

Soundings - Beyond Race and Multiculturalism? Responses to *Prospect* magazine's Rethinking Race dossier

Contributions assembled by AbdoolKarim Vakil, Chair of the MCB Research & Documentation Committee in 2010

Contributors:

Robin Richardson reads the *Prospect* articles with an eye to its political timing and finds the intervention Very Sad

Alastair Bonnett sets the *Prospect* debate in the context of the struggle to think race and ethnicity in Britain in its own terms in 'Out from Under the Shadow of the USA?'

Tariq Modood considers whether we really are 'Beyond Racism and Ethnicity?' and concludes that 'Saying its time to move on from talking about racism is far too simplistic'

Chris Allen ponders how Multiculturalism stands the challenges of Superdiversity and finds the *Prospect* dossier short on *The Real Rethinking Required*.

Nasar Meer charts the regressive impact of MII knowledge and the mainstreaming of assimilationism on policy discussion of race and racism, and deems the *Prospect* intervention *Rhetoric In Spite of Evidence*

Ian Law argues that the heralding of the "death of antiracism" brings with it the old-style denial of the ongoing, everyday significance of racist hostility and violence

Yunis Alam will not be mourning the passing of the Multiculturalism of Tolerance but argues that Until we look at some of the underlying conditions of widening and deepening social exclusion, the multiculturalism people are so quick to vilify will continue to fail

Nissa Finney suggests that it would be more fruitful to ask 'how and to what extent does ethnicity matter for people's lives today?' and argues that it is premature to conclude that ethnicity does not play a role in people's lives

Jenny Bourne denounces the poverty of *Prospect's* Either/Or thinking: *Its Both Class And Race*

Gargi Bhattacharyya refuses to be drawn into *Prospect's* cul-de-sacs. We are on the brink of some of the most cataclysmic attacks on minority ethnic and other poor communities that have been seen in a generation, she warns, the combined attacks on the most disadvantaged will harden lines of class and race

Claire Alexander considers the timing of the *Prospect* intervention and concludes that this is less 'Rethinking Race' than denying racism, substituting an anti-politics of personal experience and 'I'm alright, Jack-isms' for a politics of equality

***Shamim Miah** finds Counter terrorism a conspicuous absence from Prospect's strangely 'honest way' of discussing 'race'. Meanwhile, back in the Real World of Prevent... in Oldham and elsewhere "Community Cohesion" is closing down projects that made a difference to tackling 'race' equality on the ground*

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***D. Tyrer** finds the Prospect dossier both disappointing and worrying and its 'Rethink' trading on tabloid cliches. In the context of the hegemonic racial politics of populist street rallies and rising Islamophobia, he warns, we cannot afford to wish away the conceptual tools for engaging with racism*

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Very Sad

Robin Richardson

In its essentials, this set of articles could have been published in the conservative press at any time over the last 20 years. It reflects anxieties amongst white people about so-called political correctness, and about measures introduced by central and local government over the years to make direct and indirect discrimination on grounds of ethnicity unlawful. In the normal way of things, the articles would not be worth commenting on. But for two reasons, note should be taken. First, it is unusual for a serious intellectual journal such as Prospect to give a platform to populist, ill-informed and unoriginal superficiality of this kind. Second, autumn 2010 is a significant time in the history of Britain's long journey towards a fairer society, for consultations are currently taking place about the specific duties to be introduced to support the Equality Act 2010. Even though unoriginal and shallow, there is a danger that the Prospect articles will strike a chord in circles close to the coalition government, and that the practical implementation of the new Act will in consequence be – at best – lukewarm, reluctant and fitful.

The Equality Act received royal assent on 8 April 2010 and about 90 per cent of it came into force on 1 October. It was the culmination of many years of cooperative deliberation and planning on the part of lawyers and third sector organisations working on issues relating to age, disability, gender, ethnicity, religion and sexual identity. It was steered through parliament by the Labour government but in all its most important aspects it received all-party support throughout. In the House of Lords, it was championed with huge articulacy and intellectual authority by the Liberal Democrats.

In its public utterances about the Act so far, the coalition government has emphasised the importance of transparency, of evidence-based planning and of measurable, outcome-focused objectives in each separate public body, for example every school, every local authority, every police force, every government department. 'Our proposals,' its consultation paper of August 2010 says, 'use the power of transparency to help public bodies to fulfil the aims of the equality duty to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between different groups. This means that public bodies will be judged by citizens on the basis of clear information about the equality results they achieve ... Transparency means public bodies being open about the information on which they base their decisions, about what they are seeking to achieve and about their results.'

These aspirations are in principle admirable, and entirely in accordance with the direction in which the previous administration was moving. Much will depend, though, on political will in central government; on the good will, knowledge and energy of leaders and managers in each separate public body; and on the capacity of citizens and their representative organisations to obtain, scrutinise interrogate and use the information which public bodies by law provide. The ungenerous, point-scoring and fearful articles in *Prospect* will do nothing to strengthen good will and embolden commitment in the places and spaces where they are most needed, and may on the contrary diminish and weaken confidence, hope and resolve.

To be fair, the articles contain one or two good points – Tony Sewell's stress on empowering young people to take control of their own fate rather than wallow in a sense of victimhood, for example, and Sonya Dyer's references to commonalities in human experience explored through the arts. But overall, the articles are of very poor quality. They make no reference to the changing legal context of the last ten years, as mentioned above, and none to scholarly work on the intertwining of colour racism and cultural racism, or to the intertwining of both these main forms of prejudice with notions of, and anxieties about, national identity. It is extraordinary that they make no reference at all to anti-Muslim hostility throughout western societies, and to the urgent need to challenge and deal with it. Instead, they uncritically recycle silly little myths invented by the tabloid press, for example the absurd claim that children as young as three are reported to local councils for making racist remarks. The collection as a whole is very sad.

Robin Richardson is a director of the Insted consultancy and a former director of the Runnymede Trust.

Out from Under the Shadow of the USA?

Alastair Bonnett

These articles in Prospect form part of a backlash to multiculturalism and anti-racism that has been developing, from a number of quarters, for many years. They will in turn provoke a defensive reaction from many, along with the attempt to cast any such criticism as anti-progressive or right-wing. However, the relationship of these last two terms to multiculturalism and anti-racism can no longer be claimed to be straightforward. I'm not convinced that academics add much to this debate by claiming the moral high ground with unlikely visions of anti-racist-leftist solidarity. The world has moved on.

What we can add though are international and historical contexts that help place these kinds of, seemingly very British, debates. Thus, for example, I would argue that these articles can usefully be seen as part of an on-going struggle to drag Britain's particular history of race and ethnicity out from under the shadow of the USA. One of the problems about discussing ethnicity in Britain is that we forget that this country is firmly entrenched in the cultural orbit of the USA. The constant emphasis on 'race', especially seen through the, highly polemicised and politicised, dichotomy of blacks versus whites, may make some sense in the USA (though much less so today). But it was always a severely limited set of ideas to apply to the migrant experience in Britain. Yet we went ahead dividing people into blacks (anyone who wasn't white) and whites (anyone who was European). The assertion of colour racism as the key articulator of ethnicity in Britain also reflects a US model, as does the notion that a society can be defined as united by (or in) cultural diversity. Of course these aren't just American ideas. But it is striking how they have been disseminated from the US and left a lot of countries trying to understand themselves with concepts that simply don't fit. Certainly, in the UK they have left us less able to understand and deal with the ethnic diversity of both migrant (religious, national and so on) and non-migrant populations, as well as the very different problems that 'old world' countries have with changing or displacing host cultures.

The Prospect articles suggest some of the different ways that people are trying to escape from this legacy. At the same time they contain their own traces of America. This is an area of debate that has been thoroughly polemicised. So the flip side of yesterday's unreasonable polemics that depicted Britain as a nest of ferret-eyed racists is that we now have polemics on inequality as being all the fault of migrants. In another mutated echo of the past, the individualism that Tony Sewell and others offer – in which poor performance by black boys is down to poor self-image and poor attitudes – reflects a very American rhetoric of individual effort and 'can-do' attitudes. It seems we are still some way off finding 'our own' languages and concepts for the experience of migration and ethnic change. But maybe 'our own' is a phrase that no longer means a lot, as an aspiration or a reality. The 'race debate' has been globalised and US-American categories and concerns are integral to our common sense world view. As we escape America we run towards it.

Alastair Bonnett is Professor of Social Geography, Newcastle University

Beyond Racism and Ethnicity?

Tariq Modood

I do not share the perspective of these Prospect pieces that 'multiculturalism has had its day'. One of the main reasons for that is that I do not think multiculturalism is, as is suggested in these pieces, focused on colour racism. For some time now it has built upon a concern with racial equality and extended it to challenging cultural racisms like Islamophobia; Multiculturalism has through dialogue and negotiations across civil society, as well as policy, been about remaking our sense of Britishness to accommodate the ethno-religious mix of the present and the future. These are the multicultural struggles I refer to in my new book of essays, 'Still Not Easy Being British: Struggles for a Multicultural Citizenship'

I do, however, agree with the suggestion that sometimes the disadvantage experienced by ethnic minorities is a reflection of class or at least is best understood and best tackled in policy terms by seeing it in terms of interaction with wider socio-economic factors. This was central to the approach adopted by 'An Anatomy of Economic Inequality in the UK' the report of the National Equality Panel, of which I was a member and which presented its report in January, 2010 to the then Deputy Prime Minister.

The report made clear that there is much diversity between minority ethnic groups: they are not all in the same socio-economic location. Moreover, each minority ethnic and religious group exhibits internal inequalities of a kind that reflect those of the country as a whole. However, the report also made clear socioeconomic structures or 'objective' class factors do not fully explain the position of non-white minorities, either in terms of the distinctive disadvantages or of the advantages of specific minority groups (pp.233-234).

While various social class type factors do a lot to explain the position of ethnic minorities; additional factors are needed and I will mention four:

Ethnicity (especially in relation to education)

While Black Caribbean attainment levels decline during compulsory schooling, those of South Asians and Chinese catch up with Whites and some groups overtake Whites. This phenomenon is also represented in the very high proportions of South Asians and Chinese going through higher education.

The performance of the ethnic minorities is partly explained by class. For example, the class position of migrants in Britain is not reflective of the class position they enjoyed in their countries of origin before migration. It is clear that some people from middle class backgrounds from say India found themselves in working class jobs in Britain and have spent their working lives trying to reverse this downward mobility and especially using education to ensure that their children experience upward mobility. Nevertheless, it is not just a question of class. For it does not explain why, for example, even those South Asians who came from rural backgrounds with little education are able to produce a significant cohort of university entrants (though under-represented in some of the most prestigious universities).

This scholastic success is not due to private education for it is found in state schools; it is not due to a 'school effect' for it is found in many different types of schools and neighbourhoods, and typically in schools where Whites and Black-Caribbeans do less well. It is not simply a social class effect

because the relative success is enhanced if class (in the form of free school meals as a measure of children from homes with low incomes) is factored in.

In this respect, the unexpected improvement in the school tests and GCSE results for Bangladeshis in the last decade is quite significant and may be indicative of a generational upward mobility. To some extent this is also true of Pakistanis, though they, especially amongst males, have a longer 'tail' of young people with no or low qualifications. A decade or so ago Bangladeshis used to have a similar profile as the Pakistanis but slightly worse, yet the position seems to have reversed in relation to boys and educational attainments.

Race/colour (in the pay and other penalties in the labour market experienced by all non-white groups)

As the studies reported in the Report (Boxes 9.2 and 9.3) show, educational achievement is not necessarily matched by labour market outcomes. The White population gets the best returns in terms of wages for a given level of qualifications – all minority ethnic groups suffer some form of 'penalty'. Even if they seem to be doing well they may be suffering a 'penalty'. For example, the actual pay for Chinese men exceeded that of the White British men by about 11 per cent in 2006-08. However, once factors such as their higher qualification levels were taken into account, Chinese men with no religion were actually suffering a pay penalty of 11 per cent.

In introducing religion, as I have just done, I move to the third factor:

Taking ethnicity and religion together, thinking of some groups as ethno-religious, rather than just ethnic groups gives us greater precision in highlighting the worst off groups.

This comes out most clearly in the position of Muslim ethnic groups, not just Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, but actually it is also true of Turks and Kurds and Somalis for instance. Moreover, it is also true if we look at a multi-religious ethnic group like the Indians: Indian Muslims, but also Indian Sikhs, are more disadvantaged than Indian Hindus.

Moreover, this is not just useful in distinguishing between more or less advantaged groups amongst non-whites but also Whites: eg., in showing that White Jewish are more advantaged than White Christians.

Generation

The studies also show that it is important to separate out 'first' and 'second' generations within minority groups. Doing so reveals, for example, that while both generations suffer similar degrees of ethnic penalty in relation to getting employment, the second generation has made considerable progress in relation to job levels and now has, if in work, similar chances of accessing professional and managerial jobs as the White British population. Though they may be more able to access some professional and managerial work better than others – and that might explain why they are still earning less than they should given their level of qualifications. This interpretation is supported by the recent evidence of discrimination faced by people with South Asian and African names when applying for white collar jobs.

