully to define their ethnic boundaries in contradistinction to a convenient set of scapegoats, such an insight would certainly illuminate a significant part of the logic and the dynamics of recent ethnic confrontations in England's northern cities.

### *3.6 Ethnic polarisation in contemporary Britain*

Although the ethnic tensions which have arisen in the wake of large-scale immigration of non-European settlers now regularly precipitate the publication of alarmed – and all too often alarmist – headlines in mainland British newspapers, it is worth remembering that a very differently grounded but far more violent ethnic conflict has now been raging for well over three decades across the Irish sea in Ulster. In this case there are, of course, no genetic markers between the two contending parties – and at least to anyone but aficionados sophisticated of the local scene – very few cultural ones either; rather it is ideological differences with respect to religion affiliation, and consequently as whether the province and its population should remain 'loyal' subjects of the English Crown, or whether they affiliate themselves to the Republic to the South which divides them.

As ever in contexts of ethnic polarisation, these positions not only have a history, but are also vehicles for the pursuit of contradictory material interests. The boundaries which contain the province were originally drawn up in 1926 to protect the local Protestant population from what its members viewed as the wholly unacceptable prospect of Republican, and hence 'Papist' domination that they assumed would be inevitable if they allowed themselves to be incorporated in the newly established Irish Free State to the south. But although this undoubtedly reflected the democratic wishes of the local Protestant majority, it immediately

led to the creation of a permanent local Catholic/Republican who were as fearful of Protestant domination as were the Loyalists at an all-Ireland level. Nor were these fears unjustified. In the years that followed members of Ulster's protestant majority made strenuous and largely successful efforts to bolster their position of privilege by pressing the province's Catholic minority into a position of systematic political and socio-economic advantage.

However such hegemonic strategies rarely work forever, and in the late 1960s these established structures of ethnic inequality began to be challenged by the Civil Rights Movement. Such moves were viewed – and continue to be viewed – in wholly contradictory ways by most of those standing on either side of the divide. To the Catholic minority, not only did challenges to the injustice of Protestant hegemony seem to be wholly legitimate, but also to be so unacceptable that it could be appropriate, if necessary, to take extreme measures to challenge the Protestant's pig-headed commitment to eternal domination. By contrast most members of the protestant majority took precisely the opposite view: since their opponents' demands appeared to negate everything which their tradition of loyalty to Protestantism, the Union and the Crown stood for, it was a wholly unacceptable challenge, for it represented a far-reaching threat to the integrity of the established socio-political order. Hence they took the view that it was appropriate if necessary, to extreme measures to protect their sacred heritages from the revolutionary demands which their opponents were beginning to articulate. The result was 'the Troubles': a process of ever-escalating ethnic violence as both sides set out to out-trump the other's increasingly dastardly efforts to defend and advance its own position. As this occurred each side also powerfully reinforced its own sense of ethnic solidarity, such that in contemporary Ulster there are very few social arenas in which the participants' ethnic status does not out-trump all others.

However the cost of such polarisation – or more specifically the levels of violence which were attendant upon it – eventually became so large that all sides began to recognise that it was impossible to bear. If there was no prospect of either side winning, then it gradually became apparent that the only way forward was to call a truce, and instead begin to search for a mutually satisfactory *modus vivendi*. Of course such a mutually satisfactory solution has been extremely difficult to find – and for just the reasons which Gray identified. Firstly all concerned had to make substantial sacrifices, and not least by abandoning their previously cherished beliefs that there was *one* correct ideological perspective, be it Catholic and Republican or Protestant and Loyalist. Ideological purity had to be abandoned in favour of

some messy path of compromise down the middle. Secondly such a compromise was viewed as deeply painful, and most especially so to the formerly dominant Protestants: in their view compromise was nothing short of a comprehensively sinful surrender to the forces of evil. Thirdly the speed at which the necessity for compromise has been recognised has varied substantially as between different sections of the population: hence the conflicts of interest over such vital issues as access to jobs, schooling, housing and hence 'territory' in proletarian north-Belfast have become so deep-rooted that neither side has yet been prepared even to consider 'surrender' to the other, even though the inevitability of compromise has now not only been recognised elsewhere in the province, but substantial steps have also been taken towards institutionalising the sharing of both power and privilege across the ethnic divide.

Yet although it should by now be self-evident that a recognition of both the inevitability and legitimacy of ethnic pluralism is the only way of containing ethnic conflict, there is little sign that that lesson has yet been learned in the United Kingdom's English heartlands. Here the most salient contemporary ethnic division is that between the white natives and the visible minorities, and the resultant processes of ethnic polarisation have precipitated periodic explosions, almost all of which have promptly been dubbed 'race riots'. How, though, are the underlying tensions to be resolved? If John Gray's analytical conclusions are sound, and the lessons of Ulster are anything to go by, it follows that although efforts to share knowledge across cultural boundaries in an effort to establish a set of common moral values may be an impeccably liberal solution, it is most unlikely to cut the mustard. And for very good reason: such a moralistic approach does nothing to address the underlying conflicts of interest which invariably drive these processes of polarisation. Unless and until it is recognised that is indeed the heart of the matter, and that the conflict will only start to be capable of resolution when members of the dominant majority accept that they have no alternative but to make some substantial concessions to members of hitherto excluded minorities, that processes of polarisation will begin to be contained.

