

### **After identity**

A central theme of *Soundings 29* is a revisiting of identity politics. As Paul Gilroy has recently pointed out in *After Empire* (Routledge 2004) - in his case referring to the politics of race - continuing to discuss such issues is often seen as an old-fashioned pursuit. Identity politics can be dismissed by those whose radical anti-humanism allows them to reject essentialism, as well as by neoliberal individualists who think a good dose of individualism will solve most identity problems. However, as Paul also argues, an acceptance that identity is not as fixed and natural as perhaps was implicit in 1970s and 1980s identity politics does not mean that such categories do not have immense discursive and ideological power. Furthermore, in an insecure world, an attachment to the certainties of identity is an understandable protective stance, particularly for those whose assigned identities make them the subject of hostility. So, broadly, the theme of the pieces collected here is that 'identity politics' is of continuing importance in the twenty-first century, even if we need to think about it in different ways - which we attempt to do in this issue

Zygmunt Bauman takes the position that it is much easier for the global elite to celebrate hybridity and lack of fixity than it is for those who are still struggling for recognition - those, as he puts it, 'on the receiving end of identity wars'. He accepts that the concept of identity is inherently contradictory, but argues that, partly for this reason, it is best understood as a human practice, shaped by the conditions in which each of us lives. Zygmunt also points to the connections between neoliberalism and the idea of the self as unfixed; he argues that in the absence of other markers, we learn to seek identity through consumption.

Valerie Walkerdine looks at such issues of 'liquid-modern' identity as they affect our relationship to work, and argues that the imperative to choose and make up our own lives, combined with the pressure to define our identity through consumerism, has transformed - and psychologised - our relationship to work. Thus, for example, instead of seeing exploitative relationships we see interpersonal interaction with our employers; instead of skills that need to be

learned we see personality traits suited to particular areas of work. Our identities become something we have to take to the labour market and promote. Thus problems of working life become individual personality problems, which often leads to a sense of personal inadequacy. This model of working life is clearly a long way from traditional labour movement preoccupations, and would seem to signal some drastic rethinking for workplace politics. Valerie argues that cultural forms of critique are one fruitful way of drawing attention to the contradictions within this discourse of work. Here her arguments chime in with Jonathan Rutherford's discussion in *Soundings* 28 on the need to weave the wide array of personal concerns and unhappineses that people experience in western society into a new politics of the individual and society.

Paul Gilroy argues that the insecurities of modern life, combined with a failure to acknowledge the role of racism and Britain's imperial past in shaping contemporary British culture, have led to a pathological desire to be certain about what is meant by English identity. British society is haunted by melancholia, which is partly based on a simultaneous knowing and disavowal of what empire involved. But as well as identifying this morbidity, Paul also draws attention to 'our country's long experience of convivial post-colonial interaction and civic life É largely undetected by our governments'. Here he sees a counter to melancholia emerging from below (though of course also hedged about with hostility).

**P**aul calls this multiculturalism, not multiculturalism, which, he argues, is dead as an ideology in Britain. And it is true that multiculturalism has recently been under attack from those who once might have been regarded as centre left (particularly in *Prospect's* recent series of articles). As Tariq Modood points out in his article, multiculturalism is now dismissed by such writers as an argument for cultural separatism and self-imposed segregation. Even Trevor Phillips, Chairman of the Campaign for Racial Equality, is keen for minorities to show themselves as truly British. Tariq makes a strong defence of multiculturalism, however, arguing that these critics fail to see that multiculturalism is fundamentally a call for an understanding of the plural nature of our society, and for the right of minorities to receive recognition within that plurality. Only a pathological national identity, desperately seeking certainty, could find this problematic.

Patrick Wright reflects on a particular strand of English defensive

nationalism, as reflected in the writing of G.K. Chesterton. He argues that, for Chesterton, the essence of 'Englishry' was a 'sense of being opposed to the prevailing trends of the present' - a perspective that allows even the most well-placed man of the world to imagine himself a member of an endangered aboriginal minority: a freedom fighter striking out against 'alien' values and the infernal works of a usurping state'. This particular strand of Britain's melancholic attachment to an imagined past highlights the serious problems for a modernising project that fails to address questions of national identity and belonging: a default position - a retreat to a closed and insular world - is always on offer.

Wendy Wheeler has a very different emphasis, not so much on the question of identity as on the relationship between the individual and the whole of the rest of the environment, both human and physical. Implicit in her argument - which is basically arguing the case for the importance of complexity theory for politics - is an understanding that the individual is formed ecologically, out of societies that are 'complex non-linear evolving holisms'. Individuals are not discrete atoms; individuality is 'processual, relational and embedded in both socio-cultural and natural systems'. Understanding our selves in this way can overcome some of the major problems for theories of identity - for example it dissolves mind/body and subject/object dualism. In terms of political practice this means for Wendy a politics of empowerment - wherever you are within the human eco-system your actions can have an effect. The means by which this perspective might incorporate the dynamics of exploitation or political conflict is not clear at this point, but it opens up a very interesting way of thinking about individuality and its connections to the social.

