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Multiculturalism and the Weaponisation of Failure

Matthew Whittle

In 2023, then-UK Home Secretary Suella Braverman pronounced that ‘[m]ulticulturalism [...] has failed’.¹ Its demise, she said, could be registered in the fact that ‘it allowed people to come to our society and live parallel lives in it’. In making this assessment, Braverman was singing from a tattered hymn sheet that had been passed between Western leaders seeking to look tough on terrorism more than a decade earlier. Back then, the UK’s David Cameron, France’s Nicholas Sarkozy, Australia’s John Howard, and Spain’s Jose Maria Aznar had all lined up behind Germany’s Angela Merkel when she told members of the Christian Democratic Union party that multiculturalism had ‘utterly failed’ (Weaver 2010, n.p.).² In each case, the policymakers of post-2008 austerity were painting non-white migrants – especially those from Muslim communities in majority-white nations – as terrorists-in-waiting.

What these diagnoses of multiculturalism reveal is how failure can be weaponised. This weaponisation diverts attention *away* from the foreign policies and austerity economics that entrench ethnic, racial, religious and class divides, and *towards* racialised migrants, their descendants, and people seeking asylum from persecution, or fleeing disastrous – sometimes illegal – military interventions led by Western governments. It also stokes the kind of anti-immigrant, neo-fascist fervour that led to the recent Far Right attacks on Muslim communities and



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people seeking asylum across the UK in July 2024: when immigration is seen as the root cause of socio-economic issues relating to employment, healthcare, education, and housing in wealthy Western nations, pronouncements of multiculturalism's failure fan the flames that burn through asylum hotels and mosques.

If the presumed failure of multiculturalism can be weaponised in such a manner, there are two resources that can assist us in responding to such bad faith diagnoses: Salman Rushdie's provocative 1982 essay 'The New Empire within Britain' and Paul Gilroy's 2004 book *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*

In the former, Rushdie was responding to the decision of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government to amend the British Nationality Act, removing citizenship from anyone born on UK soil and granting it only to children with at least one naturalised parent (a move that targeted Black Britons and British Asians specifically). Taking aim at a rhetorical lineage that links the catchwords "integration", "assimilation" and "multiculturalism", Rushdie notes that 'a whole declension of patronizing terminology can be found in the language in which inter-racial relations have been described inside Britain'.³ These terms, he says, sound 'virtuous and desirable', but effectively mean that 'blacks should be persuaded to live peaceably with whites, in spite of all the injustices done to them every day'. As such, for Rushdie, multiculturalism under Thatcher was no more than a 'sham' that had failure written into its DNA. He saw the trap being set and raised an early alarm to avoid it.

Gilroy, writing 22 year later, makes an important distinction between what he calls the 'dry dogma of a ready-mixed multiculturalism', on the one hand, and 'multicultural society' on the other: the 'ism' of the former denotes exactly the kind of patronising, empty catchword that Rushdie decried; the latter, by contrast, names the lived, multi-racial reality of Western nations in the twenty-first century.⁴ For Gilroy, then, multiculturalism is ordinary; it is a fact of life, not a 'lifestyle option'.⁵ Influenced by the 'clash of civilisations' discourse that demonised Muslim communities in Europe and America as backwards and barbaric

following the 9/11 attacks and the US-UK-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, Gilroy notes that ‘[m]ulticultural society seems to have been abandoned at birth. [...] [I]ts death by neglect is being loudly proclaimed on all sides’.⁶ Yet, ‘[t]he briefest look around’, he writes, ‘confirms that multicultural society has not actually expired. The noisy announcement of its demise is itself a political gesture, an act of wishful thinking’.

To confront such wishful thinking, Gilroy set out a new nomenclature of ‘conviviality’ that privileges everyday forms of multi-ethnic co-habitation across Europe.⁷ Rather than relying on a notion of ossified ethnicities and races sitting side-by-side, conviviality, he says, ‘turn[s] the tables on all purity-seekers’, forcing ‘them to account for their phobia about otherness’.⁸ Doing so refuses the narrative that makes Europeanness coterminous with whiteness and Christianity.

It was the ordinariness of Britain’s multi-racial conviviality that was on show on 7 August 2024, when communities across the nation peacefully faced down the Far Right in the name of anti-racism and refugee rights. Yet, re-reading Gilroy today pushes us to go even further, to envision a form of anti-racist solidarity that goes beyond flooding the streets as a *reaction* to Far Right riots. For a truly convivial culture to thrive, it must be rooted in a *pro-active* understanding of racism as being part of a dominant political discourse, and not merely a matter of parochial prejudices. And we must contextualise that discourse within a longer history that stretches back to the global spread of European colonialism, when ‘the catastrophic power of race thinking was first institutionalized’.⁹ Ultimately, Gilroy reminds us that racism is not a matter of personal biases that can be technocratically managed out of existence, one fascist at a time. It has a history that is central to the history of Europe. Comprehending this in systemic and meaningful ways would reject the notion that non-white Europeans, migrants, and refugees imperil the West’s cultural coherence and racial purity, and would go a long way to forestalling any future attempts to weaponise the “failure” of multicultural communal living.

Notes

1. Suella Braverman, “Keynote Address by UK Home Secretary Suella Braverman: UK-US Security Priorities for the 21st Century,” American Enterprise Institute, September 26, 2003, <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/230926-Keynote-Address-by-UK-Home-Secretary-Suella-Braverman-Transcript.pdf?x91208> (accessed 30 August 2024), [n.p.].
2. Matthew Weaver, “Angela Merkel: German multiculturalism has ‘utterly failed’,” *The Guardian*, 17 October, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/oct/17/angela-merkel-german-multiculturalism-failed> (accessed 30 August 2024).
3. Salman Rushdie, “The New Empire Within Britain,” in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991* (London: Granta, [1982] 1991), 137.
4. Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 2.
5. *Ibid.*, 167.
6. *Ibid.*, 1.
7. *Ibid.*, 153.
8. *Ibid.*, 167.
9. *Ibid.*, 164.

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