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## Paul Gilroy and the cultural politics of decline

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Paul Gilroy has been an influential cultural theorist and scholar, but he has also been important to wider debates concerning decline and identity in contemporary Britain. Gilroy's contention that contemporary Britain suffered from postcolonial melancholia built on some of his earliest published work. Gilroy has been a trenchant critic of the early British cultural-studies tradition, but his simultaneous attention to structure and agency, focus on modes of dominance and resistance, privileging of historicity and counterhistory, and exploration of the politics of representation, suggests connections with that tradition as well. In stretching and reconceiving the cultural Marxist tradition, Gilroy has simultaneously demonstrated its continued legacy for historical theory and practice.

**Keywords:** British decline; British identity; cultural studies; black Atlantic; multiculturalism; racism

### Introduction

Paul Gilroy's *Postcolonial melancholia* (2005) represents a major contribution to understanding and critiquing the political culture of contemporary Britain. Written in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, the book challenges the growing ethnic absolutism and cultural nationalism in contemporary Britain and the West more broadly. Speaking from an explicit position of 'agonistic, planetary humanism' (4), Gilroy argues that 'an obsessive repetition of key themes – invasion, war, contamination, loss of identity – and the resulting mixture' has produced 'an anxious, melancholic mood' – 'part of the cultural infrastructure of the place, an immovable ontological counterpart to the nation-defining ramparts of the white cliffs of Dover' (14).

Gilroy's critique of contemporary Britain is a potent affirmation and defense of multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and transnationalism at a time when they are threatened by essentialist notions of national identity and unbridgeable cultural difference. Yet *Postcolonial melancholia* builds on

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earlier engagements with (what might only partially be called in jest) ‘the Condition of England’ question. The book has resonances of arguments that Gilroy has been making since he was a graduate student at the Centre for Contemporary Studies at the University of Birmingham in the late 1970s, first in *The empire strikes back: Race and racism in 70s Britain* (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982) and subsequently in ‘*There ain’t no black in the Union Jack*’: *The cultural politics of race and nation* (Gilroy 1987), a text that began as his dissertation. Pushing forward the theoretical/political opening found in the Centre’s collectively authored *Policing the crisis* (1978), Gilroy argued that late twentieth-century British racism was founded on discourses of cultural difference, which cast blacks as permanent outsiders. Not only had such thinking become a central feature of new-right ideology, but it had subtly infiltrated left-wing perspectives as well, including the cultural-studies tradition from which Gilroy’s own thinking had emerged (Dworkin 1997). In making this critique, Gilroy aligned himself with black Atlantic intellectual and political traditions, traditions that, in a sense, he did just as much to produce as to explore, most famously in *The black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness* (1993).

Gilroy’s work has been critical to the development of cultural studies, but his interventions also have relevance for historical theory and practice. If in one respect Gilroy situated himself within a diaspora tradition, distancing himself from his British intellectual roots, at another level his thinking represented a continuation and extension of the cultural Marxist and cultural materialist tradition from which his thinking emerged. No less than E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, and notably Stuart Hall, Gilroy analyzed the contemporary moment from a historical perspective. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his analysis of contemporary Britain’s postcolonial melancholia. To overcome this melancholy state, he advocates political soul-searching: a historical analysis of the British empire, the brutalities and atrocities committed in its name, and the racial hierarchies that were among its legacies. He sees this probing as integral to the process of political renewal and transformation. In short, grappling with history is the key to overcoming melancholia’s crippling and paralyzing effects.

Gilroy’s acute analysis of contemporary Britain should not be viewed in isolation. It should be seen as part of a broader literature on British decline. Here, grappling with the loss of empire, post-Second World War migrations, a precarious world role, relative – if not absolute – economic decline, European integration, and devolution and the potential breakup of the United Kingdom have produced a small publishing industry. Answering the questions ‘who are the English?’ and ‘who are the British?’ has become a national passion among journalists, pundits, political writers, ideologues, and cultural commentators. There is something unquestionably dismal about this ‘discourse of decline’: the obsession with decay, the resignation to second-rate status, the endless rounds of self-recrimination and finger

pointing. But such discussions also potentially suggest revitalization and regeneration, new identities and emerging cultural formations. Few writers have been as important to this process of renewal as Paul Gilroy. By placing his arguments in their intellectual, cultural, and political setting, in other words, their historical context, and seeing *Postcolonial melancholia* in relationship to his overall intellectual development, we gain a better appreciation of the nature of Gilroy's achievement.

### Rereading cultural studies

In *The black Atlantic*, Gilroy argues that the development of cultural studies 'from an ethnohistorical perspective requires more than just noting its association with English literature, history, and New Left politics'. He, most importantly, has in mind the need for examining the role of cultural perspectives in providing 'for the images of their racialised others as objects of knowledge, power, and cultural criticism' (Gilroy 1993, 5). In this section I attempt to take Gilroy's suggestion seriously, looking at the formative years in British cultural studies and Gilroy's position within it. I do this by fleshing out Gilroy's development in relationship to debates on the postwar British crisis in which questions regarding identity, decline, race, and national belonging have been deeply intertwined.