In the light of all this the series of reports on the ethnic confrontations in Oldham and Bradford which have recently been published by the Home Office (2001a and b) make depressing reading. For the authors of these reports, polarisation ('segregation' is the term which they themselves use) is not so much a symptom, but the principal *cause* of the disturbances which they set out to remedy. Hence in addition to recommending that more

public funds should be spend in order to remedy socio-economic deprivation, the authors central suggested remedy is largely moralistic:

‘A civic identity which serves to unite people and which expresses common goals and aspirations of the whole community can have a powerful effect in shaping attitudes and behaviour. Shared values are essential to give people a common sense of belonging regardless of their race, cultural traditions or faith. Positive action must be taken to build a shared vision and identity’ (Home Office 2001a:12)

Yet all this sounds as cosy and uncontentious as motherhood and apple pie (although one wonders if it would also be seen that way on the streets of North Belfast), just what should detailed content of that vision be, and how might it actually be implemented. The report goes on to discuss just those issues in the next chapter:

‘We recognise the importance of open and constructive debate about citizenship, civic identity; shared values, rights and responsibilities. It is only through having such a debate that we will have the basis for bringing together people of different races, cultures, and religions in a cohesive society and within cohesive communities. We intend that national Government should take the lead in promoting such a debate, and we hope that local government will also recognise the need for this dialogue to take place at a local level.’ (*ibid*: 20)

Yet although this opening statement explicitly recognizes the need for debate, and the subsequent paragraph openly acknowledges that this will raise all sorts of contentious issues, the authors nevertheless take care to nail their liberal flag (in Gray’s first sense) very firmly to the mast:

‘In an open liberal democracy, citizenship is founded on fundamental human rights and duties. The laws, rules and practices that govern our democracy; uphold our commitment to the equal worth and dignity of all our citizens. We must tackle head on racism and Islamophobia. It will sometimes be necessary to confront cultural practices that conflict with these basic values, such as those which deny women the right to participate as equal citizens. Similarly, it means ensuring that every individual has the wherewithal, such as the ability to speak English, to enable them to engage as active citizens in economic, social and political life.’

But having thereby spelled out a strongly assimilationist agenda which insists on the legitimacy of ‘confronting cultural values which conflict with fundamental human rights and the laws, rules and practices that govern our democracy’ the argument promptly backtracks to suggest that

‘Common citizenship does not mean cultural uniformity. Our society is multicultural, and it is shaped by the interaction between people of diverse cultures. There is no single dominant and unchanging culture into which all must assimilate. The public realm is founded on negotiation and debate between competing viewpoints, at the same time as it upholds inviolable rights and duties. Citizenship means finding a

common place for diverse cultures and beliefs, consistent with our core values.’ (*Ibid*: 20)

Sceptical readers might well conclude that this amounts to double-speak, in which the authors are desperately seeking to find a way of facing in two contradictory directions at once. But whilst it is possible to achieve this at the level of moralistic rhetoric, it is not a recipe for coherent policy. The resolution appears on the next page, for having reiterated the proposition that segregation is the core problem, Ministerial working party goes on to argue

While we cannot at present be sure of the full extent of segregation in Britain, there are a number of actions which we can begin to take to counter the negative effects of segregation, and the associated barriers to choice. **We propose that community cohesion should be made an explicit aim of Government at national and local levels.** .... Government policy must promote cross-community relations wherever possible – through youth work schools, health and social care provision, regeneration, culture and sport.’ (*ibid*: 21) (Bold in the original)

Yet just how far are these strongly assimilationist (because vigorously anti-segregationist) policy proposals likely to work? Once one takes the arguments developed by Gray and Parekh aboard, there are good reason for extreme scepticism. However well intentioned these proposal may be, they nevertheless wholly overlook four crucial points:

- the presence of ethnic disjunctions – and hence a strong degree of segregation and a consequent absence of comprehensive ‘community cohesion’ – is a routine feature of all plural societies
- such disjunctions are invariably *widened* if coercive attempts are made to close them up: a recognition of the legitimacy of diversity is a necessary prerequisite for any kind of serious progress in public policy
- cohesion is not to be found in homogeneity, but rather in developing a *modus vivendi* around the least-worst options for all concerned, no matter how seriously this may upset the established *status quo*
- that such a *modus vivendi* is only likely to be achieved when formal recognition is given to the significance of ethnic diversity in all spheres of public activity: only then will members of every component of in our plural society begin to feel that they have a valued and meaningful stake in the established social order.

The fact that all this stands radically at odds with current Home Office thinking should be a cause for considerable concern. As a comparison with Ulster immediately demonstrates, it is

most unlikely that the politics of mutual ethnic closure – and hence of ethnic polarisation – will begin to be unwound in the absence of an explicit recognition the condition of ethnic plurality within which all of us now live. A mere search for harmony invariably obscures that *de facto* reality.

