Race, terror and civil society

A. SIVANANDAN

Abstract: The London bombings of 7 July brought home in the dead-liest way one facet of globalisation. New anti-terrorist legislation has been brought forward; multiculturalism has come under attack; anti-Muslim racism has increased at every level of British society. Political and public debate are threaded through with the politics of fear. This wide-ranging analysis provides a framework for understanding the dynamic interconnections between the new racism thrown up by the processes of globalisation and modern empire, the increasing threat to civil liberties and the alienation felt by many young Muslims.

Keywords: Blair, Iraq war, multiculturalism, Muslim, Terrorism Act, xeno-racism

White racial superiority is back on the agenda – in the guise, this time, not of a super-race but of a super-nation, a super-people, a chosen people on a mission to liberate the world. The Iraqi people have to be saved from themselves – by force, necessarily, because they know no better. And who better to do it than the US of A, ‘the land of the free and the home of the brave’? Its stated mission? Regime change, pre-emptive strike, full-spectrum dominance – the Bush doctrine,
written in tablets of stone and conveyed to the nation through the metaphysics of fear and the politics of deceit, wrapped up in the vision of a Manichaean world polarised between good and evil: Us (of A) and Them (the sub-homines), based now on the myth that ‘our way of life, our freedom, our democracy’ is the sine qua non of all civilisation. ‘Post-modern imperialism’ is how Robert Cooper, adviser to the EU and one-time adviser to Blair, describes it. Thus, the real war, not the phoney war, is not between civilisations, as Huntington would have it, but against the enforced hegemony of western civilisation. But Bush and Blair cleave to these notions despite all the evidence to the contrary that the war has increased divisions in the country, led to insurgency on all sides, attracted terrorists in Iraq and furnished the basis of terrorism at home. And they still insist that it is their values, their prosperity, their civilisation, that the lesser beings want to destroy out of sheer envy. It is that notion of a superior civilisation that marks out the racism of the twenty-first century and ‘embeds’ it in America’s imperial project.

But there are other racisms, apart from this ‘civilisational racism’, that globalisation has thrown up through its displacement of peoples. The racism meted out to asylum seekers and migrants, even when they are white, for instance – which is passed off as xenophobia, the (natural) fear of strangers. But the other side of the ‘fear or hatred of strangers’ is the preservation and defence of ‘our people’, ‘our culture’, our race – nativism. If it is xenophobia, it is, in the way it denigrates and reifies people before segregating and/or deporting them, a xenophobia that bears all the marks of the old racism, except that it is not colour coded. It is racism in substance, though xeno in form. It is xeno-racism, a racism of global capital.

Then, there is the racism directed at Muslims on the basis of religion, signified this time not just by race or immigration status (refugee, asylum-seeker, and so on), but by dress and appearance as well – combining the characteristics of both asylum seeker and terrorist, reflecting the combined ‘war’ on asylum and on terror.

The war on asylum in fact pre-dates the events of September 11. But after the London bombings of July 7, the two trajectories – the war on asylum and the war on terror – have converged to produce a racism which cannot tell a settler from an immigrant, an immigrant from an asylum seeker, an asylum seeker from a Muslim, a Muslim from a terrorist. We are, all of us Blacks and Asians, at first sight, terrorists or illegals. We wear our passports on our faces or, lacking them, we are faceless.

Now anyone whose face is not quite the right shade, who does not walk in exactly the right way, who does not wear the right clothes for the season, can be taken as a potential suicide bomber – as law-abiding Brazilian electrician Jean Charles de Menezes learnt to his cost. And, if
you are recognisably Muslim (or just believed to be Muslim), you will
be subjected to official stops and searches by the police and to unofficial
racial attacks and harassment in the community. The Muslim commu-
nity is being driven into a siege mentality, reinforcing the very segrega-
tion that the government wants to prevent. To make matters worse,
Blair is now proposing to set up a commission on integration to see
whether multiculturalism has, as he thinks, been instrumental in breed-
ing terrorists by steeping them in their own culture and so alienating
them from British society. But it is precisely because Blair refuses to
accept that the war in Iraq could have played a part in breeding
home-grown suicide bombers, that multiculturalism has become the
whipping-boy. And the generality of commentators have gone along
with him because they fail to distinguish between the multicultural
society as a fact of Britain’s national make-up, arrived at through the
anti-racist struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, and multiculturalism as a
cure-all for racial injustice, promoted by successive governments. The
first, pluralism, envisages a culturally diverse society; the second,
culturalism, engenders a culturally divisive society. Multiculturalism
as such did not create separatism or ethnic enclaves. Culturalism did.