Discourses of decline have almost always been a component of British cultural Marxism and cultural studies. At roughly the same time that E.P. Thompson was publishing *The making of the English working class* (1963), the classic text of 'history from below', he was likewise embroiled in a heated dispute with the editor of *New Left Review* (Thompson 1965), Perry Anderson, whose 'Origins of the Present Crisis' (1964) took as its point of departure debates on postwar British decline. Harold Macmillan could woo voters in the 1959 election with the slogan 'you never had it so good'. But by the early sixties alarming signs of economic decay were manifest, as Britain was being rapidly overtaken by Common Market competition, its share of world trade plummeting to 15 percent (it stood at 33 percent in 1900). A spate of books and articles – exemplified by the Penguin series 'What is wrong with Britain?' – proclaimed, probed, and debated remedies for the country's stagnation.

Anderson's essay as well as those written by his colleague Tom Nairn – comprising (what is often referred to as) the Nairn–Anderson thesis – represented a contribution to this rapidly expanding literature. Anderson and Nairn viewed the existing literature on decline as treating the symptoms as if they were the roots of the crisis. In their view the British path to modernity served as a brake on later dynamic growth, including the failure to create a dynamic middle class and the inability of the working-class movement to challenge the hegemony of the dominant bloc. This analysis was extended by Nairn in *The breakup of Britain* (1977). Nairn's dissection

of a troubled political culture was a prophetic analysis of the structural forces that might potentially lead to the dissolution of the UK and a discursive force in that very fragmentation. Echoing the Nairn–Anderson thesis of the 1960s, Nairn located Britain’s crisis and decline in its anachronistic political culture, unable to create a modern state – popular sovereignty, a written constitution, and republican forms of government.

British cultural studies, as it developed at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s, under the directorship of Stuart Hall, developed in an intensifying atmosphere of crisis. No less than Nairn, Hall and his team of researchers in *Policing the crisis* located the roots of the British crisis at the level of the state. The impetus for the book was a divisive criminal case involving a group of black youth who attacked a white working-class man in Handsworth, a multiracial and working-class neighborhood in Birmingham. The fact that these young men committed the crime was not at issue, but their sentences were excessive, and the case helped to precipitate the apparently spontaneous mugging scare that surfaced in the early 1970s. Hall and his colleagues situated the case in a broader ideological context and argued that it was symptomatic of a British crisis rooted in postwar decline. He described Britain as ‘a third-rate post-imperial, not a first-rate new capitalist power’ (Stuart Hall et al. 1978, 233).

These broad historical perspectives underpin the book’s analysis of the mugging scare. Hall and his colleagues argued that it was a consequence of a prolonged and intricate process of ideological preparation in which the state and the media deployed fears of race, crime, and youth to create a ‘moral panic’. They regarded this ideological mobilization in the context of the collapse of the social-democratic consensus that underpinned British politics since the Second World War. They understood the current historical moment in terms of a Gramscian hegemonic crisis and that the emergent right-wing ‘authoritarian populism’ connected with Thatcherism was the most likely victor. Hall and his colleagues suggested that, even though blacks in Britain were labeled as immigrants and hence outside British culture, their historical experience was, in fact, shaped by the British empire. Blacks were thus at the center – rather than the periphery – of British history. They shared with others of the black diaspora a common African connection, yet their experience was informed by a specifically British context as well. Blacks were predominantly of the working class. However, some of their deepest conflicts were with white workers. In an influential argument, Hall argued that the class experience of blacks was mediated by racial categories.

Paul Gilroy’s early work explored the theoretical and political opening created by *Policing the crisis*. Unlike Hall, who was born in Jamaica and came to Britain to study at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar in 1951, Gilroy was born in London. By the time that he came to the Birmingham Centre as a

graduate student, he had already begun to study as an undergraduate the traditions of Caribbean and African-American intellectual and cultural practice that became the inspirations of works such as *The black Atlantic*. Thatcher's electoral victories in 1979 and 1983, the Falklands War, the brief experiment of a progressive Greater London Council, the disarray of the left, and the intensification of racial conflict, boiling over in the riots of 1981, provided the context for Gilroy's work during this period. Nationalism, racism, identity, crisis, and decline are interwoven themes in both the collectively produced *The empire strikes back* and Gilroy's own '*There ain't no black in the Union Jack*'. In his words:

The process of national decline is presented as coinciding with the dilution of once homogeneous and continuous national stock by alien strains. Alien cultures come to embody a threat which, in turn, invites the conclusion that national decline and weakness has been precipitated by the arrival of blacks. The operation of banishing blacks, repatriating them to the places which are congruent with their ethnicity and culture, becomes doubly desirable. It assists in the process of making Britain great again and restores an ethnic symmetry to a world distorted by imperial adventure and migration. (46)

A central dimension of Gilroy's argument was that the articulation of racial and national discourses had become a central feature of British political culture. In contrast to late nineteenth-century British racism, which was based on biological hierarchy, its late twentieth-century equivalent was founded on cultural differences, which cast blacks as permanent outsiders. In Gilroy's words:

black settlers and their British-born children are denied authentic national membership on the basis of their 'race' and, at the same time, prevented from aligning themselves within the 'British race' on the grounds that their national allegiance inevitably lies elsewhere. (46)

For Gilroy, not only had such thinking become a central feature of new-right ideology, but it had also shaped left-wing political ideas as well. When leftists sought to reclaim the signifier 'Britishness' from their conservative opponents in the aftermath of the Falklands War, they left its racial and imperial dimension unexamined.

