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In defence of both multiculturalism and progressive nationalism

A response to Mike O'Donnell

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Since 9/11, 'to be a Muslim is to be under suspicion, under threat and, given the huge increase in racial violence, under attack' (Younge, 2001). In Britain, the situation has worsened with the bombings of 7 July 2005 (7/7), the abortive bombings of 21 July 2005 and the alleged conspiracy of August 2006 to blow up 10 planes. While the coordinated attacks in the USA were deeply shocking, they took place in another country and could be seen to be the product of fanatics. In 2005 and 2006, the conspiracies were closer to home, with most of those responsible for the atrocities being Muslims born and/or brought up in Britain. While the British government and the media have continued to emphasize that the enemy is terrorism and not Islam, there is little doubt that a discourse celebrating Britain's multicultural society is on the retreat (Rattansi, 2004) and in its stead nationalist discourses from different sides of the political spectrum have been revived (Goodhart, 2006; West, 2005), along with discourses that urge Muslims to integrate (Modood, 2005). I write this at a time when, following the leader of the House of Commons, politicians are vying with each other in urging Muslim women not to wear the niqab veil. The clear

implication is that it is Muslims who are to blame for their lack of integration, an implication made absolutely explicit in (much of) the tabloid press where binary oppositions of Us/Them; the West/the Rest; the British/Muslims are routinely reproduced and Muslims are demonized (Freedland, 2006).

In this context, it is refreshing to read an article by an author who welcomes the fact that we are a multicultural society and who wishes to place his critique of multiculturalism within a framework that does not place the onus of responsibility to change on one group. The author's concern is with social solidarity in Britain, which he sees as fragile and in need of shoring up. O'Donnell recognizes that the problem of order is a recurring theme in social theory, with sociological theorists such as Durkheim and Marx grappling with the issue since at least the onset of modernity. Islamist terrorism in this view is the 'perceived immediate threat' to social solidarity, but this is by no means the first threat that has been identified. This is helpful. It is important to recognize that we are addressing a recurring issue, and formulating it in terms of solidarity usefully leaves open, as many current political and media formulations do not, the question of whether integration policies are critical and whether (as is often implied) these entail changes mainly by one group, Muslims.

There is little doubt that multiculturalism has come under increasing attack since 2001, not least from those who would identify themselves as progressive social democrats. 'By 2004, it was common to read or hear that the cultural separatism and self-segregation of Muslim migrants represented a challenge of Britishness and that a "politically-correct" multiculturalism had fostered fragmentation rather than integration' (Modood, 2005). While O'Donnell distances himself from some of the criticisms made of multiculturalism, he clearly does not see multiculturalism as a sufficient basis for social solidarity and indeed seems to be sympathetic towards the view 'that strong multiculturalism [which he sees as exemplified in the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, 2000] threatens social solidarity'. In the light of this, the bulk of the article examines various 'responses to the alleged crisis of multiculturalism in Britain'. He argues 'that a combination of human rights and social equality offer a better basis than nationalism for strengthening social solidarity in Britain'.

I find much to agree with in O'Donnell's article and believe that he is right to remind us of the importance of human rights and especially social equality to social solidarity.

Human rights standards provide ground rules that serve both to protect individuals and provide a helpful framework for negotiating disputes (Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, 2000). The 1998 Human Rights Act (HRA) was significant in facilitating the enforceability of human rights and the advent of a Commission for Equality and Human Rights does indeed provide an opportunity to strengthen a human rights

culture in which any invidious discrimination is viewed as a serious matter. We mustn't get dewy eyed, however. The HRA has not, as hoped, led to a renewed respect for human rights and measures since 2001 to address terrorism have often paid scant regard to human rights. While human rights standards do provide useful ground rules for settling conflicts, these rules have to be interpreted and implemented, and building organizations at an international level to enforce them is still an uphill struggle. O'Donnell argues that it is perfectly realistic to look to human rights to shore up social solidarity. His admission, however, that 'the effectiveness of human rights depends on a democratic global consensus and commitment to action' suggests to me an incurable romantic.