### **Difference and universality**

Wendy's essay can be seen as an attempt to think beyond individualised identities, and the title of this issue - after identity - also points towards there being more to identity than is spoken of in identity politics. What is it that we appeal to when we claim equality, and the legitimacy of our identity? One answer is that it is a request for the recognition of one's difference, and for respect to be accorded it. But difference on its own casts us apart. While the old humanism was oblivious to differences of race, sexuality and gender, so the politics of identity fails to acknowledge that along with the differences of identity there exists in us the common traits of humanity. Not one without the other, but both

articulated together, difference and sameness. In Britain today there seems to be an increasing reluctance in some quarters either to give recognition to difference or to sustain a culture of hospitality and humanity.

Andrea Levy's novels take place within the terrain of postwar Britain's multiculturalism, and she brilliantly evokes the bafflement of a generation of migrants who had expected to be welcomed into their 'mother country'.. Gilbert Joseph, in *Small Island* - an educated man who had grown up with the literature, geography, history and politics of Britain - is made both faceless and a spectacle by the racism he encounters: 'I had just one question - let me ask the Mother Country just this one simple question: how come England did not know me?'

**M**eanwhile there are abundant examples of Britain's failures on the humanitarian front - some of which are documented in Neal Lawson's recent pamphlet *Dare More Democracy*, based on focus group research.<sup>1</sup> For the C1/C2 voters involved, all of whom had switched to Labour in 1997, but who now felt let down by the government, the focus group sessions 'acted as a form of political/democratic therapy'.. And, as in therapy, what emerged were thoughts and feelings that had been repressed. One issue that they were not asked about, but which was raised again and again, was their anger over immigration, asylum and 'the threat to their sense of Englishness'. Blair, it was pronounced, was 'anti-English'. He supports 'any country and religion except the English'. Without shame, people repeated that 'foreigners' were making 'unjustified claims' on health, welfare and education resources. As Neal writes, 'The issue of patriotism, nationality and the threat from outside animated the groups more than any other.'

This is grist to the mill for David Goodhart, who argues that multiculturalism fragments the social solidarity on which the welfare state is based. But this is a bankrupt argument - which, apart from anything else, ignores the inequalities, differences and discriminations that exist within the white British population. However, in its vicinity Gilbert Joseph's question is turned into a gross presumption. Goodhart's position is a monument to the loss of nerve of a white English liberal intelligentsia on being confronted with a rabid tabloid-driven xenophobia and a colluding government. But this is

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1. Neal Lawson, *Dare More Democracy*, 2005, available from Compass, FREEPOST LON15823, London, E9 5BR; 020 7367 6318; info@compassonline.org.uk

not Powellism, as has been suggested by Trevor Phillips; it is more a metaphorical twitching of the curtains as the thugs swagger down the street bellowing 'White is Right', while taking a kick at the door of the white woman with the black boyfriend. It represents the Home Front for the historical revisions of empire that have been undertaken recently by a number of academics, and for Tony Blair's liberal imperialist messianism. The self-righteousness of the new centre has no vocabulary to challenge the xenophobia of UKIP and the BNP. Having abandoned the language of social justice and equality, they are no longer able to appeal to the disenfranchised white working class. Thus New Labour has no ideological means of resisting the racialised discourse of anti-immigration - all it can do is join in the game.

**G**ilbert Joseph puts his question on behalf of the whole Windrush generation - perhaps the most crucial question for postcolonial times. Multiculturalism offers a variety of answers, including many useful cultural initiatives, such as Black History Month. But there remains a sense that such initiatives manufacture positive images that are disconnected from the reality of people's messy and multi-dimensional lives - and from the major difficulties people face, such as black British school children's struggle in education, or the social exclusion of Muslim communities. The traffic of representation tends to be one-way and over-simplified. Englishness itself remains unexamined. Any answer we come up with to Gilbert's question would have to give recognition to his dignity and cultural difference, but would also need to be based on a mutual respect for our common humanity.

SD & JR

*The next issue of Soundings is on the Good Life and will look at approaches to economics that put the well being and relationships of people first. Molly Scott Cato from GaianEconomics writes on work; Edward Fullbrook explains post-autistic economics; and Andrea Westall from the New Economics Foundation sets out alternatives to our current economic orthodoxies. There are also articles from Farhad Dalal on institutional racism, Ken Wortpole on architecture, Hetan Shah on happiness, and Fiona Williams on the family. Plus Slow Food, US empire, and an archaeology of Zionism.*