



Colonial Crimes and Convivial Cultures by Paul Gilroy'

Act 2: Greenland, April 21 – May 14, 2006

Hello everybody. I first want to say that I am really sorry that I couldn't join you for this meeting. I hope everything is going well there. I was particularly disappointed not to be able to come because it seems to me that there is a way in which art speaks powerfully to the predicament that we share. It is especially important that the politicisation of art is able to respond, as Walther Benjamin put it so long ago, to the aestheticisation of politics: a process which destroys politics as we've known it. So, in a sense, it falls to art to restore that mission. And I am very very sorry not to be able to be part of the conversation.

I see our meeting over the next few days – your meeting over the next few days – as part of an opportunity, part of a struggle to give Europe back its past. It seems to me that without access to the past, without the removal of the cultural and psychological screens that block access to it, Europe has no chance, no opportunity to comprehend its present circumstances or to plan for a democratic future in which the creation and reproduction of what we might call a habitable multiculturalism is absolutely critical.

Now these things are, I think, especially acute in relation to the Nordic countries. That's because the history of the Nordic countries is used outside the Nordic world to show how social democratic principles work at their very best. I think the task of making a habitable multiculturalism part of that conversation, of making it part of whatever residuum of public culture can be maintained there, is a strategic question that goes beyond the local interests of people in the Nordic world.

The situation in the Nordic countries is distinctive for other reasons too. It is special partly because you are, I think, so much in the grip of what we used in England to call "the new racism". This is a form of racism – of racialised thinking, reflection and government – which accentuates questions of culture at the

expense of questions of politics. It was identified as a new racism because it was a racism, which was able to deny that it is connected to biological hierarchy. It is a new type of racism also because it is tightly articulated to nationalism and to patriotism as well as to forms of xenophobia and exclusion that flow from cultural specifications of national identity, which are tacitly or covertly racialised.

In looking at the Nordic countries we need another concept too: the concept of agno-politics or agnotology. These are terms that describe the patterned forms of ignorance. They become useful when knowledge of the colonial adventures and colonial missions of the Nordic countries in the past can be effectively denied. There, the question of restoring access to that hidden history becomes a political matter. This involves dealing with a very particular ambivalence towards Nazism and fascism in some places and to the effect of quiet ideologies of white supremacy and exclusion, which are there. Restoring the history of the Nordic countries means that they can be recognised as places that were mired in the colonial projects of Europe, in the transatlantic slave trade, in the acquisition of Caribbean possessions and of course, at a later stage, in the conquest and subordination of Greenland itself.

There are other dimensions of this patterned amnesia. There is a kind of forgetting about the role of the Nordic countries in the arms trade globally; a sense perhaps of a particular force: guilt – unproductively, and potentially of another one: shame – more productively, in conversations about this. Forms of denial are at work. Denial, as the sociologist Stan Cohen has pointed out recently, is a social and political force as well as a psychological one, which we don't pay enough attention to.

This combination of amnesia, ignorance, denial, guilt, and shame creates a unique political field through which we now have to move and organize. This is a distinctive cultural environment in which we have to operate. I think it is difficult to find a conceptual or interpretative vocabulary, which helps us to navigate these peculiar conditions. In my own work, I have tried to develop an idea of melancholia, which builds on certain motifs in Freud and certain ways in which Freud's work was taken up by later German thinkers, particularly by social psychologists in the period of de-Nazification. I tried to create an argument in which we can understand how the European nations have been in many ways unable to get past their loss of global pre-eminence and how their inability to get past that loss folds into and generates all sorts of pathological features in their contemporary encounters with the strangers, the Others, the migrants who are now within Europe's borders, within the metropolitan communities.

Let me explain this a little bit more. The situation of coping with difference, coping with otherness and, in some cases, of managing the presence of postcolonial people applies although not all of the incomers are postcolonial folks (that is people whose presence in Europe results from colonial history). Whether or not they are actually postcolonial, these people are hostage to a discourse on migrancy, which is entirely xenophobic and exclusionary in character. We see this fact registered in the European languages where you'll stay an immigrant forever: You're a first generation immigrant, a second generation immigrant, a third generation immigrant, a fourth generation immigrant – you're always an immigrant, it doesn't really matter what you do, you're unable to qualify as anything else. That is a funny sort of symptom of the deeper problem that I am speaking about. In this scheme, the citizens confront the denizens who exist in a kind of social twilight.