On the importance of social equality to social solidarity, I am in complete agreement. He uses both theoretical and empirical arguments to make his case that egalitarian measures will help to bolster social solidarity in Britain. Further empirical support for the proposition that social equality generally is conducive to social cohesion comes from a series of comparative studies (Wilkinson, 2005). I have only two comments to add to what O'Donnell says on this subject. My first is this. It is remarkable how little attention has been paid to the socioeconomic position of Muslims, at least by (most) politicians and the media. Much of the pertinent research has had perforce to use proxy measures such as being Pakistani/Bangladeshi. What this research demonstrates is that Pakistanis and Bangladeshis (the vast majority of whom are Muslim) experience significantly more disadvantage than other ethnic groups. They comprise the only ethnic group(s) where a majority of members live in low income households; they face by far the largest ethnic penalties; and they are more than twice as likely as other ethnic groups to experience overcrowding (Home Office, 2005; Pilkington, 2005). The 2001 British Census for the first time enables us to compare the position of Muslims with other religious groups. 'The broad picture confirms that Muslims as a whole occupy an underprivileged position' (Peach, 2005: 29). In the light of this striking evidence of social inequality, there is an over-whelming case for measures to combat the social exclusion faced by many Muslims and thus, as O'Donnell argues, 'to reclaim a significant minority of seriously disaffected British Muslim youth through egalitarian reform'. My second comment relates to O'Donnell's stress on 'the importance of includ-ing disadvantaged white people in egalitarian reform'. It is clearly import-ant on social justice grounds to develop policies that do not unduly favour some ethnic groups over others. O'Donnell's enthusiasm for an egalitarian agenda is motivated by his concern rightly to redress disadvantages faced by all ethnic groups. He is also, I suspect, fearful of a white backlash and favours social equality as well as human rights because he sees both as less divisive than measures that are targeted at particular groups or identify group rights. What also needs to be recognized, however, is that mainstream programmes that are seemingly colour and culture blind 'have not been as

successful with ethnic minorities when compared with Whites' (Perform-ance and Innovation Unit, 2002 quoted in Pilkington, 2003: 241). A commit-ment to social equality may well therefore entail more targeted measures than O'Donnell would ideally like to see.

Where I fundamentally part company with O'Donnell is in his dismissal of multiculturalism as irrelevant to shoring up social cohesion. He outlines two arguments that have been employed to indicate that multiculturalism threatens social solidarity. Since he does not seek to rebut these arguments and indeed spends most of the rest of the article examining three 'approaches to buttress or replace multiculturalism', this does not seem an unreasonable surmise. The first criticism of multiculturalism is that it overemphasizes differences between people and thus obscures communal-ities. It is, in short, divisive and thus corrosive of social cohesion. The second criticism of multiculturalism is its valorization of political correctness. While 'minority rights reforms' have played an important role in outlawing discrimination, they have brought in their wake political correctness. This has in turn stifled freedom of expression, inhibited open cross-cultural dialogue and distorted policy formulation. In such a scenario, 'resentment can build up', with 'issues erupting dangerously' and well-intentioned policies being developed that fail to address key issues. This situation entails a 'threat to social solidarity'.

Let me deal with each criticism in turn. While multiculturalism has diver-gent meanings and takes different forms, it is exceptional for proponents not to highlight the need for respect for difference to be complemented by adherence to some common values. Take for example the report of Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (2000) which is seen by O'Donnell as 'the acme of a trend in multiculturalism' and by Joppke (2004: 249) as (re)affirming 'the British multicultural orthodoxy'. O'Donnell reads the report as one that is committed to communitarianism – Britain as 'a community of communities' – and as a result believes that it is 'divisive'. This is an extremely one-sided reading.

The report suggests that it is helpful to think of Britain as 'a community of communities and a community of citizens' (Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, 2000: 56). Thinking of Britain as a community, it is argued, alerts us to the importance of a common sense of belonging and the need for shared values and social cohesion. Thinking of Britain as a community of communities challenges the conventional view of Britain as divided into two seemingly homogeneous groupings, a white majority and ethnic minorities, and urges us instead to recognize that Britain comprises a number of fluid, overlapping and internally diverse national, regional and ethnic communities that cut across any simple majority/minority division. This means that treating people with due regard to respect for differences is not an issue only of concern to minority ethnic groups. At the same time, the report emphasizes that it would be inappropriate to think of Britain

purely in these terms since we are not only members of distinct communities, but are also individuals who deserve to be treated equally. We need therefore to think of Britain not only as a community of communities, but also as a community of citizens.

Conceptualizing Britain, and its constituent communities, in these terms entails, it is argued, a need to strike a balance between cohesion, equality and difference. Contrary to O'Donnell's reading, the report is unwilling fully to embrace communitarianism, precisely because of its tendency to be exclusively concerned to promote one of these values, notably difference. By visualizing Britain as a community of communities and a community of citizens, the report expresses support for the three principles of cohesion, equality, and difference. 'They must be held together, qualifying and challenging each other, yet also mutually informing and enriching' (Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, 2000: 105).

