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Review Debate: Reply to David Goodhart and Andrew Pilkington.

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REPLY TO DAVID GOODHART AND ANDREW PILKINGTON

Andrew Pilkington is explicitly in broad agreement with several of my substantive arguments and I believe there is more in common between David Goodhart and myself than our above exchange indicates.

We each emphasise egalitarian policies and anticipate that these could reduce inter-ethnic tension in areas of social disadvantage and so under-pin social solidarity. Goodhart and Pilkington see such policies as part of a ‘progressive nationalism’ whereas I find inappropriate the historic and contemporary implications of the term ‘nationalism’ – particularly in the current context of ethnic friction. However, the three of us can probably be described as ‘progressive’ a term which I take to mean roughly ‘somewhere left-of-centre’. We are, then, participants in an on-going debate within the Left to define a new progressive direction – post-Blair and, it is to be hoped, post the Iraq war that has blown us so violently off-course.

On the issue of multiculturalism I sit, not entirely comfortably, between the Goodhart and Pilkington positions. Not only am I positive about Britain’s multi-cultural character and believe that the legislation intended to secure it is vital, I am supportive, as is Modood and I assume Pilkington, of any *necessary* further measures to under-pin it. However, I share some of Goodhart’s concern about multiculturalism. Firstly, multiculturalism is inadequate to deal with current ethnic tensions and the lack of social solidarity these indicate. What is now required might be termed ‘inter-culturalism’ - mainly emphasising debate, sharing and a degree of commonality rather than predominantly cultural autonomy and difference. Secondly, multicultural policies have contributed to substantial and apparently increasing separation (a more accurate term than ‘segregation’ which implies political compulsion) in education and housing as well as to considerable and dangerous cultural separation. This may not be apparent to cosmopolitan elites who may, indeed, enjoy the ‘conviviality’ that Paul Gilroy makes so much of but it is obvious not only in working class but in many middle class neighbourhoods as well. Thirdly, there is a reality to the ‘political correctness’ associated with multiculturalism and one does not have to be ‘right-wing’ to observe or experience it. Examples are the moralistic opprobrium aimed at those who argued that the term ‘black’ was inadequate to describe all ‘non-white’ people and the difficulty, until recently, in having an open debate within the Left about immigration. The problem can be more insidious than in these cases. For instance an attitude survey of British Muslims commissioned by and reported in the *Guardian* was presented in misleadingly politically correct terms. The presentation of responses to the following key question in the survey illustrates the point:

‘Do you see yourself first and foremost as’:

Muslim	37%
British	3%
British Muslim	54%
Other	6%.

Immediately beneath this data was a gratuitously offensive heading – *‘Today we look at the clashes between their faith and a hard-drinking, sex-obsessed, avaricious nation’*. A front-page headline announcing the survey was *‘Muslims reject image of*

separate society'. That comment fails adequately to interpret the above and other data in the survey – presumably because more obvious interpretations countered the views of the author and possibly the *Guardian*. What the data suggests is that many Muslims regard their Islamic identity as more important than their British. There is nothing remotely reprehensible in this but it might have been helpful for the newspaper to stimulate a major debate on this issue in 2002 rather than wait until post 7/7 when such a debate was precipitated. Further, it would have clarified the political-cultural attitudes of Muslims further had the 54% who favoured the description 'British Muslims' been asked the follow-up question: 'What is most important to you, being British or being Muslim'. This is a question I have asked several groups of young Muslims and I cannot recall one that answered 'being British' (O'Donnell, 2006). In fairness, few Muslims may want to prioritise their identities in this way but equally many have serious reservations about British culture and politics which ought to be in the public domain. By inhibiting free expression, political correctness can block information necessary for democratic debate and policy formation.

My main point of disagreement with Goodhart and Pilkington is the relative importance of human rights in relation to the claims of nation and (ethnic) community. In fact, the disagreement with Pilkington is much less substantive and his defence of Parekh's position on this issue makes it clear that he sees a major role for human rights in providing a broad framework of values and, I assume, law within which national life occurs. It is precisely this that I mean by a 'global consensus' on human rights – a working and dynamic conceptualisation and practice of human rights which is already almost universally acknowledged as desirable by nation-states. It is surely desirable that those who contravene human rights should be accountable in the relevant international courts – as has often though not always been the case. I think Pilkington and Parekh agree with this. My main disagreement with them reflects a rather different reading than Pilkington of Parekh's view of the relationship of human rights, nation and community (multiculturalism). Parekh's views that Britain 'should formally declare itself a multicultural society' and that 'we should think of it (Britain) as a looser federation of communities' is not the direction now needed (Parekh, 2000). At a more philosophical level, I find Parekh's routine criticisms of Enlightenment values divisive. For all that the values of 'liberty, equality and fraternity' require context to be understood and applied, secular progressives should no more give them up than Christians would the bible or Muslims the Qur'an.

Many critics of contemporary multiculturalism stress British nationalism as an alternative. Goodhart presents his own version of this. I differ and argue that an unequivocal embrace of human rights and a radical reorientation of Britain's foreign policy would have a more unifying effect than specifically nationalist initiatives. Given the strength of the human rights movement across the world and the increasing realisation of the need for a global framework to deal with urgent dangers to the planet, it is odd to find my views described as 'utopian' by Goodhart. However, Mannheim distinguishes between utopianism based on unsubstantiated idealism and utopianism extrapolated from current realities towards the making of a better world – a kind of 'idealism without illusions'. I am happy to subscribe to that kind of utopianism.

References

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