Even if progress is being made in terms of entry into professional and managerial jobs, albeit not in terms of jobs commensurate with one's qualifications, the central problem in relation to racial equality and the labour market – in terms of persistence and scale of inequality – continues to be the unequal levels of unemployment.

Finally, it has to be emphasised once again that the severity of labour market disadvantage for the Pakistani and Bangladeshi population, in particular, suggests that general policies aimed at reducing low incomes or unemployment will not, by themselves, close the multiple gaps in relation to those two groups.

Hence it is premature to say that racism is no longer a factor or that targeting groups by ethnicity is no longer necessary. I agree that things are not the same as they were in the 1980s and that one of the key reasons is the upward mobility of some minorities, both because of their own efforts and because of the relative openness of British society. The other key reason, however, is completely ignored by the Prospect dossier: colour-racism has been joined by a family of cultural racisms such as those against Asians, Arabs, Africans, Muslims and so on. To defeat these we need more sophisticated models of society and concepts of ethnicity and racism and their interaction with class and gender. Saying its time to move on from talking about racism is far too simplistic.

Tariq Modood is Professor of Sociology, Politics and Public Policy and Director of the University of Bristol, Research Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Citizenship

The Real Rethinking Required

Chris Allen

Munira Mirza's 'Rethinking Race' dossier in the October edition of Prospect magazine evokes in me an ambivalent response. 'Has multiculturalism had its day?' The answer, for me, is both Yes and No. But more importantly, whilst multiculturalism may indeed have 'had its day, it's not because of the reasons Mirza and co set out.

First off, therefore, some context. Prospect has been ploughing this furrow for some years. Back in 2004, David Goodhart used Prospect to launch a broadside against multiculturalism. Employing extremely questionable terminologies for such a liberal mouthpiece – the phrase "stranger citizens" to refer to new migrants for instance — Goodhart proscribed multiculturalism's imminent demise on the basis that Britain was becoming "too diverse". Questioning whether Britain could sustain the mutual obligations that were necessary for maintaining a good society he went on to declare that the "more our lives [are] spent among strangers..." the more our "...common culture is being eroded".

Trevor Philips, head of the then Commission for Racial Equality now the Equality & Human Rights Commission, responded in The Guardian by suggesting that "The xenophobes should come clean". In

an article I wrote for the Journal for Culture and Religion I concluded that for Goodhart et al, “it is possible that a much more accurate meaning of what is being put forward can be gleaned from what is not being said rather more than what is not”. It’s possible that the same applies now.

A somewhat naïve premise seems to underlie this new multiculturalism bashing dossier: that multiculturalism was somehow a cure for racism. Multiculturalism can be either, or indeed both, a descriptive and normative term. The former describes the existence of a diversity of cultures, ethnicities, religions and so on, typically referred to in a specific geographic or demographic space. The latter is more conceptual and refers to the rights of different groups to both give and receive respect and recognition in a given space or context. Some of the opposition to multiculturalism is specifically an opposition to the normative understandings and premised on the view that incorporated within this is a seemingly institutionalised positive endorsement of multiculturalism. Irrespective of understanding however, in many parts of today’s Britain, multiculturalism – at its most descriptive level - is the *modus operandi*. Even in the few anomalous places where Britain remains demographically mono-cultural, the mediated and virtual spaces that represent today’s Britain are quite different and so multiculturalism is a reality, like it or not. On this basis, I disagree with Prospect’s premise.

But then again, I do think that in some ways multiculturalism has had its day. Let me clarify that.

In some places, multiculturalism has had its day. This is not because Goodhart’s 2004 predictions were correct and multiculturalism was already in terminal decline. It is, rather, because multiculturalism has changed. For me, Prospect’s latest assault on multiculturalism seems a little *passé*. But what do I mean by this?

In places such as London and Birmingham, it is now far more ‘on trend’ to speak about how they are becoming super-diverse. For those such as Steven Vertovec, my University of Birmingham colleague Jenny Phillimore and indeed in my own think-piece for the West Midlands Regional Observatory last year, the urban conurbations in Britain are rapidly moving towards levels and complexities of diversity that surpass anything that this country has ever experienced or understood. Super-diversity is significantly different to anything that has gone before: far more protean with far more variables to contend with that are also less visible and more embedded in a greater number of sometimes newer, smaller and more scattered, multiple-origin, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified communities. In these areas therefore, old notions of multiculturalism would appear to have had their day, but not, I repeat, for the reasons the Prospect articles suggest.

But even though we might acknowledge the shift towards super-diversity we have to be careful. Like multiculturalism, super-diversity is a descriptive term also. Merely recognising more complex forms of diversity will not in itself be a means to an end. Like multiculturalism before it, using a term to describe society – or at least parts of it - will neither eradicate racism nor indeed any other forms of discrimination or prejudice.

And here is where I again agree and disagree with Mirza and her gang of multicultural doom-mongers. Clearly race does not have to be the significant disadvantage that it is – I’m reluctant to say

“often” – portrayed to be. We no longer live in a society where we collectively gather in front of our television screens to laugh at racist and xenophobic prime-time sitcoms such as ‘Mind Your Language’ and ‘Love Thy Neighbour’ as we did in the 1970s. But we do still live in a society where racism is an issue and where newer forms of discrimination and prejudice such as Islamophobia have not only found a greater resonance with large swathes of society but are moreover increasingly being used as a smokescreen behind which old racisms hide.

But this is not because of the failings of the multicultural model.

No, it is the consequence of high levels of poverty and deprivation and the lack of successful policies implemented to redress inequalities, some of which may have been described as ‘multicultural policies’. And this is my biggest objection to this recent Prospect assault. So eager is it to kill off multiculturalism that it fails to capture and present the whole picture.

Take for instance Birmingham. At present, people from BME backgrounds tend to be concentrated in the most densely populated areas of the city. Many of these areas are also those where the highest levels of deprivation can be found. For example, Department of Health figures from 2009 show that almost 60% of Birmingham’s wards are within the most deprived quintile nationally. Other statistics from the Campaign to End Child Poverty state that Birmingham is home to the poorest ward in the country, Ladywood. Two others are not far behind in the poverty stakes. Unsurprisingly, these same wards are where high numbers of BME people live and where ‘super-diverse’ might be an accurate description.

Disadvantage is not necessarily about race, any more than it is about religion, ethnicity or gender for instance. Yet even where it is not ‘about race’, race may still be something through which disadvantage can also be additionally experienced and perpetuated. And where this does occur – as with religion, ethnicity, gender and any of the newer markers that are emerging in super-diverse areas such as language, immigration status and so on – it can rarely be disentangled from manifestations of deprivation, poverty and inequality. None of this occurs within a vacuum

As we move towards greater super-diversity therefore things are going to become more complex and far less ‘black and white’. What is needed is a new mindset, one that seeks to eradicate the causes of disadvantage - of poverty, deprivation and inequality – and is able to recognise but also consider beyond the old markers of race, ethnicity and so on.

Multiculturalism therefore has not had its day, it’s merely undergoing transformation (in places). And it’s not simply only about rethinking race, it is about rethinking our approaches and understandings of disadvantage.

That being the case, I wonder whether Prospect’s framing of the question and issues are really part of the rethinking required?

Dr Chris Allen is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Applied Social Studies, School of Social Policy, of the University of Birmingham, and the author of Islamophobia (Ashgate, 2010)

Rhetoric In Spite of Evidence

Nasar Meer

Disraeli's refrain of 'Lies, Dammed Lies, and Statistics!' may well have come to mind on learning that the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) had been rebuked for scrutinising too closely the government's recent spending review. The spat is a timely reminder that politically contentious empirical claims are, of course, rarely uncontested, and that the appropriation of data in support or critique of a position is an inevitable feature of debate.

What is worth highlighting, however, is that, as sociologists have noted, within a generation or so we have seen the remarkable ascent of 'soft' knowledge, in a manner that is qualitatively novel.

Another way of putting this would be to say that independent of how knowledge might be appropriated in the course of debate, there was once a convention or hierarchy by which systematically research-based evidence surpassed – indeed eclipsed - its rhetorical alternatives, derived from anecdote and conjecture.

This is a tradition kept alive – often against the odds - in the study of health inequalities as exemplified by the Black report (1980), the Acheson Report (1998) and the Marmot Review (2010), amongst many others. Each of these public policy oriented contributions has posed significant obstacles to commonsense or simple policy solutions concerned with public health and well-being.

When it comes to the discussion of the significance of race and racism in contemporary society, however, we appear to be less fortunate. In this arena, what some sociologists have termed 'Mode II' knowledge – knowledge which is not peer reviewed, and so less rigorous and more likely to be generalising, speculative, or directly politically anchored - has come to be afforded the same – on occasion greater – legitimacy as that of scholarly contributions.

While the ascendance of MII knowledge is a general phenomenon, which the sociologist John Holmwood links to a shift away from Universities and academics bearing a monopoly in the generation of specialised data (as witnessed in the seemingly ubiquitous rise of Think-Tankery), the topics of race and racism appear to be particularly affected.

I would argue that this is partly due, firstly, to a drift in the creation of data that is able to present a coherent narrative. This would not be unique to the study of race and racism were it not for, secondly, the relentless political onslaught in the rhetoric of assimilationism.

Let me take each of these in turn.

While we in the UK have profoundly better data-sets examining the experience of ethnic and racial minorities compared with anything available on the continent; this is presently garnered in smaller samples and then consolidated in a way that means that a persuasive account of the national story over time is less explicit. Alternatively, data is achieved through sub-questions such as those on the Labour Force Survey or the Census, or through indirect means, on the basis of other studies. There are important exceptions to this. Chief amongst them is the series of National Surveys on Ethnic

Minorities (previously overseen decennially by the Policy Studies Institute). But these have not reported since 1997, and it is precisely this kind of focused but general narrative-data that is presently missing.

The second issue, of course, takes us directly to pages of these Prospect contributions. On a first reading it is fascinating how with this collection Munira Mirza has returned us to the theme of John Major's 1992 Conservative Party conference speech. Not long after local and municipal councils had been stripped of important powers and degrees of autonomy (one of the myths of the modern Conservative Party is that it has been anything other than highly centralising), and in a statement widely interpreted as a rebuke to anti-racist educators, Major insisted: 'teachers should learn how to teach their children to read and not waste their time on the politics of race'.

It later came as no surprise to learn that the Chief Executive of the National Curriculum had specifically been instructed to remove all mention of multicultural education from the National Curriculum.

I say this is fascinating because, in amongst other places, Mirza's intellectual interests have been forged in research for the Right-Wing Think Tank Policy Exchange. Between 2006-9 PE captivated journalists and policy makers and managed to shape the agenda on a variety of public policy approaches concerning the State-Muslim engagement. In some respects we are today reaping the harvest sown by PE and others like the inappropriately named Centre for Social Cohesion, in terms of the political fall-out and miss-trust between many Muslim groups and the state. (Some, including Newsnight have alleged that Policy Exchange fabricated research evidence to discredit a number of Muslim organisations).

In a way Mirza isn't sticking with the present but is leap-frogging backwards to a time when researchers were already opening up the idea of racial equality to register differential achievement in educational and labour market participation for different ethnic minorities (which is precisely part of the rationale for her contribution).

This was something first highlighted by the Michael Swann, and continued to be confirmed in the late 1980s and early 1990s when Tariq Modood unpacked "Asian" and was able to show how the Asian-white parity hid the fact that Indians, especially East African Asians, were achieving better qualifications and higher incomes than whites, but the Pakistanis and Bangladeshis were doing even worse than Caribbeans - a situation that has seen interesting developments in subsequent years.

The point is that for a long time now those working in the field of race equality have challenged the view that all non-white groups perform worse than whites, or that blacks perform worst, and Modood's own contribution to these soundings, and the NEP research that he cites, are illustrative of this trend, so I will not repeat the case that he has already made very convincingly.

I would rather pursue another line opened up by Modood's contribution concerning the significance – but omission in the Prospect pages - of the continuing significance of race in the phenomena of cultural racism against Muslims.

There are several ways in which this can feature.

An obvious instance is in the labor market, and here the geographers Sophie Bowlby and Sally Lloyd-Evans provide a rigorous and systematic disentanglement of how ethnic penalties in the labour market can translate into an 'Islamic penalty'. Drawing upon data-sets from Reading and Slough, that are contextualized in the national picture, they make the significant finding that Muslims are indeed materially discriminated on the grounds of their 'Muslimness', a finding that accords with other embryonic work undertaken in this area by Nabil Khattab and colleagues.. This has considerable public policy implications demonstrating as it does that Muslim labour market discrimination cannot be explained away by reference to ethnic or racial origin – let alone class.

My own concern is a little more discursive.

In my book *Citizenship, Identity and the Politics of Multiculturalism* I provide a rationale for distinguishing the right to practice Islam in accordance with religious beliefs from the way in which discrimination against Muslims picks out individuals on the basis of discernible characteristics. The latter may involve the attribution to those individuals of an alleged group tendency, or it may emphasize those features that are used to stigmatize or to reflect pejorative or negative assumptions based on his or her real or perceived membership of the group. These conceptual distinctions are critical, especially for the principled operation of anti-discrimination legislation.