This raises a conundrum, however, since these principles are, at least in part, at odds with each other. How do we reconcile these contrary values? If O'Donnell were correct in his reading of the report and other writings of the lead author, Bhikhu Parekh, one might be led to expect cultural relativism to prevail, with minority rights trouncing human rights. This is in fact far from the case.

The report acknowledges the impossibility of resolving the tension between the values of cohesion, equality and difference. Nonetheless it presents some pointers that enable a balance to be struck between these values. Some 'common values are necessary to hold [Britain] together and give it cohesion' (Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, 2000: 53). These are of two forms: procedural and substantive. Procedural values are those, such as tolerance, mutual respect and rationality, that provide 'the basic preconditions for democratic dialogue'. Substantive values are those enshrined in international human rights standards that 'underpin any defensible conception of the good life . . . On the basis of such values, it is legitimate to ban female circumcision, forced marriages, cruel punishment of children, and repressive and unequal treatment of women, even though these practices may enjoy cultural authority in certain communities' (Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, 2000: 53–4). While these values set limits to permissible differences, the report argues that people should otherwise be free to pursue their own conceptions of the good life, and these may, of course, differ profoundly. We are still left therefore with the question of how the competing claims of difference and equality can both be recognized. Here the report emphasizes the need for the public sphere to be more pluralistic and for disputes to be resolved through intercultural dialogue and negotiation.

For O'Donnell, the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain report represents the paradigm case of strong multiculturalism, a development seen as having 'simply gone too far' and a threat to social solidarity.

Careful examination reveals, however, a form of multiculturalism that does not obscure and devalue what people have in common. Indeed in some respects, the report seems to anticipate O'Donnell's strictures about the importance of taking equality and human rights seriously.

Let us turn to the other criticism O'Donnell makes of multiculturalism, the purported association of multiculturalism with political correctness. My reading of the race relations legislation in Britain is somewhat different from O'Donnell's. In particular, it seems strange to me to characterize it as 'the minority rights reforms'. The emphasis of the 1965 and 1968 Race Relations Acts was on like treatment with the overall thrust being individualist. The 1976 Act moved beyond like treatment in two respects – first, by acknowledging indirect discrimination and, second, by encouraging positive action (but not positive discrimination) – and the 2001 (Amendment) Act has gone a little further with its introduction of a general statutory duty on public authorities. These measures, it is true, exemplify an acknowledgement of group rights, but the legislation has been primarily informed by a liberal perspective rather than a communitarian one. What I also find surprising in O'Donnell's account is the strong implication that legislation has indeed entailed political correctness. Post-war legislation has not in my view curtailed freedom of expression in any significant way. It outlaws speech that is intended to incite race or religious hatred. And surely that is appropriate.

It is true that legislative changes have been accompanied by normative changes about what is acceptable to say and publish. References to 'niggers' and 'Pakis' are now generally unacceptable, and the *Black and White Minstrel Show*[1] is no longer part of our television viewing schedule on Saturday evenings. This is on the whole, as I am sure O'Donnell would agree, a positive development. We can scarcely urge Muslims and other minority groups to integrate if we are insulting them. Not all would agree, however. For some, the above smacks of political correctness, with images conjured up of the thought police cajoling us to stay in tune with the latest party line. Labelling attempts to be sensitive in the way we address and represent people as political correctness, however, is to fall prey to a right-wing discourse that is dismissive of the ideals relating to human rights and social equality that O'Donnell, like myself, holds dear. While it is true that many people do see legislation as leading to political correctness (note, for example, the common perception that the law entails positive discrimination as well as inhibitions on freedom of expression), that is in my view a mistake. What such misperceptions signal instead is how susceptible people are to a right wing anti-political correctness discourse. This discourse turns the world upside down. The problem is not the stereotyping, stigmatizing and marginalizing of vulnerable groups, but political correctness zealots who threaten freedom of speech. It is remarkable that this discourse has become so pervasive. The vitriol thrown at the report of Commission

on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, and indeed the current demonization of Muslims, by large sections of the British media scarcely indicate an intimidated press. I would suggest that what such coverage indicates instead is the hegemonic position of a right wing anti-political correctness discourse (Ackroyd and Pilkington, forthcoming).