The possibility of politically significant connections between nationalism and contemporary racism is either unseen or felt to be unworthy of detailed discussion. More importantly, the types of subjectivity which nationalisms bring into being and put to work pass unquestioned. The problem has become how socialists can (re)possess them from the right. (53)

This critique did not apply only to left-wing political efforts to reclaim patriotism. It extended as well to the cultural studies and cultural Marxist tradition of the Birmingham Centre. In an important critique of the

theoretical development of British cultural studies and cultural Marxism, Gilroy suggested that scholars such as Eric Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson, and Raymond Williams were oblivious to the consequences of left-wing patriotism.

Nationhood is not an empty receptacle which can be simply and spontaneously filled with alternative concepts according to the dictates of political pragmatism. The ideological theme of national belonging may be malleable to some extent but its links with the discourses of classes and 'races' and the organizational realities of these groups are not arbitrary. They are confined by historical and political factors which limit the extent to which nationalism becomes socialist at the moment that its litany is repeated by socialists. (55)

Gilroy might have been more sensitive to the historical context in which Thompson's and Hobsbawm's left-wing patriotism surfaced: the 1930s and 1940s Popular Front forged in opposition to European fascism. However, this does not undermine his main point. Such views are not intentionally racist, and in the context of the struggles against fascism were understandable. But they were implicitly founded on notions of ethnic absolutism and essentialist and fixed notions of English/Britishness and thus had racist and exclusionary consequences in the very different political situation of the 1980s. In essentializing national identity, these left-wing writers ignored the importance of local, regional, and transnational dimensions of people's identity, critical to any democratic politics of the left in an increasingly globalized world. In essentializing Britishness, they were oblivious to the fact that Britishness itself was undergoing discursive transformations.

*'There ain't no black in the Union Jack'* was a critique of the dominant political culture and cultural studies. But that critique was part of an antiracist politics that, among other things, helped to establish discursive spaces for blacks in Britain as 'black Britons'. As Gilroy stated it: 'Blacks born, nurtured and schooled in this country are, in significant measure, British even as their presence redefines the meaning of the term' (1987, 155). Their relationship to the dominant culture was one of 'cultural syncretism', defined by diasporic and transnational traditions and experiences. In Gilroy's words:

Analysis of the political dimensions to the expressive culture of black communities in Britain must reckon with their position within international networks. It should begin where fragmented diaspora histories of racial subjectivity combine in unforeseen ways with the edifice of British society and create a complex relationship with has evolved through various stages linked in different ways to the pattern of capitalist development itself. (157)

In effect, Gilroy simultaneously critiqued ideologies of the dominant bloc and brought to light modes of opposition and resistance to them. He might have critiqued cultural Marxism and British cultural studies for their

oblivion to the politics of race and nation, but the form of his argument was very much within these traditions.

### History debates

We can better appreciate Gilroy's critical position in the 1980s, and its subsequent development in the following decade, by considering his intervention in the debates on the role of historical studies in education. They were initiated by the Thatcher government and implemented under John Major. They consisted of a centralized history program in primary and secondary schools, as part of a national curriculum in England and Wales, the most significant overhaul of education in Britain since the 1940s.

The 'History Debate' was part of a broader cultural and political struggle over national identity. In public culture, the renewed enthusiasm for history was discernible in the growth of 'heritage industries', which, in the historian Raphael Samuel's words, 'has contrived to make the idea of "Englishness" aesthetically and visually appealing at the very moment when with the collapse of industry and withdrawal from Empire it appears politically and economically bankrupt' (1990b, 76–7). It was the cultural critic and literary scholar Robert Hewison who most famously argued that, rather than manufacturing goods, Britain was producing heritage, which he attributed to the fact that Britain was 'gripped by the perception that it is in decline'. In his words:

The heritage industry is an attempt to dispel this climate of decline by exploiting the economic potential of our culture, and it finds a ready market because the perception of decline includes all sorts of insecurities and doubts (which are more than simply economic) that makes its products especially attractive and reassuring. Looking at a Laura Ashley catalogue, it is possible that we imagine ourselves living in a museum already. (Hewison 1987, 9–10)

Also important in this context is the work of Patrick Wright, a graduate of the Birmingham Centre, who Gilroy described as the 'most acute observer of the morbidity of heritage' (2005, 100). Wright's *On living in an old country* (1985), among other things, analyzed the various organized efforts at preserving English artifacts, landscapes, and country houses in the name of a pure and authentic nationhood. In terms that recalled Gilroy, Wright argued that the heritage movement was part of a complex cultural formation whereby the class and multicultural conflicts of the present were collapsed into an eternal, static national essence.