This is where race as cultural racism has continuing, indeed increasing, significance because binary distinctions between race and religion flounder when we recognize that many British Muslims report a higher level of discrimination and abuse when they appear 'conspicuously Muslim' than when they do not.

The increase in personal abuse and everyday racism since 9/11 and the London bombings, in which the perceived 'Islamic-ness' of the victims is the central reason for the abuse, regardless of the truth of this presumption (resulting in Sikhs and others with an 'Arab' appearance being attacked for 'looking like Bin Laden'), suggests that racial and religious discrimination are presently overlapping.

That is to say, a 'Muslim' appearance, whether or not the individual is in fact Muslim, can be a site of contempt, and a signifier for all things Muslim or Islamic. Racism therefore vilifies Muslims as its subjects, in addition to degrading Islamic civilization and heritage in the abstract.

In my book I argue that literal and prescriptive accounts of Muslim identity do not satisfactorily explain the adoption of Muslim identities as an act of personal choice. Although they are not passive objects of racism, Muslim identities in contemporary Britain are not free of external pressures, objectification and racialization, and the most recent British Social Attitude survey (2010 - 26th Report) supports this reading when the authors conclude:

"Three key points emerge from this analysis. Firstly, some of the antipathy towards Muslims comes from people with a generalised dislike of anyone different. Secondly, a larger subset of the population – about a fifth – responds negatively only to Muslims. Finally, relatively few people feel

unfavourable towards any other religious or ethnic group on its own. [...] The adverse reaction to Muslims deserves to be the focus of policy on social cohesion, because no other group elicits so much disquiet" (Voas and Ling, 2010: 80-1).

Earlier antidiscrimination formulas have been instrumental in recognizing and protecting identities that are equally unstable, contested or seemingly dependent upon 'choice', such as categorizations of racial and ethnic minorities generally, including Jewish and Sikh identities. In moving forward with the Equality Act (2010) we should be mindful that constructed hierarchies of legitimate or illegitimate difference should not be mistaken as a 'natural order' of things, nor should an anti-racial equality agenda be allowed to deny Muslims all the protections previously afforded to other racial minorities.

Nasar Meer is Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Southampton and the author of Citizenship, Identity and the Politics of Multiculturalism: The Rise of Muslim Consciousness'(Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)

Racial Crisis and Antiracist Futures

Ian Law

Improving theory, greater understanding and better evidence of racist violence on the one hand, accompanies deepening 'structural' racism and European racial stratification on the other. This racial crisis is a central contradiction in the postcolonial era and is evident within the European politics of race. The establishment of the European Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) in Vienna in 1997/8, which subsequently became the FRA, and the implementation of systematic surveillance of patterns and trends in racism and xenophobia across the expanding number of EU member states represents a significant advance in understanding. But has this been accompanied by deepening structural racism and associated violence across this region. There is a crisis in strategies to tackle racist violence where legislation, techniques and approaches increasingly proliferate in the face of highly durable and resurgent patterns of attack and murder. This indicates that the 'fit' between causes of racist violence and the forms of intervention that have developed may be poor. Therefore, the prospect of more complex and comprehensive explanations of racist violence providing a secure foundation for equally comprehensive international, national and local anti-racist action may lead to this crisis being averted. Despite many dilemmas, capitulations and reversals in the twentieth and twenty first centuries anti-racism has remained a strong and potent social force and this is almost certain to continue. The heralding of the 'death of antiracism' brings with it the old-style denial of the ongoing, everyday significance of racist hostility and violence.

Our recent study in Leeds (2007) which examined racist hostility and policy responses found a set of local agency concerns about increasing racist hostility and violence, together with a strong sense that what is needed is firstly, a better understanding of how racist hostility works and, secondly, more effective action to respond to this issue based on these findings. The need for an improvement

in agency responses was recognised by many representatives from these agencies. Poor levels of service, poorly implemented policy, poor perceptions of service and a strong desire for more effective work with local communities were powerfully stressed:

“Leeds has quite a grand Hate Crime Strategy..but on the ground it isn’t delivering..

It is a statistic on a piece of paper there have been ten hate crimes, but what they [other agencies and parts of the Council] don’t appreciate is that there are ten families with children that are getting beaten up, moved out and traumatised...’

What is lacking from the Council is enforcement work... and work changing people’s perceptions...

There is none of that effective building of the community to provide an opportunity to counter some of that in-built hostility”.

(Housing Manager)

“The level and adequacy of support for victims and families suffering from racist victimisation is ‘appalling’ and services are ‘very fragmented’.”

(Customer Services Manager)

“I think the [racial harassment policy] is fine and I think the rhetoric is wonderful but the actual operation, what happens on the ground, may not realise the policy....

There is a major issue of under-reporting...

People report it to the authorities and perceive that they have received an indifferent response...

How do you deal with a community who feel that they have so much anger that they have to attack somebody?....What is lacking is engagement with communities... getting them to change, support and befriend people”

(Hate Crime Officer, Neighbourhoods and Housing)

Our report strongly supports the general thrust of these views and seeks to show how greater understanding of both the impact of racist harassment on victims and the complex ways in which racist hostility works in local communities requires a re-thinking and a renewal of policy and practice in this field. Evidence from victims identifies the immediate and escalating levels of racist violence they experienced. Victims also understood that, although many individuals from agencies provided excellent services to them, public agencies were often also unable to deliver effective victim support, effective enforcement or effective prevention. Improving theory, greater understanding and better evidence of racist violence on the one hand, accompanies deepening ‘structural’ racism and European racial stratification on the other. This racial crisis is a central contradiction in the postcolonial era and is evident within the European politics of race. The establishment of the European Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) in Vienna in 1997/8, which subsequently became the FRA, and the implementation of systematic surveillance of patterns and trends in racism and xenophobia across the expanding number of EU member states represents a significant advance in understanding. But has this been accompanied by deepening structural racism

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Ian Law is Director of the Centre for Ethnicity and Racism Studies, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds, and the author of Racism and Ethnicity: Global Debates, Dilemmas, Directions, London: Longman, 2010. Situating Racist Hostility and Understanding the Impact of Racist Victimisation in Leeds (CERS, 2007), is co-authored by L. Hemmerman, I. Law, J. Simms, and A. Sirriyeh by L. Hemmerman, I. Law, J. Simms, and A. Sirriyeh.

Faulty By Design

Yunis Alam

If enough people say something often enough, it can become as good as true. That truth, in turn, becomes self-evident and is even more casually appropriated as an element of conventional, and often unquestioned wisdom. It's not smoke and mirrors exactly, and neither is it an explicit form of propaganda but there are times when it comes mighty close to being both.

I was never really taken with the kind of multiculturalism that's now regularly in the dock. Its practice and genteel aspirations tended to be about enabling people to undertake performances with some degree of competence; know what to say, which labels to use. An awareness of which traditions, customs and values apply to which ethnic minorities might be fine as a starting point, but that's pretty much where things stayed stuck ever since. It's also worth bearing in mind that all this practical multiculturalism was couched within the rubric of tolerance. Yes, we are all tolerant but there comes a time when the bounds of tolerance are crossed. The problem with tolerance is that it's not all that to begin with. My neighbour, he has a dog. The dog barks all damned night and most of the damned day. Myself, I tolerate the dog and my neighbour because the neighbour's a big man; his dog is one vicious looking bastard, too. So I tolerate them both, while respecting, valuing or even appreciating neither. We can tolerate just about anything and for a long time, that's all that's been happening with us ethnics. Being merely tolerated is no favour, no demonstration of respect or acceptance. You can keep your tolerance: I would rather be resented and even hated openly than having to settle for being tolerated.

As for the most recent turn in the storyline of British multiculturalism, it's little more than a rehash of older ideas some of which gained prominence at the turn of this century: integration had failed, communities were segregated and actively seeking to live parallel lives. That didn't bother me. Still doesn't as far as it goes. Some of us tolerate this one sided fixation with ethnicity as not only a

marker of difference but as the a denominator of conflict. Because of that, any tensions – small or large – are then fairly easily explained as being contingent upon ethnicity and its purported consequences. Of course, the whole world is segregated but ethnicity isn't the only, or most important marker that draws the lines. More often than not, it's class or even wealth that helps segregate: you don't often get the Alan Sugars of the world, or their poxy apprentices for that matter, living in sink estates, inner city no go zones or in areas where access to quality housing, education or services is of a standard worth writing home about.

The commentators voicing their views in the Rethinking Race edition of Prospect Magazine are not presenting anything remarkably new. Indeed, there are plenty of others who have even stronger views about the problems with multiculturalism and more concretely with ethnic minorities, especially Muslims. The topic of integration is always around the corner, as are the notions of loyalty and trust. Something similar happened with Irish Catholics a few centuries ago, the interest and fear rarely subsiding. I'm fairly sure most British Muslims, though legally and technically citizens, will still continue to be viewed as outsiders in one way or another. The veil, for example, is still imagined to be symbolic of the wearer's reluctance to associate with Britishness, therefore performing at once an individual and collective act of resistance and segregation; the alternative, that women who wear the veil do so because being British allows them to be who they want to be, when on occasion voiced, is quickly dismissed. Instead of talking about rights and freedoms afforded us, the frame invariably reverses and asks us to prove that we belong; integrate, reject terrorism, live harmoniously with our neighbours. All this is said, in one way or another, with a straight face, without even a hint of irony or appreciation of the offence such a premise elicits. I do belong and I'm no less integrated than my neighbour with his crazy dog.

Multiculturalism was never given a fair shake to begin with. It's not that it gave too much to these unruly and ungrateful ethnics; it was never allowed to go far enough. A superficial knowledge of once alien cultures only went so far. Sure, samosas, chai, jerk chicken, reggae music and even the occasional sneaking of a foreign word into the OED (Blighty's an old one, but a good one – as is doolally) all have their place but they're little more than tokens, knowledge of which does not excuse responsibility for addressing structural inequalities that continue to be connected with ethnicity, class and gender. Until we look at some of the underlying conditions of widening and deepening social exclusion – for many of us, at all levels, racism is alive and kicking – the multiculturalism people are so quick to vilify will continue to fail. I won't mourn its loss when it does finally bite the bullet but, given the way things are, I will have difficulty tolerating the nature of the ideological shape filling the void.

Yunis Alam is a Lecturer in the Department of Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Bradford, and a novelist. He is the editor of Made in Bradford (Route, 2006) and co-author with Charles Husband of British Pakistani Men from Bradford: Linking narratives to policy (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2006). Social Cohesion and Counter-Terrorism: A contradiction?, also co-authored with Charles Husband is forthcoming from Policy Press in 2011

The Wrong Question

Nissa Finney

The articles in Prospect magazine's 'Rethinking Race' dossier argue that multicultural thinking, and the initiatives associated with it, has overestimated the problems of 'race', resulting in a pre-occupation with race and racism that enhances racial divisions. For example, physicians respond differently to minority ethnic clients than to White clients because of a heightened consciousness of the potential for racial discrimination (Singh); Black boys do educationally less well than their contemporaries because they view themselves "through the lens of racism", as victims (Sewell, p34); the singling out of ethnic minorities by arts initiatives is demeaning (Dyer); and tensions between Whites and Asians in Oldham are heightened by emphasis on cultural difference (Mirza).

There are some interesting points raised in the articles. In particular, Singh explains that it is often immigration history rather than race that has connections with mental health; and Mirza and Dyer suggest that it is socio-economic background rather than race that should be the focus of attention (though they should note that ethnicity continues to be associated with many socioeconomic indicators after socio-economic status, or class, is taken into account).

So, for me, the strong points of the arguments are where they are specific about what it is that does and doesn't matter. What I find particularly weak is the lack of explanation of how the authors define multiculturalism (philosophy or practice). This makes it very difficult for the reader to place the specificities of the arguments in the broader context of an assessment of multiculturalism. In short, a major problem with Prospect's contribution is the attempt to frame it by the question 'has multiculturalism had its day?'

It would be far more fruitful to ask 'how and to what extent does ethnicity matter for people's lives today?' This is the topic of a great deal of research which is carefully teasing out how and why ethnic minorities consistently have different, and very often worse, experiences than their White counterparts in employment, education, health, wealth, and housing. Rather than dismiss ethnicity, then, we need to better understand its contemporary meaning.

My second concern with this collection is the connection made between multiculturalism and extreme racism. Mirza claims that 'The BNP has not merely gained support in the era of multicultural policies, it has gained support because of them' (p.32). A striking accusation, but unevicenced. Support for far right groups has risen in times and places with very different policies. We must not be led down the apparently simple route of thinking that getting rid of multiculturalism will eradicate support for the BNP.

The support for the BNP and the messages of exclusionary nationalism that it promotes is part of a litany of race, migration and segregation which has characterised the British context for public and political debate on these issues over the last decade. The litany equates immigration, diversity and segregation, labels all as problems and opposes them to integration. However, the claims behind this litany – such as that Britain is a country of ghettos and that minorities don't want to integrate – are

not backed up by evidence. I review this evidence in 'Sleepwalking to segregation'? Challenging myths about race and migration" co-authored with Ludi Simpson (Policy Press, 2009) and show how common claims about race and migration are myths.