Culturalism, or ethnicism, as policy, was Thatcher’s and Scarman’s
answer to the racism that in 1981 had ignited the major cities of Britain.
Lord Scarman in his investigations into the Brixton riots denied point
blank the existence of institutional racism, and located the cause of the
riots in ‘racial disadvantage’, the cure for which was pouring money
into ethnic projects and strengthening ethnic cultures. But, as the Insti-
tute of Race Relations pointed out at the time, the fight against racism
cannot be reduced to a fight for culture. Nor does it require the state to
give people their cultures; they already have them, however attenuated
these cultures may be by racism. Nor is culture a commodity to be
sponsored. Conversely, to sponsor culture is to reify it, reduce it to
its rituals. Hence the apt description of government policies on multi-
culturalism as of ‘the steel-band, sari, samosa’ variety. Nor does learn-
ing about other people’s cultures make the racists less racist. Besides,
the racism that needs to be contested is not personal prejudice (which
has no authority behind it) but institutionalised racism, the racism
woven, over centuries of colonialism and slavery, into the structures
of society and into the instruments and institutions of government,
local and central. And that is why Macpherson, in his landmark
report on racism, passed over the shibboleth of cultural compensation
as the antidote to racism and established institutionalised racism instead
as the problem that needed to be tackled. Alas, this proposal had hardly
become policy before it was virtually killed off by the tabloids and the
Right.

The multiculturalism, then, as practised by governments – both
Labour and Conservative – was instrumental in creating ethnic enclaves.
 Whereas the multicultural society that has grown up in large parts of the country came out of the struggles of the black communities against racism – struggles for equal pay and against discrimination on the shop floor, struggles to make the police protect communities from racial attack, struggles for children not to be streamed or bussed out of schools, struggles to include other histories in educational curricula, struggles against the Sus laws that criminalised black youth not for an actual offence, but for being likely to commit one (just like the anti-terror laws today) and many more. And it is this multicultural Britain that needs to be defended against the Labour government’s attempts to ride roughshod over those hard-won anti-racist victories which established the UK as an exemplar to the rest of Europe on integration. Instead, Britain is now showing all the signs of reducing its policies to the lowest common denominators of those in Europe: core values, enforced language classes, citizenship lessons and the like. These will all shift the UK towards the standard European model of monoculturalism.

 But the Blair government, which has itself parodied anti-racism in its own culturalist policies, seems determined to undermine the fundamentals of the diverse society that has been created in this country on the basis of a segregation theory conjured up to explain the alienation of Muslim youth. This, however, is not borne out by the facts. In the first place, the segregation theory would apply, by and large, to their parents’ generation. That arose from racial segregation in public housing and white flight combined with the post-industrial collapse of the factories and foundries they had manned. So when the government held out ethnic compensation, they grabbed it with both hands, creating in the process ethnic enclaves in places like Oldham and Burnley and Bradford. And the result of that segregation was the riots of 2001, not the terrorist attacks of 7/7.

 Second, none of the suicide bombers could be said not to have been integrated into British society. Abdullah Jamal (formerly Jermaine Lindsay) was married to a white, English woman, Mohammad Sidique Khan was a graduate teacher who helped children of all religions with learning difficulties, Shehzad Tanweer was also a graduate and often helped out in his father’s fish-and-chip shop and Hasib Hussain was sent to Pakistan because he had fallen into the English culture of drinking and swearing.