Abstracted and redeployed, history seems to be purged of political tension; it becomes a unifying spectacle, the settling of all disputes. Like the guided tour as it proceeds from site to sanctioned site, the national past occurs in a dimension of its own – a dimension in which we appear to remember only in order to forget. (1985, 69–70)



That history should be a subject of public debate was for many at the time surprising. As Juliet Gardiner observed, 'less than a decade ago there was a very real possibility that history could cease to be a mainstream subject in British education at all' (1990, 2). The renewed interest, however, did not arise from a passion for the past alone: it represented an effort to create secure borders for a British identity perceived as being under siege by a multicultural other and under threat from European integration. In Samuel's words:

If there is a single issue which has made history into a front-line subject and propelled it into the arena of public debate, it is the question of what it means, in the present day, to be British. In recent decades, the national question has emerged, or re-emerged, as a storm-centre of British politics, most obviously in relation to New Commonwealth immigration and settlement, and Britain's membership of the EEC. (1990b, 76)

The movement to create a national curriculum, with history as a major focal point, developed from the convergence of several strands of new-right intellectual and political activism: the Hillgate Group, the Social Affairs Unit, and the Centre for Policy Studies, prominent among them. Intellectuals connected to the *Salisbury Review* played a critical role in laying the ideological groundwork. Roger Scruton – the journal's editor, chief spokesperson, and a writer in newspapers and the popular press – sought to rejuvenate a common culture (which he viewed as being) under threat from immigrants and migrants. The right-wing belief that history was central to the renewal of English/British political culture came to be held by the most powerful political actors. Margaret Thatcher recalled that the 'hardest fought battle' in connection to the national curriculum was over history. 'No amount of imaginative sympathy for historical characters or situations', she wrote, 'can be a substitute for the initially tedious but ultimately rewarding business of memorizing what actually happened' (Thatcher 1993, 595). She made clear what she meant by 'what happened', as her biggest objection to the initial draft for the history curriculum was that it did not have enough on Britain.

Following the passage of the Educational Reform Act of 1988, the National History Working Group, chaired by Commander Saunders Watson, began to plan the history curriculum. The Group consisted of history teachers in primary and secondary schools, academics, authors, a director of education, and the secretary of the Institute of Historical Research (Gardiner 1990, 2). Between the time that the committee first met and the publication of its final report in April 1990, a debate raged among academics, teachers, politicians, political writers, and journalists. It was Raphael Samuel who was in the forefront of galvanizing discussion, debate, and action among left-wing historians. At a History Workshop in 1990, a group of historians and educators gathered to

resist the role that history had been assigned in the new national curriculum.

Samuel's numerous essays in the mainstream press (1998) as well as his intervention at the 1990 History Workshop are notable for their spirited defense of a wide-ranging notion of history and an advocacy of 'history from below' or 'people's history', although one that was mediated by a growing appreciation of the role of the Empire in people's lives. Samuel lumped together the 'heritage baiting' of left-wing cultural critics and the attacks by conservative intellectuals on the method of historical empathy taught in the schools, both of which he believed were oblivious to how ordinary people used history in everyday life. He acknowledged that conservative intellectuals supportive of the Thatcher/Major government's efforts at reforming the history curriculum had been more passionate about history's centrality than the labor intellectuals and labor governments of the sixties. Yet he not surprisingly found the kind of history that they wanted to resurrect and the high politics on which it was founded as narrow and outmoded. Samuels represented history as being continually in flux, subject to constant argument, open to shifting perspectives, and capable of being interrogated from multiple points of view.

An important dimension of Samuel's argument was that British history needed to be opened up to European and global perspectives, and he recognized that any rethinking of history in the schools must take into account the increasing numbers of people from black and Asian backgrounds in Britain. At the same time, he defended national history per se:

Yet history, whether we like it or not, is a national question and it has always occupied a national space . . . Nor can the history of minorities escape it, since it is in relations of opposition to majorities that minorities are defined. (Samuel 1990a, 127)

Gilroy's intervention at the History Workshop conference, 'Nationalism, History and Ethnic Absolutism' (1990), more than any other (among those subsequently published), challenged the terms of the debate itself, which, he believed, that Samuel, despite his important contribution, had accepted. Gilroy's paper, and ensuing article, articulated views that he already expressed as well as conveying new directions in his thinking. Rejecting the title of the session which his paper was a part of, 'British History: For or Against', Gilroy sought to shift the debate from 'national history' to 'nationalism', and he addressed racism in connection to nationalism and nationalist historiography. In terms recalling his earlier critique in '*There ain't no black in the Union Jack*', he reiterated his view that not only the new right was guilty of forms of English cultural nationalism: new left historians also had envisioned the people from a nationalist perspective. In his view, the conflict over history in the national curriculum had been constructed such that it masked the implicit consensus shared by historians on both sides

of the political divide. Advocating going beyond either affirming or rejecting national history, Gilroy argued for an alternative that, he candidly admitted, was connected to his own complex identity as a black Briton:

I think we need a new line of thought that goes beyond either/or-ism into a different conceptual logic or supplementarity. In its simplest form, this might turn on the alternative couplet both/and. I make no apology for the fact that this shift in my own thinking arises from a desire to be recognized as being both black and English in addition to everything else that I am. (1990, 117)

Gilroy's passionate plea to overturn the binary oppositions underpinning ethnic absolutism gains added poignancy when it is recalled that his remarks at the History Workshop conference were made (as he himself mentioned) in the midst of the international crisis provoked by Salman Rushdie's *Satanic verses*. The passionate responses, intensified by the fatwa issued by Ayatollah Khomeini, Supreme Leader of Iran, calling for the murder of the author and his publisher, produced and reinforced cultural binaries, western free speech pitted against Islamic fundamentalism. Edward Said (1990) described the crisis as symptomatic of the threat that hybridity posed to conventional notions of national and religious identity in the contemporary world. In a spirit that recalls Gilroy's theoretical/political efforts, Said wrote: 'There is no pure, unsullied, unmixed essence to which some of us can return, whether that essence is pure Islam, pure Christianity, pure Judaism or Easternism, Americanism, Westernism' (1990, 166).

Significantly, Gilroy did not just call for a 'different conceptual logic': he began to sketch it out. On the one hand, it meant rewriting British history from a transnational perspective so that 'it ceases to be recognizably British at all' (1990, 119). On the other hand, he admitted that

somewhere between the local and the global there must be a place for that nation state and indeed for the myths and dreams of national or ethnic collectivity that condition our political predicament even as the relationship between the local and the global is itself transformed. (117)

Such attitudes, contradictory as they may in fact be, tell us something about Gilroy's complex relationship to Englishness/Britishness, his simultaneous connection to Britain and the cultures of the African diaspora. Gilroy's means of achieving both was by exploring the black Atlantic World.

It contains a fluid and dynamic cultural system that escapes the grasp of nation states and national conceptions of political and economic development. The writers and political thinkers generated within the black Atlantic tradition have produced a rich body of work in which reflection on nationality, hybridity, independence, syncretism and self-determination have been acknowledged as central political and philosophical questions for something like two hundred years. (119)

For the fields of cultural studies and history, Gilroy's exploration of this intellectual, cultural, and political terrain, proved momentous.

### **Postcolonial melancholia**

Gilroy's *Postcolonial melancholia* – his most sustained meditation on contemporary Britain since the 1980s – was produced in, what in many respects, was a transformed historical context. It was written in the aftermath of the events of 11 September, the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, and rising anxieties in Europe and the United States over Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. If a notable focal point of the book is contemporary Britain, it is Britain in a global context. At certain points what is said about Britain could equally pertain to either North America or western Europe, and, indeed, the end of the book fuses Gilroy's analysis of Britain and Europe. In *Postcolonial melancholia*, Gilroy moves effortlessly between being a black European and a critic of American imperialism and popular culture, achieving a multidimensional, multilayered, and cosmopolitan analysis. It is appropriate for a world where national boundaries are increasingly blurred and national barriers to escape this trend are erected in increasingly modular fashion.

Britain's unique handling of global challenges forms an important segment of Gilroy's book. The British experience is inflected by the continued salience of discourses of decline and a preoccupation with defining Englishness/Britishness in response to the intensifying assaults of the 'Celtic fringe', European integration, asylum seekers, immigration, and British Muslims. Few instances capture the issues at stake better than the publication of, and response to, *The future of multi-ethnic Britain* (Commission of the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000) or the Parekh report, which significantly is what Gilroy begins the Preface to *Postcolonial melancholia* with, describing the reaction to the report as 'a depressing and deeply symptomatic counteraction' (2005, xi). It was commissioned by the Runnymede Trust; produced by a committee of 23 prominent academics, journalists, writers, and professionals; and chaired by Bhikhu Parekh, a political philosopher who had been awarded a life peerage. The Home Secretary, Jack Straw, publicly blessed the commission. Despite a wide-ranging analysis and recommendations on numerous subjects, the media and the political right (sometimes the same thing) focused on the report's few pages analyzing the meaning of British identity, claiming that it equated Britishness with racism. In fact, what the report argued was that British identity had been historically racialized and that for black and Asian Britons it was connected to collective memories of imperial domination. It called for widening the scope of – rather than rejecting – Britishness, and it advocated, among other things, making British history germane for a multicultural society. Defending the report

in the *Guardian* on 15 October 2000, Stuart Hall, a committee member, wrote:

We did say that, historically, the idea of Britishness carried ‘largely unspoken racial connotations’ – meaning that, in common understandings, the nation is usually imagined as white . . . We nowhere suggested that this was destined to remain so until the end of time.