The litany may be based on misinterpretations of race and migration but the roots of this are not multiculturalism. Rather, the litany stems from a complex combination of postcolonial politics, international migration, national imaginings, racial and other prejudices and, more recently, political discourses that, in the context of international terrorism, have focused on ethnic segregation and division.

But a focus on division is not the same as a focus on difference, a subtlety Mirza overlooks in her piece about Oldham. An emphasis on cultural difference can be a celebration of diversity and recognition of the value of different perspectives and practices. Indeed, this was at the heart of multiculturalism in its original conception. A celebration of differences allows the conviviality between people of different backgrounds about which Paul Gilroy and Ash Amin write.

A final point of contention is that while

the collection of articles claim to be re-thinking race such that less emphasis on it is needed, Mirza chooses to employ the race of the authors to add validity to the central argument: She notes of the authors that "none of them is white and therefore cannot be easily dismissed as ignorant, naïve, or unwittingly prejudiced" (Mirza, p.31). A potentially interesting debate about positionality and 'insider/outsider' perspectives is distilled to a frustratingly one-dimensional (and racialised) assertion.

I do not argue with the point that people should not necessarily be primarily seen through the lens of ethnicity but it is premature to conclude that ethnicity does not play a role in people's lives.

Nissa Finney is a Research Fellow at the Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research in the School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester and co-author with Ludi Simpson of 'Sleepwalking to segregation'? Challenging myths about race and migration (Bristol: Policy Press, 2009)

Both Class And Race

Jenny Bourne

The basic points Munira Mirza (and co) make, parroting much of what was said by Prospect editor David Goodhart six years ago, are that racism is no longer the determinant of black people's lives that it had been, and that multiculturalism and its adherents, who also peddle concepts like 'institutional racism', are to blame for perpetuating the idea of an enduring racial inequality in the UK.

Of course it is ahistorical and downright reactionary to assert that people from ethnic minorities are inevitably and eternally victims of racism. But it is equally questionable to assert (as the authors of these articles do) that because you have made it or because a particular group 'over-achieves' this is evidence that racism no longer exists.

No definition of racism

But to respond to their false and partial notions, one has to go further than merely pointing out, as many angry journalists and academics have done, all the areas in which BME people and children are clearly at a disadvantage in the UK – be it in terms of racial violence, the criminal justice system, health, educational achievement, poverty indices etc. The fundamental error is the way that racism is being defined and analysed by them. Or rather, that it is neither defined nor analysed. All these writers appear to view racism in a very narrow way – as connected with the prejudices of die-hard individual bigots – and as something static.

Racism changes

But racism is in fact a process – starting with prejudice (in the mind) to discrimination (in the act) to racism (institutional and of the state). State and institutional racism provide the breeding ground for personal prejudice. And racism has always affected different groups differentially depending on a whole range of factors – when that community came to the UK, bringing what by way of capital and skills, into what part of the economy, settling in which area, affected how by the end of industrialisation etc. In fact racism never stays still but changes its shape, functions, contours and impact in terms of larger political social and economic forces.

New forms of racism

If we are looking at racism today, post-industrialisation and post-9/11, we have to see how globalisation and the war on terror are throwing up its new forms. So today the victims of racism at its most acute and vicious are, on the one hand, the rightless asylum seekers and migrants thrown up by the impact of globalisation, and, on the other, members of Muslim communities, now facing a massive resurgence of Islamophobia as a result of 9/11, the war on terror, and the wars being waged in Afghanistan and Iraq. There are in effect new racisms with new ‘crusaders’ such as the English Defence League, and new victims. And racism is no longer necessarily colour-coded in a world where all foreigners are suspected of stealing jobs, houses and benefits. (Which does not mean that all previous colour-coded racism has died, different forms coexist and overlap.)

Class versus race

Mirza and co try to argue that class is now a more important determinant than race. Class can in some (but not all) ways mitigate race – if you have a car, you won’t be as likely to be stopped and searched or prey to racist attack walking home at night, if you live in a detached house with gardens around, you will be far less likely to be in dispute with your neighbours than in an impoverished terrace or tower block. But it does not follow that what poor BME people experience is unadulterated class oppression. Race interacts with class, enhances and modifies its impact. The distinction that A. Sivanandan made between the racism that discriminates (against the middle class) and the racism that kills (which affects the poor and workless) not only holds true today but is due to become much more accentuated as the recession and cuts begin to bite.

Multiculturalism never dealt with racism

Why does it with Mirza always have to be either or? Either it is all to do with race or it is nothing to do with race. Surely a more sophisticated approach is needed? The same is true in the derision of

multiculturalism. Yes, multiculturalism had its excesses, and the Institute of Race Relations (IRR) was in fact one of the first to point out the limitations and dangers of 'ethnicism/culturalism' after the implementation of recommendations of the Scarman Report into the 1981 riots. And yes, ethnic monitoring has bent towards an apolitical and simplistic 'equality of outcome' thesis. But trying to 'quantify' racism cannot surely make it more prevalent, as Mirza would have it. Ignoring it has never helped it go away.

Multiculturalism was never going to be a riposte to racism but rubbishing such a notion does not mean that racism has ceased to exist. Nor does it mean that the ideal of a multicultural society should now be jettisoned.

Critical and Constructive Rethinking

What Mirza and her stable-mates such as Kenan Malik do, is to continually throw out the racist baby with the cultural bath water. The Institute of Race Relations too has been critical of the limitations of many of the same areas such as post-Scarman multiculturalism, race awareness training, and Macpherson's recommendations. Indeed, articles and interventions in its journal *Race & Class* have been pioneering such criticism for over thirty years. But have done so in a much more nuanced and politically constructive, dare I say dialectical, way. If it is a rethinking that is needed, a better starting point will be found in 'Race, class and the state' (1976), 'Challenging racism: strategies for the 1980s' (1983), 'RAT and the degradation of black struggle' (1985), 'Poverty is the new black' (2001), 'Race, terror and civil society' (2006).

Jenny Bourne is a researcher in race policy at the Institute of Race Relations and Joint Editor of Race & Class.

Social Injustice and Ethnic Status: The Questions That Matter

Gargi Bhattacharyya

What the Prospect dossier is and is not about.

Firstly, this is not about multiculturalism. Only one of the pieces makes any direct reference to debates about multiculturalism, and this is in relation to cultural industries.

What this really is, is an attack on the claim that racism exists and shapes social outcomes – and, as others point out, this is a longstanding point of political debate and struggle. The most effective method of silencing a critique of racism is to argue that racism no longer exists at all. Those claiming to suffer from its consequences must be pursuing their own selfish agendas – or be hopeless losers unable to succeed in the happy meritocracy of Boris-Johnson-land.

Actually, I thought the Prospect pieces were uncontroversial – apart from their framing by Munira Mirza's introduction and conclusion. What are the main arguments of the pieces? For Tony Sewell, the point is to say that blaming racism does not help young black men overcome social barriers. For Sonya Dyer, the problem is that specialist arts provision relegates minority artists to an ethnic silo –

there to tick organisational boxes but never quite entering the mainstream. For Swaran Singh, the gripe is that allegations of institutional racism threaten to take attention away from the urgent mental health needs of minority communities – and disproportionality in diagnostic outcomes does not invalidate the process of those diagnoses in the writer's view. Each of these arguments has been heard before, including among anti-racists. None constitutes an argument against the existence of racism or the need to challenge racism.

That more troubling suggestion only emerges in the two pieces by Mirza. Mirza – appointed by Boris Johnson as lead adviser for culture and arts in London, without any discernible prior experience apart from her willingness to front attacks on a variety of left and liberal causes. When she bleats that 'some people from ethnic minorities are left unsure whether an opportunity or promotion has been given to them on the basis of merit or box ticking, and can face the quiet resentment of colleagues', it is hard to imagine that she is not reflecting on her own odd and under-qualified career trajectory.

This experience of box-ticking opportunity may be true for Mirza, but it is unlikely to resonate with other minority ethnic professionals. Research in the field identifies the substantial over-qualification of minority ethnic people across workplaces, particularly in more senior roles. I am not denying that there are those who occupy their roles, in part, due to a concern to reflect diversity – but this will never be the only consideration in an appointment, and frankly, there are plenty of straight white men occupying senior roles as a result of chance, nepotism and inertia. I no longer expect socially mobile minority ethnic people to be better than their white peers and instead accept that, if they are as good, they are entitled to their job.

Opening up the debate

Some points of contention in engagement with other responses here:

I have already said that I think that the focus on multiculturalism is a diversion – this is not what the Prospect articles discuss.

Is Britain in the shadow of US race politics? This argument has been made in relation to policy debates for decades – and, in the realm of policy, it has some validity. In terms of the battle over popular understanding, I don't understand the point being made. US commentators and activists always struggled to understand the aspiration to unity through political blackness which emerged from a particular moment of anti-racist activism in Britain. Whatever the shortcomings of this formulation in terms of changing wider consciousness, the aspiration was not a result of some misplaced Ameriphilia.

Is multiculturalism up to the challenges of super-diversity? Was it ever designed to be? If we return to my point that what is at stake here is the legitimacy of political debate and action around racism, then so-called super-diversity raises new challenges of organisation and understanding – but these could never be met by the bureaucratic systems developed to contain the critique of institutional racism. At my most cynical, I would say that the diversion into endless and ineffective bureaucratic

activity signalled the defeat of the potentially radical moment of British anti-racism represented by the Stephen Lawrence campaign (and the many many family campaigns that preceded and accompanied it).

Other responses point us back in a more fruitful direction – what difference does ethnic status make to social outcomes and how can we challenge this? That surely must be the question to address – not the cul-de-sacs offered by Prospect, newly converted Tories, or others set on disrupting the possibility of any collective response to social injustice.

The challenges before us

We are on the brink of some of the most cataclysmic attacks on minority ethnic and other poor communities that have been seen in a generation. Proposals to cap welfare and housing benefits, and to blow apart incapacity benefit, threaten to impoverish large swathes of minority communities in an instant. At the same time, much of the much-celebrated social mobility among our communities in recent years has occurred through the public sector – it is likely that a disproportionate number of the 500, 000 jobs lost will be among minority communities.

In this context, Munira Mirza's claim that anti-racism has gone too far, that it is all about censoring speech and is only an excessive policing of relations between individuals, seems very calculated and very frightening.

It doesn't matter whether we characterise what lies ahead as a result of colour or cultural racism, whether it is an unintended consequence of other measures or whether it is a cold calculation that these groups (remember we are talking first of all about the poor end of minority communities) are not the electoral supporters of the Conservative Party and, in any case, are too voiceless to cause difficulties. Whatever the intentions (and how did we get tricked back to the thankless challenge of guessing intentions?) the combined attacks on the most disadvantaged will harden lines of class and race – perhaps to such an extent that some minority groups will remember what they have in common: not culture but social positioning.

As always, the challenge remains both analytic and political. Understanding if, when, and how racism continues to scar social life is one challenge. Speaking to each other in a way that might allow us to do something about it is another altogether. Let's hope we are up to it.

Gargi Bhattacharyya is Professor of Sociology at the School of Languages and Social Sciences, University of Ashton, and the author of Dangerous Brown Men: Exploiting Sex, Violence and Feminism in the 'War on Terror' (Zed Books/ Macmillan, 2008).

Rethinking Race or Denying Racism?

Claire Alexander

Timing, they say, is everything. Which leads me to wonder whether the recent Prospect Magazine articles pronouncing the decline of 'race' and racial inequality as a key feature of contemporary British life is best understood as convenient alibi for the new coalition government, conspiracy, or as merely ironic. Certainly the timing is significant – it appears just ahead of the most recent report from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, 'How Fair is Britain?' (October 2010); the tightening of legislation on migration for non-EU migrants (which threatens to further undermine the tenuous rights of black and Asian families in the UK); the launch of StopWatch (a new campaign against racial discrimination in Stop and Search procedures); and the imminent proposed legislation that will enshrine and legitimate racial and ethnic profiling in criminal investigation. It chimes too with the arrival of Big Society, in which the new regime has replaced a concern with inequality with that of 'fairness' – where individual merit trumps any forms of social disadvantage on the (seemingly) level playing fields of contemporary Britain, and where issues of race, gender and class have become matters of 'character' not social location.

The EHRC report in itself provides a strong riposte to what Aditya Chakraborty has aptly described as Prospect's 'move on brigade'. As Trevor Phillips – himself not averse to opening this particular can of worms – states in its Introduction, Britain is 'now a largely tolerant and open minded society', but one 'fac[ing] a fresh challenge – the danger of a society divided by barriers of inequality and injustice [Where] for some the gateways to opportunity appear permanently closed' (EHRC 2010). The report's findings point to the increasingly complex picture around race inequality that has emerged in the past twenty five years, but also to the resilience of entrenched forms of racial and ethnic disadvantage. They point to change and progress, no doubt, but also to worrying continuities that over 45 years of race equality legislation has failed to address. While it is clear that social class is a significant factor – you are likely to live 7 years longer if you are from the highest social class than from the lower social classes – there are also ethnically specific statistics which defy the simple class based analysis proffered by Prospect (as Omar Khan argues in The Guardian). For example, BME students are overrepresented in Higher Education but remain concentrated in post-1992 universities and only 8% at Russell group institutions (compared with 24% of White students), levels of unemployment amongst Pakistani and Bangladeshi men and women run at three times the level for White Britons, and there is continued evidence of the 'ethnic penalty' amongst the BME workforce, with Bangladeshi men earning 21% lower than their White male counterparts and even the otherwise hyper-successful Chinese professionals earning 11% less than their White colleagues. The disproportionality of black men in prison is even larger than in the US – five times more black people are incarcerated proportionally than whites – and recent figures show that black young men are 7 times more likely to be stopped and searched than white, a figure that rises to a staggering 27 times more likely when stopped and searched without reasonable suspicion. Of course, it's not all bad news – there is the mystery of the success of Chinese young women who are the highest performing group at aged 16, irrespective of their social class position.