Other aspects of the melancholic pattern that I have tried to identify reveal themselves where there are things about the departed prestige and currency of Empire, which can't be released, which can't be let go of, that can't be worked through, as Freud would put it, in the process of mourning. Freud imagined that you could get to the other side of those feelings of loss. But, it seems Europe's postcolonial states never get to the other side because they are somehow happier when they can suffer that loss and dramatize and reproduce that loss chronically in ritual ways. The painful loss becomes something they don't want to let go of, something that they want to keep hold of because there is something about the experience of loss, which comforts them. There is something about the way the loss works, which tells them that they themselves are the primary victims of colonial history rather than the people who tell you that they are the victims of the racism, which comes out of it. Europe displaces them from their victimage and holds the space of victim for itself.

That role of victim gets monopolised in order to deny immigrants, denizens, foreigners, – inhuman beings – any access to the moral authority associated with their victimisation. Keeping victimhood exclusively for oneself has another benefit. It takes away any legitimacy from the wounded less-than-people who strive to draw attention to their victimisation at the hands of Europe and to its colonial crimes. White Europe stands as the only victim worthy of acknowledgement. This pattern has become common in the contemporary situation. It is something that it will be very important for us to try and discuss.

The same melancholic way of not dealing with the problems represented by colonial history is also, I think, revealed in the idea that the European, social-

democratic countries can't really respond to the presence of racism in a political way. What happens is that where racism and xenophobia and white supremacy and neo-fascism and ultra-nationalism are manifested, denial gets compounded. People can't really face those developments or address them politically as part of what it means to manage a habitable democracy. Instead, though they may not like the foreigners, denizens and strangers and they certainly don't like dilution of national purity, they don't like the intrusion of people from the outside, they are also deeply and acutely uncomfortable at what they discover about themselves in the process of seeing how deep their own feelings of hostility run.

I think there is a secondary opportunity for us to intervene in the way that awareness, that reflection on the power of racism and xenophobic nationalism is actually managed and processed as a matter of politics. It should not be something that comes before politics has got started or something that comes after the political process is complete. It must be something political in its own right, with its own boundaries and limits that requires its own forms of government intervention.

These peculiar circumstances give artists a special mission. The psychological and emotional dispositions and political environment that are at stake here are distinctive. It means that artists can't just sort of seek to give this rejected or unwanted consciousness of the past back. You can't just fantasize about pumping the bad ideas out of people's heads and pumping in good ideas instead. This environment requires an anti-racist creativity, which is bound to certain arguments about pedagogy and curriculum and role of education and breaking the cycle of guilt and denial and ignorance, but are not reducible to that alone. I think artists have a special role to play here.

That role works best when their art isn't able to separate itself from the tempo of political struggles that are articulated from within the communities concerned. I suppose this form of artistic intervention is a politics of art. It may perhaps also be a politics of culture. Anyway, it works best not only when its cues and tempo derive from a larger set of struggles, but when artists have the verve and imagination to be able to collaborate with each other across the boundaries of the national states, which are so permeable to capital now. This is why I am particularly happy that that is one of the things we are doing here today.

But there is another element in this artistic mission that I want to draw your attention to. It is bound to another aspect of the situation in which melancholia

and melancholic patterns have been so dominant through the last few years. And it relates to the forms of cultural and political life that are being created within many European cities, even in some parts of the urban centres of the Nordic world by settlers, by the people that were migrants and the descendants of migrants, the children of migrants, the grandchildren of migrants. It has been created by them in their settlement in those centres and in the forms of cultural life that are being played out there where their own habits and ways of seeing the world, of making sense of the world, of reflecting on the world, of intervening in pursuit of rights and recognition flow into and enrich the civic culture, the public world of those cities by demanding more democracy, better law, more elaborate and sensitive forms of government, enriching the public culture of those countries.