Contrary to O'Donnell's view that multiculturalism has no significant role to play in sustaining solidarity, and indeed may undermine it, I concur with Modood (2005) when he argues that 'multiculturalism is still an attractive and worthwhile political project; and indeed we need more of it rather than less'. Multiculturalism for Modood is a form of integration. It entails changes on the part of established institutions as well as minority groups in a process of mutual accommodation. What is crucial in the current context is that British Muslims are represented in the public sphere, that there is genuine dialogue, that pragmatic and mutual adjustments are made and that over time we move towards a situation where, irrespective of difference, people experience equal respect. Especially damaging to multiculturalism are ideologies that represent the social world in terms of a simple binary opposition, the West/Islam whereby people are divided into two mutually exclusive categories. While Islamophobia and Islamist ideologies comprise mirror images of each other, neither are 'conducive to fostering dialogue, respect for difference, to seeking common ground and negotiated accommodation, in short to citizenship in general and above all to multicultural citizenship' (Modood, forthcoming). While O'Donnell does express some sympathy for Modood's form of multiculturalism (which by his own admission is more modest than some others), I am somewhat surprised by two things. First, there is a hint in his reference to *The New East End* (Dench et al., 2006) that pluralism has generally tended to address the needs of minority ethnic groups more effectively than the majority ethnic group. Second, there are occasions – such as the juxtaposition of 'the values and practices of Islam and western liberalism' – when a binary opposition between the West/Islam is inadvertently reproduced. Both of these claims seem to me highly problematic. It is scarcely credible to picture our political system as biased in the direction of minority ethnic groups. And, as O'Donnell recognizes elsewhere, there are a plethora of different versions of Islam and indeed western liberalism.

The final issue that I want briefly to address is nationalism. Here I am in agreement with much of what O'Donnell has to say. He presents a helpful critique of Goodhart's attempt to conceptualize a revitalized nationalism. It is not sufficiently inclusive, fails to address many of the concerns of minority ethnic groups and does not provide a sound basis of social solidarity. Despite agreeing with much of what O'Donnell has to say here, I do have two reservations, however. First, O'Donnell shares with Goodhart (2006), and many others, a belief that multiculturalism and nationalism are antithetical. What this overlooks is the fact that multiculturalism 'has been

integral to a nation-building project' in countries such as Canada (Modood, 2005). Second, and here I again concur with Modood, it is important to take account of emotions. While we might be cognitively pulled towards cosmopolitanism, the latter does not have the same emotional pull as nationalism. 'The reaffirming of a plural, changing, inclusive British identity, which can be as emotionally and politically meaningful to British Muslims as the appeal of *jihadi* sentiments, is critical to isolating and defeating extremism' (Modood, 2005). Contrary to O'Donnell, I believe that it is important to re-imagine Britishness so that it has widespread appeal. This may not be 'a sufficient basis for social solidarity', but it may nonetheless be necessary.

While I have ended up expressing serious reservations with O'Donnell's argument, I am grateful to him for presenting a case that has provoked me to reconsider the issues and mount a defence of both multiculturalism and, in a more limited way, progressive nationalism.

Note

1 *The Black and White Minstrel Show* was a popular British weekly TV series that ran for 20 years from 1958. The variety show, whose format was derived from America, featured white performers who wore black face make-up, woolly wigs and lavish costumes while they danced and sang popular songs.

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A Response to Mike O'Donnell

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I'm afraid to say that I found Mike O'Donnell's arguments unconvincing. Much of the article seems to be an assertion of his preferences rather than an argument employing logic and evidence. His preferences are for human rights and equality, which seem to magically sweep away all conflicts of interests and values between people. There are moments when O'Donnell seems to acknowledge the limits of liberal pieties: he accepts some of the criticism of political correctness and implies that it is not sensible for multiculturalists to ignore the interests of ethnic majorities. But a few paragraphs later he asserts that the symbols and institutions of the British majority are no longer adequate for generating solidarity. He then goes on to suggest that the curriculum be broadened to embrace the history of ethnic and religious minorities. He appears not to have heard of Black History Month (which takes place every October in Britain). The real world seldom impinges. The dramatic recent rise in public anxiety about the 'security and identity' issues, in the light of a big surge in immigration and the emergence of Islamic terrorism, is not mentioned, nor is the worrying evidence from Robert Puttnam and others about declining levels of trust in areas of high ethnic diversity. And towards the end he seems to acknowledge the utopian nature of his project when he writes that 'the effectiveness of human rights depends on the support of a democratic global consensus and commitment to action'.