Complexity, however, does not imply resolution – nor that because the faultlines are more nuanced they can be simply airbrushed from existence. Ideas of race and practices of racism have always been moving targets, but this doesn't deny their continued materiality. The Prospect 'analysis' offers a seductive comfort for those who want their social divisions negotiable, or who seek plausible deniability through the authorised testimony of a few individuals who through luck or talent – or even, dare we suggest, the multicultural access which eased their passage into the mainstream – managed to move up and out from the crowd, and who now set themselves up as the yardstick for a

post-racial Britain (and one which has been used to beat the less successful, but more numerous, who are left behind). As other contributions here note, the argument offers the easy comforts of 'commonsense', which requires no evidence and, it seems, no explanation.

There is room for blame, however – and here, it is laid squarely at the door of multiculturalism, with its apparently thoughtless promotion of the poor cultural attitudes of ethnic minority communities themselves. Blaming the victims of discrimination for their own victimisation is a popular past-time these days – witness the standing ovation for former Deputy Head Katherine Birbalsingh at the Tory Party conference in October for blaming black boys' negative attitudes for their educational underachievement, an argument echoed too by Tony Sewell in *Prospect* (although it's unlikely Birbalsingh would endorse a trip to Jamaica as a likely remedy). There may even be some mileage in the criticisms of some of the more blunt instrument incarnations of multicultural policies – certainly many academics (including myself) have critiqued the (re)turn to banal cultural identities which dominated the 1990s at the expense of more structural analyses or anti-racist solutions – most notably in the 'saris, steelbands and samosas' version of multicultural education.

There is a clear and urgent need for a re-engagement with the inseparability of 'culture' from structure, just as we need to be re-examining what Stuart Hall 30 years ago defined as the 'articulation' of race and class in the current moment (in 'Race, articulation and societies structured in dominance'). It remains the case, as Hall famously argued then, that 'Race [or perhaps now religion] is thus the modality in which class is lived' – it is not a zero-sum choice between the two: race or class (or even class or culture/religion) (see K. Sveinsson's Runnymede Trust study,

Who Cares about the White Working Class? (2009). In addition, in their attack on multiculturalism, the *Prospect* authors are confusing the problem (racial inequality and discrimination) with the solution (multiculturalism), and seem to imagine that in damning the latter, they are resolving the former – or at least shifting the blame elsewhere. This is less 'Rethinking Race' than denying racism, substituting an anti-politics of personal experience and 'I'm alright, Jack-isms' for a politics of equality or even, God help us, fairness.

Claire Alexander is Reader in the Department of Sociology at the London School of Economics.

Meanwhile, back in the Real World of Prevent...

Shamim Miah

Prospect's 'Rethinking Race' in fact brings little to the current debate on race and multiculturalism. What it does do, is reinforce a political position on race and multiculturalism. The ideas it gives voice to go back to before the race riots of 2001, to the populist backlash against race and multiculturalism in the UK and the US which Roger Hewitt described in *White Backlash* (2005).

What I find most intriguing about the *Prospect* dossier, from where I stand, is the collective amnesia at work in the articles. There are no references to Counter terrorism or Prevent – two of the most important drivers that in one form or another have shaped the lives and experience of Muslims and the Muslim community in the UK for a decade. There is no reference or critical awareness as to the

ways in which the logic of Prevent permeates schooling, for example, and other public services and policies.

I also find the public policy ramification of the logic in the Prospect issue to be rather worrying. It reminds me of the bitter debates that we use to have during our school governors' meetings in Oldham, in which the school would try to blame the 'cultural practices' of the Asians for their education failures. What is important, I feel, is not only the public discourse on race and multiculturalism but also the ways in which these discourses shape and inform public policy practice. It is now an established fact that in Oldham and other towns and cities the discourse on community cohesion did result in closure of many projects that were working on single equality strands such as race.

Whilst political pundits may find many flaws with multiculturalism, on the basis of over a decade spent working in a voluntary capacity with young people, I think it is worth point out multiculturalism acts as a normalizing presence for most young people, particularly in the way in which urban space is perceived.

In light of the work done by Ludi Simpson, Nissa Finney, and others, moreover, I find the framing of Oldham and other towns through the prism of segregation and 'self-segregation' most perverse. In fact, if anything, evidence from the Westwood area in Oldham demonstrates a growing trend amongst Muslim parents of sending their children to mixed schools as opposed to local mono-cultural schools.

Shamim Miah is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Community and International Education at Huddersfield University, and has over ten years experience of work in youth and community projects. He was born in Oldham, and has lived there all of his life.

Fragile - Handle With Care

Said Adrus [mixed media links not included in this text] 'FRAGILE - HANDLE WITH CARE' 2008
(mixed media)

Said Adrus is an artist whose work over the years has explored issues of identity, visuality, surveillance, territoriality, racism, heritage and belonging. 'Fragile' is part of his Pavilion Recaptured installation project, and was exhibited at Nottingham's New Art Exchange 'Next We Change The Earth' (2008)

Through The Prospect Reading Glass

Amir Saeed

These Prospect articles smack to me of such selfish smugness, that it left me laughing in shock and bewilderment. At a time when the Far-Right have achieved electoral breakthroughs across Europe and are gaining such confidence that street politics punctuated with violence and harassment is back on their agenda (witness the rise here of the English Defence League), the suggestion that 'race' and racism are no longer relevant is just unbelievable.

But should we be surprised?

The contemporary attacks on multiculturalism echo the vilification of anti-racism initiatives by progressive councils in the 1980s. 'Multiculturalism' originally emerged in British political discourse as a new and supposedly more tolerant approach for the integration (as opposed to assimilation) of minority ethnic immigrants. We've seen the response. Basically, right wing commentators fear the concept of multiculturalism because it implies an erosion of core, national values in favour of diverse cultures; more liberal commentators argue that the concept actually creates divisions in society by emphasising difference rather than stressing the common ground.

But recently a new dominant neo-right wing discourse has been formulated that questions the whole concept of multiculturalism. What makes this different from previous right wing criticism of multiculturalism is that much of this criticism is coming from previously centre left commentators. And much of this language has taken even more sinister tones in questioning the need of immigration, questioning minority communities, and questioning the actual benefits of a multicultural society.

The moral panics surrounding the events of 9/11, and 7/7 have led to a right-wing led debate which under the guise of community cohesion proposes a return to "core national values/culture" (–can anyone actually define "British culture"?–) alongside stricter immigration and policing controls.

These reactionary and conservative arguments fail to look to and adequately examine social, political and even cultural reasons for contemporary events. Furthermore, a lot of the 'blame' for the failure of multiculturalism has been attached to Islam's incompatibility with living within the 'democratic' principles of the West. Thus deep ideological and institutional factors such as British/Western foreign policy, poverty, 'white flight', and anti-Muslim racism are minimised or simply glossed over.

The irony here is twofold. Mainstream politicians appear to operate in a system that assumes racism is the perverse psychological thinking of the far right. Thus they are willing to support anti-racist initiatives that do not challenge the economic status quo – witness David Cameron courting the British Pakistani Muslim boxer Amir Khan or Gordon Brown applauding the Football Unites/Racism Divides initiative. Yet simultaneously politicians make statements about the need for Muslims to integrate, the need for harsher immigration controls and for greater policing powers. So while these are all measures that are debated in a highly racialised climate, the racist assumptions/assertions put forward are entirely discounted or ignored.

And yet, according to the pundits cited in Prospect, this has nothing to do with racism. What needs reminding is these commentators are only in positions of authority due to the anti-racism struggles and aspirations of working class Black and Asian people in the seventies and eighties. This is conveniently ignored by the Prospect writers as is the increased racism experienced by ordinary Black and Asian people in the UK. Furthermore the massive increase in public sector cuts will clearly disadvantage poorer groups that are overwhelmingly from ethnic minority groups.

I said at the start of my rant that I was shocked and bewildered. But should we be surprised? Only if we've forgotten Malcolm's teachings.

Amir Saeed is a Senior Lecturer in the Centre for Research in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Sunderland

Don't Believe the Hype

D. Tyrer

The Prospect feature opens with the rather ambitious claim that it was written 'by people who want to change the way in which racism and diversity are discussed'. Unfortunately the succeeding discussion fails to offer anything truly new and simply repeats a range of well-worn ideas which exceptionalise racism, relegating it to the social margins, the past, and the extremist fringes. The intention behind this is apparently to undercut recognition of institutional racism in the present by drawing attention to a range of other issues such as the 'victim mentality' [sic] of African-Caribbean boys, but its chief effect is instead to highlight the continued hold of hegemonic ideas about race.

In light of the ambitious opening of the Prospect feature it is worth reminding ourselves that there is nothing of novelty in the attempt to deny the seriousness and resilience of racism in society. In the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the US Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in railway carriages was constitutional. Although this landmark ruling provided constitutional justification for Jim Crow segregation, what was perhaps most striking was the court's explicit rejection that the judgement could be considered racist: any such suggestion would be a 'fallacy' and a mere 'construction' concocted by African Americans.

On both sides of the Atlantic, denial continues to take many forms – from refusal to accept the true extent and unimaginable horrors of the holocaust to reluctance to accept the seriousness and effects of contemporary Islamophobia – and its nebulous nature makes it a particularly potent part of the repertoire of the political right. In the rightist tabloids, denial is often expressed through highly affective registers such as the indignation of the attacks against "the PC brigade" and the asylum seekers who apparently keep taking 'our' benefits despite in reality being ineligible for any mainstream benefits. In the hands of the extremists, denial is unidirectional, and is invoked to deny minorities' experiences of racism while instead positing whites as its true victims, by blaming white working class disadvantage on the racial other. Such expressions are parodic in nature – they work on one level as an attempt to ridicule what racists think is the eagerness of minorities to play the race card – and they have become an increasingly important protest tool for extremists, who try to portray themselves as victims of state anti-racism and of minorities. These diverse articulations express a complex politics of victimism, which involves first denying the persistence of racism against minorities before then claiming that 'mainstream' (white) society is its true victim, whether by dint of having been accused of institutional racism, or on the basis of the usual far right conspiracy

theorising about racial victimhood at the hands of minorities and their apparently radical(!) liberal allies in the state.

In the context of this hegemonic racial politics, it is disappointing to read a special feature which proposes to 'change' the ways in which we speak about racism before proceeding to do exactly the opposite by rehearsing a range of familiar refrains which could have been drawn from any one of a number of right wing blogs or tabloids. The selective and weak empirical basis for many of the Prospect claims leaves a sense of polemic which underlines this. For instance, while BME disadvantage is largely framed in terms of such factors as residual effects of historical (though not current) racisms, or the "victim mentality" [sic] of African-Caribbean youth, we are told that false allegations of racism can destroy careers of innocent whites (minorities, meanwhile, are merely left wondering whether they only won the job because they are not white in this parallel universe). The insinuations which bring this bland generalising to life bring to mind the sort of lines that misogynists routinely trot out about crimes against women. Much of this is poorly supported by empirical work, but it gains a certain credence precisely because it will be read against the imaginary horizons set by the populist right wing press and its opinion-forming moral panics about anti-racism. In other words, it is precisely because of the lack of newness in this argument that it will catch on, and it is precisely because of the ways in which those on the right have ramped up unfounded fears about an anti-racist conspiracy that this tired logic will appear new and different in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. Elsewhere in the feature, the feeling of polemic is underlined by the way in which the very great distinctions between anti-racism, multiculturalism, and community cohesion policy are blurred as they all somehow merge into one "official anti-racism", as though a straw man has been set up in order to be brought down. That the far right is pursuing its Islamophobic agendas by employing the same unproblematised characterisation of state dealings with minorities as "anti-racism" is coincidental but nevertheless worrying.

I read the Prospect feature in the hope that its promise to progress debates would be met through serious, critical debate and in the expectation that its critique of anti-racism would be born largely of optimism, although the weight of the polemic crushes these prospects. There is no doubt that patterns of discrimination and disadvantage are changing, but just as some manifestations of racism appear to weaken, others emerge. We have seen this countless times, with the resurgence of anti-Semitism, the rise of new racism, the targeting of asylum seekers, and the current predominance of Islamophobia. In fact, the latter stands as a case in point, for it was weak state responses which allowed it to take root and become an increasingly widespread and influential manifestation of racist discourse. The problem with totalising claims about the demise of racism is that they are not merely premature, but they can also be dangerous. In a world of populist street rallies by extremists, where Black and Minority Ethnic people are still more likely to be stopped and searched by police than whites, and where the colour of one's skin is still a major determinant of a range of life chances and experiences, we cannot afford to wish away the conceptual tools for engaging with racism.