Now, this extraordinary process is not normally seen or analysed. Very often it's looked at and understood only as what the policy-makers call multiculturalism. Of course there is no consensus about what that term should mean, although very often what they mean by it is a kind of way of looking at culture, which is essentially, I think, drawn from the history of the United States. Let me be clear about this: When European discussions of race, racism and politics do occur, there is often a lingering sense that the United States represents the future of these matters, that somehow America is ahead of Europe. It's a funny thing, but I suppose it goes back to the 1960s and to the struggles over civil rights and political rights, which were imagined to somehow be the inevitable outcome of processes in which migrants, settlers and foreigners were deprived of rights, strangers were deprived of entitlements. With that simmering injustice, there will be an inevitable explosion. We could see what that meant in the context of the United States and its political traditions, therefore rights would be awarded and the American future averted and somehow from that moment, the idea that the United States stands for the future has been retained. It has been kept at the centre either as a cautionary tale or as a utopia.

Now, I think we need to dispose of those ideas. We need to remove the United States from that position as the future. We must take it out of the position that Hegel put it in when he said it was "the land of the future". It's not our future and Europe has its own opportunity to make it a different kind of future than the one circumscribed by American possibilities. This tension, this debate around the meaning of multiculturalism and the forms of plurality, pluralized forms of dwelling, the degree of segregation, which is appropriate and acceptable within a democratic order and so on. All of these questions are better examined once the idea that the US represents the future has been put firmly out of sight.

In my own work I have tried to develop some different ideas about multiculturalism. In the same way that the argument about melancholia enters as an attempt to think things slightly differently. I've really been forced to abandon the idea of multiculturalism as an -ism that we can identify. Certainly in England nobody has theorised multiculturalism for a very, very long time. Not since the 1960s when our more confident social-democratic politicians tried to think about what it meant to assimilate the immigrants, to integrate people. Although we were scared that America represented the future, we tried, as I'm continuing to do, to step away from the idea that the US had the political and economic answers.

In my work, I have tried to develop some different concepts and ideas. The central theme, the alternative to melancholia, has been a concept of conviviality. Conviviality, convivencia, living together in real time. What is it to live together? I had begun to feel that, although racism was clearly and destructively at work in England where I lived, racism was not always the main problem. Very often, it was the denial of the racism that was a bigger problem. In some cases this was a bigger problem than the actual racism in itself. The structural character of that racism was something, which only changed slowly over a long period of time, but the denial of that racism was a bigger issue. In response to that insight I wanted to draw attention to the idea that within our cities, alongside that racism, alongside that violence and bitterness, in the urban areas, at least, other things had evolved, other possibilities had become visible.

Alongside racism, resources for the undoing of racism had evolved spontaneously, unseen, unlooked for, unwanted. It seemed to me that very often, at the interpersonal level rather than structural level, the consequences of racism were banal and ordinary. There were conflicts, but people resolved them. They didn't always get along with their neighbours, but they overcame those difficulties. I wanted to give the fact of that kind of creative and intuitive capacity among ordinary people, who manage those tensions, some sort of significance. I wanted to give it overdue recognition. I didn't want to do that because I thought the problems of racism were over or because I believed that somehow just seeing that these things could be worked over, worked around, worked through, meant that there was nothing more to do. It was more that in our conversations about these matters we had to start taking note of the fact that there were spontaneous ways in which many of these problems, the problems that we're now told are inevitable features of a clash of civilisations, cultures and outlooks, that those same problems melted away in the face of a kind of clankingly obvious sense of human sameness. This could not be

grasped in the context of debates, which think culture in crude terms and say “either you integrate immigrants or they stay separate”.

I wanted to name that alternative possibility “conviviality”. I didn’t want to call it multiculturalism; I want to call it conviviality – just living together. Somewhere in the back of my mind was a sense of the history of the Iberian countries, which for such a long period of time managed the perilous process of living with difference without being overcome by xenophobia and hostility. So, with that history in mind I’ve tried to name this other possibility conviviality.

This engagement with conviviality and the attempt to elevate it into a theoretical concept actually meant that all of the common-sense talk about the clash between civilisations representing an unbridgeable gulf, about the kind of cultural or ethnic limits which are placed on democracy, on liberal ways of engaging politics – all of that has to be seen in a different light, a light derived from history of race hierarchy, a light derived from a critical engagement with the history of racism and exclusion. In that light, the clash between finished civilisations, if it exists at all, becomes secondary to the cracks, the fissures, the conflicts to be found within civilisations. That’s the first lesson of this multicultural reorientation.