 You can’t get more integrated than that, not within a couple of generations. And yet, they were prepared to take their lives and the lives of their fellow citizens in the name of Islam. One reason, therefore, must be as Mohammad Sidique Khan stated it: the invasion and destruction of Iraq. Even by a process of elimination, it is clear that whatever the prize for martyrdom in the hereafter, its cause must be sought in the
degradation and hopelessness of Muslim life in the here and now – in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Bosnia, Chechnya.

Hence, the more Blair goes on denying his complicity in the destruction of Iraq and its part in the terrorist cause, the more he has to find other causes to blame 7/7 on and the more he engages in the politics of fear the more to erode democratic rights and civil liberties. Conversely, the sooner he owns up to the Iraq debacle, the sooner he will be able to address himself to the most important element in the apprehending of terrorists: intelligence, intelligence, intelligence. The trouble is that he even tailors intelligence to the cut of his political coat, and substitutes authoritarian measures in its stead.

The latest anti-terrorist bill (October 2005) bears out this point. This is the fourth counter-terrorist measure in five years and it has expanded the definition of terrorism and created new terrorist offences. The Terrorism Act 2000 had already proscribed ‘terrorist organisations’ which had been resisting tyrannies in their home countries or been involved in liberation movements. The Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security Act 2001, hurried through parliament after September 11, went even further than this in that it effectively abolished habeas corpus and brought in detention without trial, but for foreign nationals only. Thus every refugee and asylum seeker (meaning Muslim) was not only suspected of being linked to ‘international terrorism’ but subject also to the stop and search powers granted by the previous Act.

The fact that the 2001 legislation applied only to foreign nationals made it open to legal challenge. So when, in December 2004, the Law Lords ruled that the indefinite detention of foreign nationals was discriminatory, Home Secretary Charles Clarke rushed through the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005 which introduced control orders legislation (that is, house arrest and electronic tagging) to replace detention without trial.

In the event, the anti-terrorist laws net in not just Muslims who are foreign nationals, but Muslims who are British (the enemy at the gate and the enemy within). Hence, while control orders are currently invoked against foreign nationals only, the government has signalled that it will extend them to British nationals under the new counter-terror measures. And as for the proposal to hold suspects for three months without trial, this is simply internment by another name.

Then there is the home secretary’s intended use of immigration law to set new guidelines for deportation, specifying a list of ‘unacceptable behaviour’ which would merit deportation, even to countries that practise torture such as Jordan and Algeria – on the undertaking, of course, that they will not torture these particular deportees (‘memoranda of understanding’, they call it) And there are similar counter-terrorism measures that the government is proposing to bring in through the
back-door of administrative edict, by-passing parliament and open debate. The danger here is not just that a criminal justice system based on equal rights to justice is under threat from measures that corral Muslims into a separate and more punitive system, but that the very foundations of democracy are being eroded by an overbearing executive. When the executive arrogates more and more power to itself (it is after all the home secretary and not the courts who decides who will be detained, who will be subject to control orders and who will be returned to face torture) and expects the judiciary merely to rubber-stamp its decisions, the role of the judiciary and the respect in which it is held are undermined. Besides, the separation of powers, which silently characterises Britain’s unwritten constitution and is therefore the more to be cherished and safe-guarded, is being systematically undone.

It is here, though, that the government faces its biggest challenge, because the judiciary, mindful of the constitutional settlement that accords it jurisdiction over its separate sphere, is fighting back. It is, for instance, by no means certain that the judges will accept the ‘memoranda of understanding’ being negotiated with countries that practise torture. If this happens, the government threatens to go over the heads of the judiciary by amending or withdrawing from the Human Rights Act so as to by-pass Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights which forbids the return of people to countries that practise torture and ‘inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment’.

But if this is how the country’s liberties are being eroded at the national level, the clause in the Terrorism Bill 2005 which makes it an offence to ‘glorify’ any ‘act of terrorism’ anywhere in the world if this ‘indirectly’ encourages others to emulate it, undermines liberation movements and struggles for democracy at the international level. Apart from the ambiguous use of words (and legal language should be precise), the law itself is a catch-all law, a blanket law, which does not distinguish between a liberation fighter for whom terrorism is the tactic of the last resort and a terrorist for whom terrorism is a categorical imperative.