D Tyrer is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Liverpool John Moores University. He is currently writing a monograph on Islamophobia for Pluto Press.

Zombies, again

Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley

As reluctant connoisseurs of multicultural clichés, we were somewhat disappointed that Munira Mirza's essay forgot to report how Birmingham City Council killed Christmas and replaced it with Winterval. As several contributors have noted, her largely anecdotal essay presents a set of arguments that could have been assembled anytime over the last twenty years. Furthermore, it remains mired in the either/or logics it sets out to critique; displays no sense of the motility and changing nature of racisms; depends on the active forgetting of how 'cultural racism' has shifted in the 'war on terror' era to coded discourses of values, compatibility and loyalty; and refuses to engage with how, as Soumaya Ghannoushi (2006) argued, the perennial trope of the 'multiculturalism problem' has become a euphemism for 'the Muslim problem'. As Gargi Bhattacharyya noted, the article is not really about multiculturalism, but proposes a familiar attack 'on the claim that racism exists and shapes social outcomes'.

There is little point in repeating the many excellent critiques collected so far in this dossier. Instead, our starting point is to take seriously this fairly insipid essay as a certain kind of media event. In other words, why, given the limited, frayed and disjointed set of policies that might be gathered messily under the label 'multiculturalism', launch a full-frontal attack that would have been exaggerated a decade ago? Why, after a decade in which multiculturalism has been loudly denounced as a bad thing by a rota of New Labour Ministers, media commentators and mandarins from liberal-left to right, pretend that there is a pressing taboo to be broken in a new political era?

Multiculturalism, as almost everybody recognizes, is a slippery, fluid term, retaining a fairly useful if limited descriptive sense in postcolonial, migration societies, but also skittering off to index normative debates, real and imagined policies, mainstream political rhetorics, consumerist desires, and resistant political appropriations. But it is also, in western Europe more generally, something of a 'zombie category', in two senses. The first, as intended by Ulrich Beck, is that of a social category or idea that is 'dead but still alive'. The second is more ritualistic, as it is also an idea that can be revived and made to walk amongst and haunt the living. Over the last decade, in countries where limited multicultural provisions have been done away with, and even in countries where nothing called 'multiculturalism' can be discerned, multiculturalism has functioned as a ritual object. Its slipperiness allows it to become the space in which debates on race, immigration, citizenship, belonging and legitimacy are conducted. Frequently understood as an experiment, or era, or project, or unitary 'philosophy', it is ritually revived merely in order to be publicly disavowed. We tried our best, they asked for this, it didn't work, and now we need to get back to a state of integration, of common values, of shared culture.

If we maintain this broader focus for the time being, it is clear that the zombie of multiculturalism is central to the justification of assimilative integrationism and neo-nationalist politics in contemporary

Europe. Blamed for everything from 'parallel societies' to gendered horror to the incubation of terrorism, the litany of multicultural failure allows for disturbing political developments to be presented as nothing more than rehabilitative action. The most obvious recent example of this is Angela Merkel's declaration in October that 'multiculturalism has failed, failed utterly in Germany'. Under pressure from the right of the CDU as it sought to siphon off populist fairy dust from Thilo Sarrazin, Merkel's appeal to the undead was particularly cheeky. It is not just the indecent haste with which she moved on from celebrating the youthful multiculturalism of Germany's football team, but also the fact that it is only a decade since Germany reformed its exclusionary nationality laws. An aspirational rhetoric of *multikulti* has long done battle with concerted attempts to define a *Leitkultur* and to specify – both from conservative and liberal positions - *deutsche Werteordnung* for all the dis-integrated 'migrants' to sign up to. But pointing out the obvious empirical lack of a multiculturalism that failed is to miss how it functions euphemistically. As per the convention, complex social problems and political-economic disjunctures can be blamed on 'migrants', and the solution, handily enough in a neoliberal era, located in an increased individual responsibility to become compatible. The range of processes of social dissolution and varieties of anomie that multiculturalism is still held responsible for is scarcely credible. However, as Sneja Gunew put it astutely, 'multiculturalism has been developed as a concept by nations and other aspirants to geopolitical cohesiveness who are trying to represent themselves as transcendently homogenous in spite of their heterogeneity'. As, for a variety of reasons to do with migration and neoliberal globalization, a sense of transcendental homogeneity gets harder to represent, rejecting rather than embracing 'multiculturalism' becomes central to renewed attempts at transcendence.

When surface is depth

While this sense of homogeneity does not easily apply to the UK, several observations translate from this wider context to a discussion of Mirza's essay. The first is that most media frenzy debates on multiculturalism are assembled from fragments of what Nasar Meer, in his response, termed the 'ascendence of MII knowledge' – generalised, anecdotal ideas that suit the blog, tweet, political soundbite and short commentary form. Most recently, Steve Vertovec and Suzanne Wessendorf have examined this as the transnational circulation of multicultural 'crisis idioms' that constructs multiculturalism as a single doctrine that has fostered separateness, stifled debate, refused common values and denied problems, while facilitating reprehensible cultural practices and providing a fecund habitat for terrorists (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2009: 13-19). Thus what commentators here have noted as the passé, dated and unsubstantiated character of Mirza's essay is actually the horizon of its existence. The assembly of clichés, the cyclical claim to be breaking taboos and the subsequent feeling of *déjà vu* is the point of the exercise.

Secondly, this rolling rejection of multiculturalism is not a rejection of 'labelling' or culturalism, but rather a reworking of it. In Merkel's case, it is bound up in the complex articulation of 'Germanness' in a field of intensive conflict over this process. In Mirza's case, not only does she proceed on the assumption that people in the UK actually live their lives in concert with the managerial categories of multiculturalism, she neglects some interesting instances of how multiculturalist thinking has been central to the backlash against multiculturalism. All commentators here agree with her that labelling people according to ethnicity is reductive. Yet why does the essay not deal with the most obvious recent examples of this reductiveness? The horrible irony of the governmental rejection of multiculturalism that took a particular form post-Cantle Report is that it produced the pernicious

labels of 'The Muslim community' and 'The White Working Class'. Multiculturalism, apparently, emboldened the former and neglected the latter, but in rejecting it New Labour simultaneously tightened the parallelism it was so anxious to tackle while ethnicising and patronising the post-industrial population it had presumed it no longer needed electorally. None of this recent politics filters its way into the essay, instead it is populated by brittle stereotypes bridleing that nobody gets their jokes and 'innocent remarks'.

Political correctness gone mad, again

For all the entreaties to dispense with political correctness that occur in this genre of argument, it needs to be remembered that attacking multiculturalism is itself a form of political correctness, a way of talking about race, and saying coded things about minorities in a 'post-racial' era. So when Mirza concludes with an injunction to 'speak openly about these issues' we should recognise openness also as a form of code. Of course, we could choose to take these recycled arguments at face value, reading her as actually wringing her hands about the sorry state of Britain's approach to tackling racism, an approach which, as she rightly points out, may in some ways have contributed to the entrenchment of racism rather than to its alleviation. We could choose to puzzle over her confusion of anti-racism with the politics of multiculturalism and diversity and the facile interchangeability of the terms 'racism' and 'prejudice', or 'race' and 'diversity'. White liberals may nod solemnly when she invokes ethnic labeling to point out that none of the authors 'is white and therefore cannot be easily dismissed as ignorant, naïve, or unwittingly prejudiced.' However to do so would be to ignore how these arguments play a central role in the rewriting of the agenda around race and racism which is at least as old as the antiracist movement itself. Where there are attempts to tackle racism there are those willing to claim either that there is no problem, or that the problem is not what it is claimed to be - that it isn't because 'I is black'.

The argument that institutional intervention into the alleviation of racism through, for example, equalities legislation, the sanctioning of institutional racism or the implementation of diversity initiatives is counterproductive is clearly not novel. It is counterproductive, the argument goes, both because it sees racism everywhere - an extension of the 'political correctness gone mad' argument - and because it is patronising to black people and ethnic minorities who do not need a 'leg up' to get ahead. Once again this is a form of discursive transposition, this time of a position popularised in the United States by public figures of colour such as African American Republican Ward Connerly, founder of the American Civil Rights Institute, set up to militate against affirmative action, or The End of Racism author, Dinesh D'Souza whose latest offering, *The Roots of Obama's Rage* has had Glenn Beck gushing 'yes, thank you, yes, somebody really gets it, and has a better handle on it than I think anybody else out there.' The British context is of course radically different to the US-American one, and the sub-debate in these contributions on the problems of conceptual transposition is an important one. However it is crucial to ask who benefits from depicting racism as a thing of the past, institutional racism as largely fictitious and the redressing of Eurocentric bias as irrelevant and patronising.

Is it those who actually face racism, who Mirza recognises still exist? Or is it those commentators, including public figures of Black and Ethnic Minority backgrounds, who 'courageously' go out on a limb to object to the antiracist 'status quo', aware that occupying this putatively contrarian position pays significant dividends in a political climate in which the racialized's demands for justice and equality are treated as spurious precisely because the notion that racism is a thing of the past has become the orthodoxy? In fact, the current framing of the 'race problem' as a crisis of 'too much diversity' - as Prospect's editor David Goodhart put it in 2004 - is underpinned by the yarn that Britain is straitjacketed by an antiracist morality that not only damages 'race relations' but gives succour to the far right. In other words, those who face racism are not only being held responsible for, as Mirza puts it, creating 'a climate of suspicion and anxiety', but also for ensuring that the BNP has 'gained support because of' multicultural policies. Other contributions have noted the unsubstantiated nature of that argument, and the assumption that racism will be rationally dispelled by policy change. What is also important is the way in which Mirza insists, like all the other recent high profile opponents of multiculturalism, on fully conflating multiculturalism with antiracism.

In so doing, they conflate the struggle of the racialized against the systemic injustices of the state with an institutionalized, managerial, 'multicultural' response, ostensibly to racism. This response has always failed to deal with the legacies of race-thinking, as they supplant it with essentialist explanations of minorities as either culturally weak or excessively cultural. Secondly, they concur with the orthodoxy that views multiculturalism as a minority demand for recognition, obscuring the less convenient truth that treating the racialized as culturally distinct and communally divided has weakened and depoliticised the antiracist movement since the 1980s. The 'official antiracism' that Mirza identifies as requiring radical criticism is not even antiracist in name since the dissolution of the Commission for Racial Equality. It has been supplanted by a diversity agenda that conforms with the 'Bennettonization' of the fight for greater equality. We agree with Mirza's implicit questioning of a 'diversity industry' and of New Labour's themed multiculturalism as part of the Britain TM moment. However Sara Ahmed has previously nailed the strange assumption that the presence of mediated, cost-free multicultural aspirations is some kind of true reflection of lived realities, particularly when it leads to the argument 'how can you say you experience racism when we are committed to diversity?' Continuing to refer to largely ineffectual measures such as diversity training as 'antiracist' plays into the hands of a postracial agenda not only by assuming that racism has largely been overcome. It also implicitly contends that it is the racialized that are responsible for any bad feeling against them that may persist, and that residual 'prejudice' proves that racism is an individual rather than a societal problem.

Given this latest rehearsal of familiar themes, it is the responsibility of those of us who remain committed to overturning racism to ask who is served when racism is denied. It is not the exploited migrant workers or the asylum seekers living off vouchers, it is not the children detained for months on end in detention centres such as Yarl's Wood, it is not the wife of Jimmy Mubenga who died aboard BA flight 77 while being forcibly deported to Angola on October 15, it is not Hicham Yezza, jailed on unfounded terrorist charges and it is not the third generation black and Asian Britons who continue to face 'heavy handed' policing, deaths in custody and incarceration at a rate that far exceeds their numbers among the population. As long as there are stories such as these and the countless others that remain unheard and untold, the arguments that editorially frame a publication such as Rethinking Race are corrosive precisely because of their banality.

Alana Lentin is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Sussex University. Gavan Titley is Lecturer in Media Studies at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. Their co-authored book *The Crises of Multiculturalism? Racism in a Neoliberal Era* is forthcoming from Zed Books in 2011.

Tony Sewell's views on education are dangerous and lack evidence

David Gillborn and Chris Vieler-Porter

Tony Sewell's view that Black (African Caribbean) attainment is nothing to do with institutional racism, and simply a reflection of 'poor parenting, peer-group pressure and an inability to be responsible for their own behaviour' [1], lacks any significant evidential basis and poses a profound threat to efforts to move toward social justice in education and in society more broadly. This is because the press and other commentators delight in repeating his views as if they represented a serious analysis of the processes that produce race inequality in education. In the latest available national data (with the exception of Traveller and Gypsy/Roma students) Black Caribbean students were the least likely to achieve five or more higher grade GCSE passes including English and mathematics [2]: if Sewell and his advocates succeed in presenting Black inequality of achievement as merely a reflection of student/parent/community deficit, then they will limit the possibilities for meaningful reform and serious research, which addresses the numerous ways through which the system itself plays an active role in creating and sustaining race inequality (e.g. through leadership negligence, negative teacher attitudes and actions; the curriculum; testing regimes; and inappropriately applied disciplinary sanctions).