Now, these problems have become an acute matter in the context of the ongoing war against terror. The forms of that conflict have been infused with the history of racial categories and anti-immigrant feelings and the governance of immigrants. Let me repeat, this is not done through the category of citizenship. The permanent immigrants are denizens – people who are here, people who belong to the place, but whose presence is such that they are excluded from the world of rights and banished to the zone of infra-humanity. The space occupied by denizens has been expanded exponentially as part of the functioning of the war on terror and the forms of security, of securitocracy, which have been elaborated since this never-ending war was announced.

So there is a strong connection between the history of race conflicts, the history of political battles around immigration, multiculturalism and so on and the forms of governance and law and militarization that have followed since the war on terror became the centre of political culture in Europe.

This, of course, is the space of the cartoons and of the Cartoon Controversy. In my view, that episode represented little more than a kind of culturalist sideshow which has been useful primarily to those experts and opinion-formers who are

determined to bring the idea of the clash of civilisations alive in ever more vivid forms. Now I want to emphasize that the discussions of multiculturalism I'm trying to displace with my two concepts (melancholia on the one hand, and conviviality on the other) derive from a number of sources. Theories of multiculturalism arrive, as I've tried to show, from discussions of immigration in the post-war period, from discussion of the rights and entitlements and sufferings of indigenous people in different parts of the world, particularly Canada and, in a more muted, but nonetheless significant way, from those few areas of the world where racial orders have been explicitly overthrown: from South Africa and to a lesser extent from the southern states of the US where the American apartheid was partly undone during the 1960s. Each of these places has generated a different, partial and unsatisfactory debate about multiculturalism, which I think we can now try to set aside. We can try and complicate our understanding of the political field of multiculturalism once we see the tensions between the way the discourses have developed. Speaking about the rights and entitlements of indigenous people develops it in a different manner from the way it is developed in discussion about the rights and entitlements of immigrants, or the rights and entitlements of people emerging from a world of racial hierarchy, which has consigned them to infra-human status, the status of not being human enough to qualify for recognition. We must try to unpack these different versions of multiculturalism and transcend each of them in the movement towards a better understanding of what a habitable democratic order would be like.

The political setting in which we are going to have to engage these questions is one – I must emphasize this – in which, against every sensible, pragmatic, reflexive analysis that can be developed, the critical voices within the European political class are calling, not for a systematic engagement with the history of Empire, but for the very opposite. In France, there are debates about the place of the Empire in the curriculum. In Portugal, people remain disinterested in exploring the relationship between their overthrowing of their colonial dominion and the development of democracy inside the country. In England, nothing is more strong and resurgent than revisionist histories of the British Empire, which accompany the political demand for its revival in a new form under the banner of the EU, under the lightest of touches. The revival of Empire is desirable because it makes the shiftless and corrupt natives run their railways properly and creates form of stability that are lacking from the postcolonial world where incompetent government is the rule.

So, we're in a situation not only where these forms of denial and ignorance – the melancholic patterns – obtain, but where explicit calls for the revival of Empire are being articulated by experts and where the actual practice of revival of Empire is being re-engaged, most notably in Mesopotamia. People here have very peculiar attitudes to this because of their patterned amnesia. The politics of ignorance dictates that they have no memory of what their country did previously in their name. In relation to Iran, say, they find it impossible to comprehend the possibility that the Iranians might not only remember past injuries, but seek to act on the basis of their very fresh memories of the damage that was done to their polity, their democracy in the name of British and American geopolitical interests less than a generation ago.

So, this environment, which calls for and practices the revival and renewal of Empire accompanied by the militarization of everyday life, the militarization of society and the expansion of the space of the denizen, the repudiation of rights and the loss of liberties, is really a very difficult situation and it would be irresponsible of me to end what I have to say without drawing your urgent attention to those matters, as if you need me to do that.

I found this transmission a very difficult exercise to do. It is awfully hard to speak into a lone camera on your own, but I hope that there is enough in what I've said and that you can see and hear me clearly enough to make the fact that I've done this to be useful to you. I wish you well in your deliberations and I'm once again just terribly terribly sorry that I can't be there with you to join you in this important exercise. Thank you very much and goodbye.

Note

1. This text is a transcript of a video letter made by Paul Gilroy in London and screened at the Public Hearing "Debating Independence: Autonomy or Voluntary Colonialism?" in Nuuk, Greenland on April 22, 2006. The transcript has been re-worked by the author.