Among the many condemnations, Jack Straw’s was perhaps the most significant. Acknowledging the merit of many of the report’s recommendations, in the *Guardian* of 12 October, Straw distanced himself from its observations on British identity. ‘Unlike the Runnymede Trust, I firmly believe there is a future for Britain and a future for Britishness’. For Straw, the report’s sentiments were symptomatic of the left’s lack of patriotic feeling.

Given the tendency of some of the left to wash their hands of the whole notion of nationhood, it is perhaps not surprising that some people’s perception of Englishness and Britishness became a narrow, exclusionary, conservative one. That’s a view of Britishness that I don’t recognize.

Straw’s response can be seen as part of New Labour’s ongoing efforts at placating middle England. However, his comments should also be seen in relationship to anxieties over the consequences of devolution, a resurgence of an ethnically based English nationalism, and the resistance to the ‘British way of life’ among a contingent of British Muslims.

One of the most important conceptual leaps forward in Gilroy’s analysis of contemporary Britain is his argument that the British malaise is rooted in postimperial or postcolonial melancholia. He derives his idea of ‘melancholia’ from the German psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, who grappled with Germans’ evasion of their collective responsibility for the Third Reich. Germans, they argued, avoided the reality of a loss of moral legitimacy through a melancholic response that made it impossible for a genuine reconstruction. Blaming their leaders for the catastrophe, they avoided delving into the wider historical process that was the precondition for moving on in a constructive fashion. According to Gilroy, the Mitscherlichs argued that melancholic reactions are prompted by ‘the loss of fantasy of omnipotence’ and narcissism, and they found the same collective evasion of historical responsibility among imperial and colonial powers as they had among the German people picking themselves up from the rubble of the Second World War. Extending their argument to postwar Britain, Gilroy argued that the country’s response to imperial decline was a collective loss of memory that manifested itself as an identity crisis and a neurotic preoccupation with heritage, a reference perhaps to the work of Patrick Wright cited earlier (2005, 208–9).

In popular culture, this melancholia finds expression in the refrain of 'two World Wars and one world cup', a chant favored by English fans at international sporting events. For Gilroy, its odd fusion of class and masculinity, war and sports, betrays a deeper historical amnesia. In his words: 'It declares that nothing significant changed during the course of Britain's downwardly mobile twentieth century. Under a tattered flag, the precious thin red, white, and blue line remains unbreached ...' (2005, 108). As a result, Britain (or England) remains a racially pure nation, immigration is kept at a safe distance, and the pain and violence of empire and decolonization is banished. This analysis is particularly germane to the Second World War – 'the finest hour' – despite the fact that most of the citizenry has no longer any first-hand experience of it. For Gilroy, an important dimension of this preoccupation is that it has been constructed as the last moment of a heroic collective stance prior to a multicultural onslaught that brings fragmentation, disorientation, and chaos in its wake. The romanticizing of World War II goes hand in hand with a nostalgic longing for a society secure in its ethnic and racial homogeneity. Gilroy's analysis of what the war signified in contemporary culture can be extended to the time when it was being fought. As the historian Sonya Rose argues in her important study *Which people's war?: National identity and citizenship in Britain 1939–1945* (2003):

Heroic, populist and utopian constructions of national identity and citizenship dominated public and political culture during the war years. But these articulations did not have singular meanings – they differed by gender, for example, and were inflected by issues of class difference, the significance both of British imperialism and racial difference as well as regionalism to ideas about the nation, and so on. (24–5)

In short, the idealization of the war, so prominent in contemporary representations, was there from the beginning.

Among intellectuals, postcolonial melancholy is in evidence as well. Gilroy cites Jeremy Paxman's *The English: A portrait of a people*, whose inquiry into the nature of the English is premised on the widely held view that 'something has rotted in England' (1998, 17). He also mentions Roger Scruton's *An elegy for England*, which mourns the loss of cultural cohesiveness brought on by postwar immigration, suggesting that anxieties over immigrants was caused by 'the disruption of an old experience of home, and a loss of enchantment which made home a place of safety and consolation' (quoted in Gilroy 2005, 114). We can easily add to this list. The BBC's soon-to-be political editor Andrew Marr, in the TV series and book *The day Britain died* (2000), traveled throughout Britain and found that Britishness meant nothing in Scotland and a mass of confusion south of the border. In his words: 'A certain kind of nation-state, with its rituals and hierarchies, its place in the world and its self-assumptions, has certainly

slipped way and quietly died when no one was watching' (Marr 2000, 209). Mark Leonard, of the New Labour think tank Demos, sought in *Britain*<sup>TM</sup>: *Renewing our identity* (1997) to 'rebrand' the country's image. In the nineteenth century it had had an 'extraordinarily strong external image', he argued. British identity today

has become confused and outdated and, in many parts of the world, decades of relative decline have left the word 'Britain' meaning very little. To anyone living in Britain, it comes as something of a shock to discover just how little 'brand recognition' we have. (15)