Throughout this article we use hyperlinks and endnotes to give the supporting references where evidence can be found. Evidence is central to the issues that are at stake; despite the rhetorical confidence of conservative critics, and their supporters in the media, who assert the failure of multiculturalism and an end to racism, the evidence says otherwise. When it comes to racism in education, especially the systematic racism experienced by African Caribbean children and young people, the facts are clear.

Don't mention the R-word (unless you're denying it)

Our children don't fail due to racism, says black academic

Daily Mail 23 Sept 2010

Black children do badly in class because of lack of attention, not racism, says expert

Black children do not do badly at school because of racism but because they do not pay attention and have little support from parents, a black educational expert claims today

Daily Telegraph 23 Sept 2010

Racism not to blame for poor grades:

Black academic attacks parents

Daily Star 24 Sept 2010

The conservative press gave considerable attention to Tony Sewell's contribution to Prospect magazine's special issue on 'Rethinking race: has multiculturalism had its day?' Entitled 'Master class in Victimhood', Sewell's essay on education was characteristically forthright in its arguments:

'What we now see in schools is children undermined by poor parenting, peer-group pressure and an inability to be responsible for their own behaviour. They are not subjects of institutional racism. They have failed their GCSEs because they did not do the homework, did not pay attention and were disrespectful to their teachers. Instead of challenging our children we have given them the discourse of the victim – a sense that the world is against them and they cannot succeed.'(p.33)

In this way systemic under-achievement by Black students (especially Black boys) is confidently pronounced to be no-one's fault but the Black students themselves, their parents and their community. Predictably this analysis met with delight in the conservative press, who rejoiced in the fact that a Black academic had poured such scorn on the idea that the education system itself might be racist. Sewell was lauded as a hero: 'a brave man' with 'moral courage' who dares to say 'the obvious'.

The rules of racial standing

Sewell's essay contains no new research; with the exception of a personal story (about a visit to an 'inner-city primary school' to give an 'inspirational' lesson) his piece simply restates views he has been asserting repeatedly over several years. In 2000 he claimed that 'those who rush to cry "institutional racism"' help to perpetuate the 'mental slavery' of 'the peer group pressures of the street' [3]; in 2004 he told Radio 4 that he didn't 'trust' research on racism in schools because 'the research has been, for me, dishonest' [4]; and in 2008 he described as 'irresponsible' statistical research that revealed Black students to be placed in lower status examination groups than whites with similar levels of attainment (where top grades are simply not available) - his verdict was that the research 'undermines hard-working teachers' and 'makes our students articulate victims'.

Evidence, or the lack of it, is entirely irrelevant to Sewell's popularity with the press: the key is the fact that his analysis tells White people that race inequality is not their fault; don't worry, there's no need to change the education system, no need to reconsider how kids are selected for the top exam groups (or excluded from school entirely through expulsion – official and unofficial). Writing in the 1990s the eminent African-American legal scholar Derrick Bell described the processes perfectly. Bell described a series of unwritten 'rules' that shape how people's views on racism tend to be judged on the basis of their own racial identity and whether they are attacking or denying racism. Hence a Black person describing racism is accused of 'special pleading', their minoritized status is assumed to destroy any possibility of impartiality and their views are disregarded. In contrast, 'the black person who publicly disparages or criticizes other blacks' is instantly 'granted "enhanced standing" ...' [5] Bell notes that the sincerity of the authors is irrelevant:

'Some, perhaps all, actually believe what they're saying. What I criticize is their refusal to come to grips with the effect of their statements.'[6]

Indeed, Bell takes pride in the fact that such writers are the exception and not the rule:

'I think it's cause for wonder and more than a little credit to our integrity that more black scholars don't maim one another in a wild scramble to gain for ourselves the acclaim, adulation, and accompanying profit almost guaranteed to those of us willing to condemn our own.' [7]

Evidence

Tony Sewell's essay shows a serious disregard for research evidence. Referring to research on low teacher expectations, he states simply: 'My challenge to these claims is that times have changed'. For the record, let us summarize some of the key findings that have been established about race and educational inequality in the English education system – through research that draws on a range of methods, conducted by various researchers (of different ethnic backgrounds), working in different universities, and funded by different bodies.

Sewell is out of date when he says that 'They [African-Caribbean boys] start school at roughly the same level as other pupils, but during the course of their education fall further and further behind their peers...' (p.33) This was true in 2000 when Gillborn and Mirza wrote a review of evidence for Ofsted which challenged conventional wisdom by showing that Black students often entered school as relatively high achievers.[8] But the intervening decade has seen a complete overhaul of assessment in the early years. In fact, early years teachers now grade students' according to their subjective assessment of each child's capabilities and White students consistently emerge as the highest performers.[9] This was a predictable shift because decades of research, on both sides of the Atlantic, have shown that White teachers under-estimate the academic ability of Black students while simultaneously over-estimating an element of challenge and threat.[10] In essence, a new assessment system was introduced (with preparations that the Education Department itself described as 'patchy') and, overnight, Black students went from being relatively high achievers to becoming under-achievers. This is a classic prima facie case of institutional racism – a reform that (whatever its intent) served to systematically disadvantage Black students -- and yet no formal investigation has ever been held. It is difficult to believe that similar disinterest would have met the introduction of the new system if it had relegated White middle class students in a similar fashion.

Black pupils and their parents do not accept failure or embrace a victim mentality. The history of Black Britain is one of struggle, resilience and hard won victories. In fact, research suggests that Black parents and their children tend to have educational aspirations that are higher than those of White students of the same gender and ethnic background and that these aspirations translate into effort:

Black Caribbean, Black African and Bangladeshi boys from high SES [socio-economic status] homes (...) completed the same or greater amounts of homework as their White British peers and had academic self concept and high educational aspirations but their progress did not reflect this.' [11]

The uncomfortable truth for the majority of Sewell's readers is that the lower average attainments of Black students (boys and girls) are significantly shaped by the actions of White people: not the rabid obviously hate-filled White racist of BNP and EDL fame, but well intentioned professionals (including headteachers, teachers, lecturers and education officers in local authorities) who (regardless of their professed views) tend to view Black students as more likely to cause trouble than excel academically. These stereotypes – for that's what they are – are extremely powerful and are

given institutional force every time teachers grade, discipline and select students for different treatment.

Talk of teacher expectations can lack clarity – as if having high expectations might magically influence attainment - but the reality in schools is that teachers are responsible for continually grading and selecting students, and that their decisions have very real and direct consequences. In primary school students are sometimes placed on hierarchically ranked tables, where the ‘top’ table covers more of the curriculum than the lower tables; the same pattern is reinforced in secondary schools through ‘setting by ability’ which physically separates children into different teaching groups; and in formal tests (including official SATs assessments and GCSEs) students are frequently entered for ‘tiered’ papers where those unlucky enough to be entered for the lower (‘Foundation’) tier are simply denied the possibility of the highest grades (which are restricted to the top tier). These selection decisions are made by teachers alone and research consistently shows that Black students are over-represented in the lowest ranked groups, where they cover less of the curriculum, have less experienced teachers and, predictably, make less academic progress.[12]

The issue of potentially racist selection in contemporary English schooling extends beyond the classroom level and includes selection for the leadership of learning across the whole education sector. The annual labour market trend reports on senior staff appointments for 2002 through to 2009 show that the number of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) men and women appointed to headships is small: generally fluctuating between 1% and 2% of appointments, with the exception of 2009 when just under 3% of appointments were of BME candidates.[13] The rise in 2009 was welcome but, using a three-year rolling average to reduce year-on-year variation, the data suggests that there is a downward trend overall. The conclusion to the 2009 report states ‘we would expect the NCSL [now the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services] to be able to state categorically that candidates from minority groups holding the NPQH [National Professional Qualification for Headship] were able to achieve headships at the same rate as those from the majority group. Anything less than this would represent prima facie evidence of discrimination.’ [14]

Current policy aimed at ‘narrowing the gap’ remains limited in scope. When policy-makers and practitioners (especially those in senior leadership positions) view the attainment gap, they tend to view it as an issue for Black and minority ethnic people not as an issue that involves or implicates them. In a letter to the next President of the United States of America written in 2008, Gloria Ladson-Billings articulated the point clearly:

‘However, I want to suggest that you, as a new president with presumably a new vision, begin rethinking or reconceptualizing this notion of the achievement gap. Instead of an achievement gap, I believe we have an education debt. The debt language totally changes the relationship between students and their schooling. For instance, when we think of what we are combating as an achievement gap, we implicitly place the onus for closing that gap on the students, their families, and their individual teachers and schools. But the notion of education debt requires us to think about how all of us, as members of a democratic society, are implicated in creating these achievement disparities.’[15]

Giving comfort to white racists: the privatization of race inequality

In an article celebrating Tony Sewell's essay, the Daily Telegraph columnist Ed West states:

'There will also be a suspicion, even among black people who agree with him, that his article will bring comfort to white racists, which it will. But he's still right.'

West argues that 'it is not institutional racism that keeps many black boys down, but institutional anti-racism (...) I've written on many occasions that I believe the race relations industry actually promotes racial disharmony...'

Sewell's essay, and the other contributions to Prospect's special issue on race, is vitally important; despite being factually incorrect and based on a series of un-evidenced assertions, it provides all the evidence needed by a right-wing coalition of politicians, commentators and policy gurus who are keen to pronounce the death of racism and to shift the blame for inequality away from the public realm and directly onto the people who experience the injustice. It has been argued that in the US discussion of race is increasingly taboo – the country's first Black President cannot speak directly on race issues for fear of being ridiculed as anti-White and legal challenges have been launched against the gathering of race-based data (vital to exposing race injustices). In this context race inequality is being 'privatized', removed entirely from the realm of legitimate public debate [16]. Prospect's intervention is part of this same process: it uses conservative Black voices to ridicule and denigrate anti-oppressive work while demonizing minority communities in a way that panders to the racist self-interest of White readers and provides fuel for a media machine that is overwhelmingly on the side of White power holders.

Evidence/Sources

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[2] Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) Key Stage 4 Attainment by Pupil Characteristics, in England 2008/09, SFR 34/2009, London: DCSF, table 2.

[3] Tony Sewell (2000) Street Style Speaks to All, The Voice, 29 August, p. 14.

[4] BBC Radio 4 (2004) Taking a Stand. Fergal Keane interviews Tony Sewell. Incidentally, we have never heard Tony Sewell produce any evidence to back this claim of dishonesty.

[5] Derrick Bell (1992) Faces at the Bottom of the Well: the permanence of racism, New York: Basic Books, p. 114.

[6] Bell (1992) p. 117.

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[8] David Gillborn and Heidi Safia Mirza (2000) Educational Inequality: Mapping Race, Class and Gender - A Synthesis of Research Evidence. Report #HMI 232. London: Office for Standards in Education.

[9] See David Gillborn (2010) Reform, racism and the centrality of whiteness: assessment, ability and the 'new eugenics', Irish Educational Studies, 29(3): 231-252.

[10] For a review of the evidence see David Gillborn (2008) *Racism and Education: Coincidence or Conspiracy?* London: Routledge.

[11] Steve Strand (2008) *Minority Ethnic Pupils in the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England: Extension Report on Performance in Public Examinations at Age 16: Research Report DCSF-RR029.* London: DCSF. (p. 45).

[12] For a summary of the evidence see Gillborn (2008). Also see M. Blair (2001) *Why Pick on Me? School Exclusion and Black Youth*, Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham; P. Connolly (1998) *Racism, Gender Identities and Young Children: Social relations in a Multi-Ethnic, Inner-City Primary School.* London: Routledge; D. Gillborn & D. Youdell (2000) *Rationing Education: Policy, Practice, Reform and Equity.* Buckingham: Open University Press; J. Oakes, R. Joseph & K. Muir (2004) *Access and Achievement in Mathematics and Science: Inequalities that Endure and Change*, in J.A. Banks & C.A.M. Banks (eds) *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education.* Second Edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp. 69-90; N. Rollock (2007) *Failure by Any Other Name? Educational Policy and the Continuing Struggle for Black Academic Success.* London: Runnymede Trust; L. Sukhnandan & B. Lee (1998) *Streaming, Setting and Grouping by Ability.* Slough: NFER; L. Tikly, J. Haynes, C. Caballero, J. Hill & D. Gillborn (2006) *Evaluation of Aiming High: African Caribbean Achievement Project.* Research Report RR801. London: DfES; S. Tomlinson (2008) *Race and Education: Policy and Politics in Britain.* Maidenhead: Open University Press; C. Wright (1992) *Race Relations in the Primary School.* London: David Fulton Publishers; C. Wright, D. Weekes & A. McGlaughlin (2000) *'Race', Class and Gender in Exclusion from School,* London: Falmer Press.

[13] P.J. Howson (2008) *14th Annual Report: The State of the Labour Market for Senior Staff in Schools in England and Wales,* London: Education Data Surveys at TSL Education Ltd; P.J. Howson (2009) *15th Annual Report: The State of the Labour Market for Senior Staff in Schools in England and Wales,* London: Education Data Surveys at TSL Education Ltd.

[14] Howson (2009) pp. 131-2.

[15] Gloria Ladson-Billings (2008) *A Letter to our next President,* *Journal of Teacher Education*, 59(3), 5-239 (p. 237).