Not to make that distinction is also not to make the distinction between state terrorism and individual terrorism. It is to absolve the state terror of an occupying power like Israel while blaming the individual terrorism of the occupied for liberation. Besides, Palestinian suicide bombers do not emerge from Islamic fundamentalism, but from the hopelessness of freeing their people any other way. The first arises from choice, the second from choicelessness. Not to distinguish between them is not only to play into the hands of Israel and justify state terror, but to avoid seeking a solution to the Palestinian question.

Israel already sets the agenda for the US and Britain on counter-terrorism. It can now under the rubric that terrorism is terrorism –
except when undertaken by an occupying power (on the ‘four legs good, two legs bad’ logic) – continue to determine the future of Palestine and the Palestinians. And the Palestinians and those who support them in their struggle for liberation will be condemned, if not prosecuted, as glorifiers and celebrants of terror.

Blair’s reasoning behind all this is that ‘the rules of the game have changed’. But the game is democracy and not one part of it can be changed without starting a chain reaction that damages the whole and debases British values.

And yet Blair exhorts ethnic minorities to live up to them. Aye, there’s the rub. For when our rulers ask us old colonials, new refugees, desperate asylum seekers – the sub homines – to live up to British values, it is not the values they exhibit that they refer to, but those of the Enlightenment which they have betrayed. Whereas we, the sub homines, in our very struggle for basic human rights not only hold up basic human values, but challenge Britain to return to them. We are the litmus test of British values. The Enlightenment project, in other words, is not over till its remit of liberty, equality and fraternity is extended to include the non-white peoples of the world. That is the challenge our presence in Europe signifies.

Nor has the task of the Reformation been completed – not so long as there is a connection between Church and State (as in Britain) – which, in practice, is bound to privilege the state religion over all others. That, again, is the challenge that Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, etc., signify.

On the other hand, states that pretend to secularism, like France, are still to distinguish between rites and rights. The religious symbols that people exhibit (like the cross and the hijab) may in their view be a rite, but from the view of the secular state, it is a right. For what, in the final analysis, defines a secular state is the paramountcy of individual liberty: my freedom is only limited by yours.

The greatest threat to western values, however, arises from globalisation and market fundamentalism – changes that affect personal morality, which, after all, is the transliteration of abstract Enlightenment values into living practice. For, the market reduces everything to a cash nexus, even personal relationships. And the transition of the welfare state to the market state, as a categorical imperative of globalisation, has altered the priorities of government from the social welfare of the people to the economic welfare of corporations, which in turn replaces moral values with commercial values: caring with indifference, altruism with selfishness, generosity with greed; and, on another level, imagination with fantasy, music with noise, art with artifice. In the absence of such values, of idealism even, young British Muslims have turned to Islam not just as a belief system but as a movement.

Once there were great movements, concerted struggles, within countries and/or internationally, against poverty and exploitation and all
sorts of injustice – against capitalism and imperialism. Today there are no great working-class movements, no Third World revolutions. There is no cohering ideology that transcends national boundaries, like socialism. Hence the struggles against immiseration, against dictatorships, against foreign occupation grow up around religion, ‘the sigh of the oppressed’, and take on the characteristics of millenarian movements. And in the interstices of these movements arise their distortions: fundamentalism.

But Islamic fundamentalism is a passing phase, certainly in its intensity. First, because 7/7 has also blown up in the faces of the Muslim leadership and clergy in this country and demands that they take conscience of what is being done in the name of the Qur’an. Second, because it demands that Islam lives in this world and not in the next. And in the soul-searching that must follow, I see the first stirrings of the Islamic Reformation – which in the process would divert the anti-imperialist struggles of the Muslim world from individual acts of terror to mass collective action that finds common cause with the anti-globalisation, anti-imperialist movement.

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