In addition to diagnosing the symptoms and roots of postcolonial melancholia, Gilroy makes recommendations for its cure as well. He believes that a precondition for renewal is confronting Britain's imperial past, which, most importantly, includes grappling with the racial hierarchies that were produced, sustained, and spread by the British empire. Extending the ideas of the Mitscherlichs to Britain, he writes:

Before the British people can adjust to the horrors of their own modern history and start to build a new national identity from the debris of their broken narcissism, they will have to learn to appreciate the brutalities of colonial rule enacted in their name and to their benefit, to understand the damage it did to their political culture at home and abroad, and to consider the extent of their country's complex investments in the ethnic absolutism that has sustained it (Gilroy 2005, 99).

What Gilroy says here returns us to his analysis of World War II. He contrasts the fixation with World II heroism and collective will with the cultural amnesia regarding Britain's numerous violent and bloody twentieth-century wars, many of which were connected to colonial rule.

Those forgotten wars have left significant marks on the body politic, but the memory of them appears to have been collapsed into the overarching figuration of Britain at war against the Nazis, under attack, yet stalwart and ultimately triumphant. (89)

More generally, Gilroy is suggesting that only through a historical accounting of the experience of empire – which penetrated the metropolis as much as the periphery – is it possible to move beyond the melancholy afflicting contemporary Britain. In this he aligns himself implicitly with several historians of Britain who have analyzed the impact of empire within the British domestic sphere, arguing that just as Britain reshaped life in colonial sites, the colonies refigured life in Britain (Catherine Hall and Rose 2005).

In tandem with placing empire at the center of the national story, Gilroy advocates rethinking the racial hierarchies that shaped the imperial experience.

In recognition of the need for more assertive and wholeheartedly political moods and tactics, we should become prepared to acknowledge the extreme difficulty as well as the great value of moral and political enterprises that require the systematic denaturing of 'race' as part of confrontations with the alienated society that absorbs the cries of those who suffer by making them sound less than human. (Gilroy 2005, 57)

Returning to arguments first prominently featured in *Against race: Imagining political culture beyond the color line* (2000), Gilroy argues that while racism is, indeed, a historical and material force, and continues to thrive, 'race' and 'racial hierarchies' are constructs, produced by the very racist dynamic that is supposedly its logical consequence. Gilroy's argument is analogous to those poststructuralist-inspired critics of Marxism, for whom class consciousness was not ultimately rooted in an objectively verifiable structure: it was produced by language and discourse, that is, it was ultimately a form of representation (Dworkin 2007). In the same vein, Gilroy advocates a discursive understanding of racial categories. 'I am disinclined', he writes 'to accept the power of racial divisions as anterior to politics or see them as an inescapable, natural force that conditions consciousness and action in ways that merely political considerations simply cannot match' (Gilroy 2005, 33).

The denaturing of race, which involves the historical reconstruction of its production, is then the precondition for its transcendence. Its taken-for-granted status – what Gilroy describes here as 'ethnic and racial absolutism' – is at the heart of preserving divisions along racial lines. In making this assertion, he has a host of right-wing thinkers in mind. But he also is referring to antiracist thinkers and activists, who have been engaged in progressive political struggles, yet have tended to invert, rather than displace, these essentialist categories. Gilroy admits that imagining a world beyond race is 'utopian-sounding', but he passionately defends it. In his words: 'Indeed, I would argue that the ability to imagine political, economic, and social systems in which "race" makes no sense is an essential, though woefully undeveloped part of formulating a credible antiracism as well as an invaluable transitional exercise' (Gilroy 2005, 54).

Gilroy understands that a world beyond race is not on the immediate horizons, but he nonetheless locates points of critique and resistance in contemporary Britain that may be regarded as steps towards freeing it from its melancholic condition. Despite the fact the dominant political culture polices the borders separating native and migrant, white and black, Gilroy argues that 'race' (reformulating Raymond Williams' influential understanding of culture) has become 'ordinary'. As Gilroy states it: 'Crossracial sex is now no more or less meaningful than multiracial football. White kids routinely speak patois and borrow strategically from Punjabi' (2005, 131). In these yet-to-be fully understood changes, where 'spontaneous tolerance and openness' are marks of 'the underworld of Britain's convivial culture',



humor manages the 'stresses' of multicultural society. Here, Gilroy accords a special position to Sacha Baron Cohen. His comic invention Ali G playfully explores racial ambiguities, pointing to tensions in Britain's multicultural society as well as distancing himself from Britain's melancholic mentality.