[16] See David Theo Goldberg (2009) *The Threat of Race,* Oxford: Blackwell, p. 337.

David Gillborn is Professor of Critical Race Studies in Education at the Institute of Education, University of London. He is co-editor with Edward Taylor and Gloria Ladson-Billings of Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education (Routledge, 2009). Chris Vieler-Porter is an independent school improvement consultant. He has held adviser posts in a number of authorities including Assistant Director (Education).

A Dose of Stanley Fish

Lucinda Platt

When reading these pieces, I was struck like many of the others who have responded with some sense of perplexity. In a rather perverse invocation of the centrality of 'race', Mirza asks us not to treat the three central authors as "ignorant, naive, or unwittingly prejudiced" on the strength of their minority ethnicity. However, the pieces would not have invited such a response -- even had they been written by white people. Rather than introducing newly contentious arguments, much of what was said was familiar from long-standing debates on the quality of anti-racist practices, on the balance between universality and specificity, on the relative weight to be accorded class and race, on how to calculate the precise impact of racism at all the various points in an individual's life -- and cumulatively and how it differs according to background. This is not to say that versions of these debates are not worth pursuing as they are unlikely to be ever fully resolved. But in themselves the challenge to be rethinking race seemed an overstated moniker to provide them with. However, I was surprised at the way their contributions, contentious or not had been wrapped up as part of a major onslaught on 'the failings of multiculturalist policies today', as if there were some coherent logic or position -- or even agreement -- behind them. But, instead, they are the individual interpretations of particular issues or claims in their areas of expertise that trouble them.

They came from such different positions and included such different explicit or implicit targets, that they could be presented as having no unified target. They had different complaints about factors relating to the specific areas in which they worked. For Sewell, the target is 'black victimhood' that is perpetuated by school leaders. Instead he describes a special programme for black boys which he set up and which achieved positive results. Yet is not such a programme and example of a targeted initiative for a specific group that are identified as losing out, not doing so well as others? Clearly some programmes are more effective in achieving their ends than others, and I would agree with the view that school children should be 'allowed' to be inspired by anyone. But that article appeared to present an argument against group specific programmes, in this instance, more about getting them 'right'. This seemed a view that would have no currency with Dwyer, who bewails specific programmes in the arts for minority ethnic group members, and the effective 'dumbing down' of some of those programmes. She talks of black artists being asked to "demonstrate our ethnicity", in a way that would not be asked of White artists. This is a complaint of many professionals, outside the arts as well as in, however, but to attribute this to 'multicultural policies' is perhaps oversimplifying how such performances are required to be acted out again and again on a daily basis. She also highlights how opportunities matter, in fact are critical in her own fields. And this is also echoed in Sewell's account, and is a point I return to.

In providing a response therefore I pick up on only a couple of issues, ones which are most evident in the top and tail pieces by Mirza but which explicitly or implicitly feature across the set of articles. The first is the attitude to evidence, and the second is the implicitly gendered nature of the accounts.

Singh clearly supports evidence, even going so far as to carry out a systematic review of the evidence to ascertain if there is racism within mental health services. But why then use selective anecdotes about mismanagement of care to imply that it is attempts to be culturally sensitive that are the issue? And why parody the requirement to reduce disproportionate admissions? I do not think that many would deny that forcible detention is preferably avoided or averted if at all possible, as also forcible medication, which is experienced as traumatic and dehumanising (or so a client of mine told

me). To achieve this requires thinking about the reasons why the disproportionate admissions occur, as I'm sure Singh knows very well.

Sewell does not like flimsy evidence. Knowing Burgess's piece, I'm not clear what is flimsy about it. It does not claim to show more than it does, but it does show, based on a comprehensive pupil data base, that there is a tendency to mark students of some ethnicities above their achievements and others below. However, he does like solid outcomes: the achievement of good grades among those whom it might be expected would not do well.

Like Singh I like evidence and like Sewell I think positive outcomes matter. But I don't think I have anything in common with the approach to evidence demonstrated by Mirza, where 'evidence' is flexible, claims can be made and not supported and there is very little recourse to accurate data on the position. Indeed in the concluding piece, evidence apparently becomes irrelevant: the truth behind anecdotes, such as claims of the banning of the St George flag, is seen as unimportant compared to the circulation of the anecdotes themselves. A dose of Stanley Fish would really not go amiss here, especially since many of her own claims also do not stand up to scrutiny.

One of the cornerstones of the argument appears to be that diversity in outcomes is a reason to forget about racism. Firstly, racism is apparently conceived of as monolithic operating on all minority groups and all members of those groups in the same way, and if it doesn't then it isn't racism. Secondly, because some people from some groups are doing well, that is taken to imply that there is not an issue of ethnic minority disadvantage to face. Well that is also simply not the case. Poverty rates for both adults and children are higher across all minority groups than for the population as a whole. Even among Indians and Chinese where (men's) earnings are higher than average, and educational achievement is, as noted, substantial, poverty rates are greater. So even if some are doing well, there are plenty not doing so well. And those who are more vulnerable economically are also more vulnerable to the impacts of racism.

There is substantial inequality within groups as there is between them. That inequality may mean that there are some from any group who feel they have little in common with less well off members of the group – just as is the case for the White majority --- but it does not make that disadvantage any less real. The UK is a hugely economically unequal society; and there is no reason why those who are well off should feel any connection to the experience of those who are badly off just because they tick the same box on the Census ethnic group question. But it is somewhat invidious to deny that there are those who are badly off. When we see that over half of Pakistani and Bangladeshi children are growing up in poverty and over a third of Black African children, to suggest that race disadvantage has had its day seems a little premature. Of course the factors that lead to these frankly shocking outcomes are multiple and complex. But the evidence clearly shows that they cannot simply be explained away by recourse to class disadvantage or 'cultural preferences'. They certainly provide no room to be complacent on the assumption that everything is simply getting better. And if everything was attributable to class background then we should be even more worried for it would imply the long-term repetition of such inequalities across the generations, especially

given that not just poverty but persistent poverty is much greater for Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black African families.

Moreover, just as relatively good earnings on average for some groups do not necessarily translate into low poverty rates, qualifications are only partly equalising. There is plenty of evidence that once you take qualifications into account Indians face a penalty in pay rather than an advantage. Upward mobility has been achieved quite extensively, but you still have to be better to stay the same. Moreover, for Pakistanis growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, qualifications did not bring the social mobility they did for others. Mirza's statement that "class and socio-economic background are more important" for a whole range of outcomes is simply wrong. My research shows that for social mobility class background matters for some groups but not for others. For some groups opportunities to capitalise on the class advantage that still remains so important in Britain are not available. It is not possible for some groups to be equally unequal as the society as a whole. And, as other authors have pointed out, the fact that some groups do well in school regardless of socioeconomic status, also puts paid to the suggestion that socio-economic background is the only or most important factor associated with success or its absence. This is, of course, particularly true in the case of girls. Yet girls scarcely get a look in in these pages, even though the different outcomes between girls and boys, men and women are also worthy of note in a discussion that puts so much emphasis on diversity. Girls from all groups except Roma/Gypsy children do better in school than boys of the same group. This is now so well recognised that it ceases to invite comment, though it only relatively recently became true for Bangladeshi girls. However, not all girls are doing as well as each other – or even as some boys in terms of school qualifications.

Sewell, in his concern with Black boys parodied the quiet Black girls at the front of the class who were well-behaved but fundamentally untalented (or perhaps just 'girly'): their mask was 'grotesque'. Such representations of quiet but unimaginative girls is a trope that is familiar to sociologists of education (and to a lot of women trying to achieve academically). But Black Caribbean girls, however, are achieving relatively low levels of qualifications, particularly if you use other girls as the comparator, rather than Black boys or poor white boys. This simultaneously highlights the gendered nature of qualifications but also that ethnicity is associated with differential outcomes, and as I mentioned, I think that outcomes matter. If racism is irrelevant – do these girls also suffer from the 'victimhood' that is typified as a specifically male response to schooling? Mirza's framing discussion is implicitly and explicitly about men, consolidating the longstanding, if much critiqued, tendency of discussions of 'race' to be about men and gender to be about white women. Yet minority group women are more likely to be poor than other women and than men of the same ethnic group, they are more likely to be unemployed than majority group women (and this is for all groups), and minority group women face particular difficulties getting adequate returns to higher qualifications. How would the 'debate' look if we had them in mind?

Lucinda Platt is Reader at the Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex

From Common Sense to Good Sense

Karim Murji

In the latest issue of Prospect (December 2010), Professor David Coleman, a demographer at Oxford University, makes a number of population projections based on migration and fertility trends. The main point of his article ('When Britain becomes "majority minority"') is about the changed ethnic composition of British population when the population may reach 77 million by 2051. Coleman notes that foreign born mothers have the highest fertility rates; linking that with standard net migration trends, he projects that white Britons will become a minority by 2066. In another projection, this would occur by the end of the century, when white Britons would make up 50% of the population.

Coleman says that 'the 50% benchmark has no special significance but it would have considerable psychological and political impact'. Unless ethnicity becomes obsolete in the future, he warns that the 'transition to a "majority minority" population, whenever it happens, would represent an enormous change to national identity – cultural, political, economic and religious'. He also expresses concerns about the impact of population increases on the environment, including the water supply and the ability of Britain to contain its carbon emissions.

Whatever the statistical merit of the analysis is, the issue here is about the way demographic changes are cast almost entirely in terms of ethnicity/race and a seeming threat to British national identity. The underlying themes of this approach will probably be familiar to many - they are both long standing and easily 'activated' in recent times. Thus the alarm about 'white decline' was evident in the first early decades of the 20th Century, an imperial decline feared as much for its political and economic consequences as for any demographic ones. The link between white identities and particular conceptions of nationhood is also evident in worries about the 'Hispanicization' of the United States, in which it was suggested that Spanish would replace English as the main language in a few decades. Coleman's implied view that all 'others' who are not white are somehow outside of British national identity (which, by implication, is conceived as coherent and unchanging) will somehow fundamentally alter the character of the nation is not that far removed from the Huntington 'clash of civilisations' thesis and a corresponding view that there is 'a rest' who stand apart from 'the west'.

I have begun with this recent piece in Prospect because of the odd contrast it provides to Munira Mirza's 'Rethinking race' in the October 2010 issue. If in Coleman's view, race and ethnic difference is everything, for Mirza such difference is increasingly irrelevant. For her, racism is not a 'regular feature' of everyday life, race is no longer a primary disadvantage and there are many mixed marriages between people of different racial and ethnic groups. But Mirza's concern is that a decline in racism cannot be accepted for what it is and that a politics of race is utilised to further a victim perspective. There is an 'official' anti-racism in which institutional racism is presented as 'floating freely....beyond the responsibilities of any individual', while legislation and policy requires public authorities to tackle racism, Such 'hard pressed' bodies employ diversity trainers and equality impact assessors to protect against being sued by their own employees, and create a climate in which informal behaviour is policed in ways that prevent people from speaking freely.

In responding to this view, one approach would be to take it at face value and show how it is inaccurate or simply wrong in so many ways and some other contributors to this site have taken that approach. Rather than adding to that, I want to make two other points. One is a simple question:

who speaks for or represents the official anti-racism that Mirza decries? She begins by citing Trevor Phillips' well known denunciation of the term institutional racism. As the head of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, his position must be closer to whatever an official view is than the Guardian journalist cited in opposition to Phillips. Equally, as a cultural advisor to the Mayor of London, Mirza occupies a more official position than most of us who have responded on this website. From that role alone it should be plain that the era of race equality advisors and diversity training is in retreat at the very least, or completely marginalised.

Treating Mirza's view as a coherent analysis, however, is, I suggest, to miss the point. In saying that I don't wish to decry or demur from the critical commentaries on this site – or to underestimate the need to tackle such views. But it might be better thought of as essentially in-coherent. It is the fact that it doesn't make sense that makes it potentially effective because it enables anyone minded to agree to find something in it that they can identify with, without needing to worry about whether it makes sense as a whole.

Its style reminds me of Gramsci's comments about common sense as an ensemble of contradictory ideas, despite which – or perhaps because of - it can 'hang together' in some way. Gramsci suggested that common sense might contain a kernel of 'good sense' and that the critical task is to expand the space for that. Hard as it is to extract any good sense in Munira Mirza's approach, it does perhaps remind us (if we needed reminding) that while the politics of anti-racism is in retreat, there have been changes in the past decade and before that. Those changes are not all positive and it is still not clear that the cultural essentialist forms of anti-racism that Paul Gilroy drew attention to and criticised over two decades ago, as well as the bureaucratic anti-racism that Reena Bhavnani and others spoke of have been recognised as limited, and maybe counter-productive, strategies. So neither 'more of the same' or a retreat to the past is a panacea. But taking from that what works and applying and amending it for new times and new contexts is a kind of good sense that, paradoxically, Prospect magazine heralds.

Karim Murji is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the Open University. Among his most recent publications is the article 'Applied social science? Academic contributions to the Stephen Lawrence inquiry and their consequences', Journal of Social Policy which focuses on social scientists' contributions to the inquiry concerning the meaning of institutional racism and police response to racial violence.

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