Last but not least, there is a further cause for alarm embedded in the Home Office proposals. One of the principal concerns of minority groups in unreconstructed plural societies is that they get a very poor deal from public services, not just because of low levels of expenditure, but also because of a gross lack of ethnosensitivity in both styles and structures of public service delivery.<sup>12</sup> If policemen, teachers, doctors, nurses and social workers lack the requisite cultural competence to set beside their technical and professional skills, they will inevitably deliver a less than fully effective service to those who differ. But rather than focusing on improving standards of public service delivery – the low quality of which was almost certainly a significant factor in precipitating the uprisings which precipitated the Report itself – the current government recommendations suggest that a central priority in youth work schools, health and social care provision, regeneration, culture and sport must now be to promote cross-community relations wherever possible. Such a diversionary agenda is most unlikely to produce any improvement in the quality of service delivery to the increasingly beleaguered members of Britain visible minority communities.

#### **4 Conclusion**

Until the relatively recent past few people would have regarded such a compromise as being in any way exceptional or alarming. They, too, lived in plural worlds – but they took their existence very much for granted. What has changed such that most contemporary observers find that prospect so much more challenging?

Ironically enough the very concept of modernity appears to lie at the heart of the problem. Not only does it generate an expectation of rapid progress towards social perfection, but it has

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<sup>12</sup> In this context it is worth remembering that Sir William MacPherson's defined institutional racism as 'The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amounts to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.' (MacPherson 1999: 28). Although MacPherson's choice of the term institutional *racism* was understandable, in the light of the arguments developed in this Chapter 'institutional lack of ethnosensitivity' would more accurately identify the phenomenon to which he is pointing. But whatever label we use to describe it, deficiencies in service delivery are now proving to be a far more serious source of



an inbuilt commitment to homogeneity as a result of the urgent efforts of democratic societies dissolve all significant disjunctions within themselves, thus transforming all their citizens into a uniform collection of self-conscious social equals, all of which has generated intense feelings of hostility to pluralism at anything other than a personal level. Hence it is manifestations *collective* diversity, and its inherent challenge to social homogeneity, which modernistic perceptions find most alarming, whilst paradoxically encouraging the blooming of a flowers at a more personal level. Everything is possible, always providing that it takes place under the legitimising icon of self-realisation.

In sharp contrast with this ideological drive towards institutional homogeneity, everyday experience in the contemporary world has become even more diverse than it ever was before. Given the ever growing cheapness and efficiency of modern modes of communication, people and ideas, let alone goods and services, have begun to move around the globe at an ever increasing speed. The resulting changes are coming thick and fast. Whilst industrialisation has always been associated with labour migration, the exhaustion of all nearby reservoirs of unskilled labour, the demographic crisis resulting from the simultaneous impact of greater longevity and reduced fertility throughout the Euro-American world, the ever widening rift in living standards as between the predominantly Euro-American metropolis and its predominantly non-European periphery, means that pressures on the borders are becoming increasingly intense. But at the same time it is becoming increasingly apparent that it is impossible to construct borders which are wholly impermeable to migrant entrepreneurs' efforts to penetrate the boundaries of the 'free' world. As a result all societies are becoming increasingly plural, and are set to become yet more so as the future unfolds.

As the contradictions precipitated by these developments grow clearer by the day, so the need to find a resolution has become ever more pressing. Locking ourselves up in castles of privilege would not only entail cutting off our noses to spite our faces, but will also steadily undermine our own deepest values. A commitment to freedom, justice and equality cannot be sustained in a radically polarised world.

Yet the answer to these conundrums is not hard to discern. There is no future whatsoever in the idle expectation that everyone can be forced to fit the same mould, thereby eliminating all

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disadvantage to people of colour than straightforward racial discrimination.

those uncomfortable disjunctions. That is the source of the problem not is solution. Rather we need to adopt precisely the opposite course. It is only by learning to respect – and above all to live with – difference, no matter how great that difference may be that we are likely to make any significant progress. Our ancestors found it easy to operate as cultural navigators, and were very much more skilled in that art than most of the indigenous inhabitants of contemporary Euro-America. By contrast those whom they so systematically seek to marginalise have for the most part much more actively retained those skills – and on that basis are beginning to mount all manner of challenges to the hegemonic structures with which they find themselves confronted. So long as those who occupy positions of relative privilege continue to react to those challenges with a mixture of fear and paranoia, and take the view that the only possible response is to close ranks to keep the alien intruders at bay, polarisation will continue to deepen, and we will all face an increasingly uncertain future.

But there is an alternative. If only those in positions of privilege – whether at a local, national or a global level – could step back from their current demands that all transactions should be done on their own preferred terms, much would change. If only they could only begin to comprehend, and indeed participate in, other people’s cultural worlds, whilst also being prepared to share the world’s available scarce resources on a much more equitable basis, we could all begin to sleep much more easily in our beds. The issue here is ultimately much more a matter of self-interest than of morality. Either we learn to hang together in all our differences through a continuous search for mutually satisfactory patterns of *modus vivendi* - we will all most assuredly hang apart.

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