That unfixed and unstable Ali might also have helped to break laughter's complicity with postcolonial melancholia and to locate new sources of comedy in a remade relationship with our heterogeneous selves, working through the aftereffects of empire in a self-consciously multicultural nation. That laughter . . . helps . . . cultivate the everyday, ordinary virtue involved in managing healthier relationships with otherness that are not deformed by fear, anxiety, and violence. (135)

Gilroy views Ali G's emergence as one among many signs of a 'vibrant, ordinary multicultural', part of, what he describes as, a culture of 'conviviality'. By conviviality, he means not the absence of racism but 'a different setting' for its 'empty, interpersonal rituals, which mean . . . different things in the absence of any strong belief in absolute or integral races'. Moreover, 'the radical openness that brings conviviality alive makes a nonsense of closed, fixed, and reified identity and turns attention toward the always unpredictable mechanisms of identification'). Despite Britain's prolonged process of decline and interminable identity crisis, Gilroy ends his reflections on an upbeat note. Indeed, he argues, that 'the subversive ordinariness' of its convivial culture might just provide a model for others. It

might one day teach the rest of Europe something about what will have to be done in order to live peacefully with difference, to manage the hatreds directed against postcolonial and sanctuary-seeking peoples, and to contain the murderous mischief of organized neo-Nazis, ultranationalists and other racist groups. (150)

Whether Gilroy's hopes will be realized will only be decided in the future. However, his optimism about Britain's future provides a stark contrast to his earlier views in the 1980s. It is almost nationalistic in its enthusiasm.

## **Conclusion**

Paul Gilroy has been an influential cultural theorist and scholar, but he has also been important to wider debates concerning decline and identity in contemporary Britain, debates precipitated by decolonization, unprecedented immigration and multiculturalism, relative economic decline, devolution movements, the Northern Irish troubles, and European Union membership. Gilroy's innovative understanding of contemporary Britain as a political culture suffering from postcolonial melancholia built on some of

his earliest published work. Yet *Postcolonial melancholia* represents a theoretical advance over these earlier explorations. He sees Britain's plight in relationship to shifts in the contemporary world and understands it deploying an array of theoretical insights drawing on European and black Atlantic intellectual sources. Gilroy has been a trenchant critic of the early British cultural-studies tradition, but his simultaneous attention to structure and agency, focus on modes of dominance and resistance, privileging of historicity and counterhistory, and exploration of the politics of representation, suggests connections with that tradition as well. Indeed, Gilroy has played a pivotal role in redefining it, stretching it to its limits and beyond, articulating it with other intellectual and theoretical movements and trends.

In stretching and reconceiving the cultural Marxist tradition, Gilroy has simultaneously demonstrated its continued legacy for historical theory and practice. Gilroy might not be a classical materialist who embraces the base/superstructure model, but he treats language and discourse as having material dimensions, as having no less real effects than the economy or the state. His view that race was produced by racism rather than its opposite is an instance of this. This perspective is politically important. It's not that racism doesn't have real effects; indeed, the opposite is true. Yet race, its presumed origin and foundation, is racism's effect, a discursive construct that, for Gilroy, needs to be denatured, deconstructed, contested, and ultimately transcended. Gilroy unflinchingly analyzes and dismantles the logic of dominant cultural apparatuses responsible for policing the boundaries that maintain racial stereotypes and other forms of ethnic absolutisms. Yet that analysis likewise points to the pressure points, modes of dissonance, and subaltern alternatives that challenge the ability of the dominant discourses to shape and define the cultural terrain. Gilroy reveals new meanings, values, and practices that are emergent and oppositional. They might not result in the transformation of the mode of production, but they represent shifts in the mode of cultural politics. Gilroy's vision is reminiscent of the pioneers of cultural studies, but it also recalls Antonio Gramsci, the patron saint of British cultural Marxism, who selected for the masthead of the newspaper he edited, *L'ordine nuovo*, the motto 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'.

In *Postcolonial melancholia*, Gilroy accords an important position in the history of European reflections on modernity to Baron de Montesquieu's *Persian letters*. Written from the perspective of two Persian travelers, the book, in Gilroy's view, provides a rare critical perspective on the metropolitan life of France's *ancien regime*. In Gilroy's words:

The social and moral conventions of the day were subjected to the anthropological gaze of a stranger, which aimed to reintroduce France to itself and to suggest that critical knowledge of one's own culture and society can only arise from a carefully cultivated degree of estrangement. (2005, 70)

What Gilroy says about Montesquieu's work could also be said about *Postcolonial melancholia*. It represents a counterhistory, written from 'a carefully cultivated degree of estrangement'. Gilroy offers a moral vision in which the key to unleashing the forces of liberation in British culture is by means of historical analysis. Ultimately grappling with the debilitating effects of the British empire and the racial ideologies that underpin it is the precondition for transformation in the present. Yet most importantly the mode of historical analysis that Gilroy advocates problematizes the understanding of the national, often the assumed ground of historiographical traditions. As he first articulated in the History Debates, Gilroy rethinks British history from a transnational perspective, the British nation as a repository of collective memory, and Britain's borders as porous and permeable, subject to flows and counterflows, caught in a web of global connections. As Montesquieu does for France, Gilroy 'reintroduces' Britain to itself. In doing so, he carves out a theoretical and political space that is important not only for cultural studies but for history as well.

### Notes on contributor

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