



Backlash! Just in case: 'Political Correctness', Immigration and the Rise of *Preactionary* Discourse in Irish Public Debate

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In the shadow of the gulag

Someone *had* to speak out. On September 27th and 28th 2006, the *Irish Times* prominently advertised the publication of an article by William Reville on the 28th entitled 'How the culture of political correctness is damaging academic freedom'. After an undisclosed period of no doubt admirable restraint, Reville was motivated – through personal academic embarrassment and in defence of science – to take a stand against the intolerant orthodoxies and illiberal rigidities that have calcified universities everywhere. Political correctness, or PC as he terms it, is an 'intolerant and deeply dodgy' ideology characterised by 'very tolerant attitudes on issues such as gender, race, sexuality and the environment', and based on an 'ethical theory' of relativism. Relativism, he explains, holds that there is no such thing as superior knowledge or 'higher standards in human choices', thus '... if a pre-modern jungle tribe believes that the moon is a luminous lantern suspended by the gods above the tree-tops, relativism proposes that this knowledge is just as valid as the scientific understanding that the moon is a satellite of the earth that revolves around our planet'.

However, PC does more than provide a haven for flat-earthers midst the pipe smoke and leather elbow patches of the academy. It is an aggressive ideology, hostile to 'objective principles of right and wrong', but driven by the circuitous confirmations of its own validity to occupy 'rigid PC positions' on such issues as 'immigration and the travelling community', and to the dogmatic advocacy of same-sex families even when implacably 'opposed by scientific evidence'. Someone had to speak out, as science and rationality no longer speak for themselves, and PC inhibits 'people from expressing valid viewpoints for fear they will be labelled bigots and people

frequently censor their utterances'. In a triumph for memory over forgetting, Reville concludes: 'One is reminded at times of Stalinist Russia where people lived in constant fear that their ordinary conversations would be interpreted as being offensive to the official ideology'. We cannot say that we did not know.

For such a muscular and unapologetic positivist, Reville's article is surprisingly untroubled by empirical evidence. No universities are mentioned, no brutalist advocates of the putative new order are named, no instance of this doctrinaire bullying identified in any aspect of Irish life. Instead readers are offered the anthropological fantasy of luminous lantern cults, an assertion that 'under relativism' my 'sub-group' can speed on the road if they feel like it (regardless of the majority's adherence to legal limits), and an un referenced and possibly apocryphal reference to the demand for 'herstory' courses in departments of history in US colleges. PC's conceptual history and development is explained with a nod to the claim of 'some right-wing commentators' that it '. . . is a formal ideology of cultural Marxism, which originated in the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory in 1923, and is deliberately aimed at the destruction of western civilisation'. Sadly this does not qualify – in the author's own terms – as proof of anything much, but it does imply that a previously undiscovered edition of the *Dialectic of Political Correctness* (1923) may have vanished in the flight of Frankfurt School members from other more active compatriots similarly engaged in threatening western civilisation.

While the paucity of Reville's dark take on the curtailment of free speech in the university and society is easily demonstrated, his article synthesises a series of assumptions and discursive manoeuvres that I wish to examine in this essay. The lack of evidence, context or proportion are far from particular to this article, but are difficulties that can be detected in the work of other commentators, and are a wider symptom of what I wish to explore as *preactionary discourse* in Irish public debate. As this neologism suggests, preactionary discourse is not only, in a profound sense, reactionary, but it is also a *pre-action* based on an anxious imaginary of already entrenched liberal-managerial orthodoxies and agencies prescribing restrictive positions on complex questions. In terming these modes of argument preactionary, I am suggesting that such projected orthodoxies are far from established in Ireland, but must be understood as emblems of deeper currents of ideological worry. The acceleration in Reville's argument from isolated snippets and metaphors to comparisons with Stalinist Russia stems from a series of anxieties; regarding social meaning and hegemony in conditions where hegemony is increasingly difficult to achieve or sustain; shifting power relations in late capitalist societies; an over-determined

vision of Enlightenment certainties; and the nature of 'the West' in the era shaped by 'the war on terror'.

The indicative list of relativist 'PC' positions on gender, sexuality, 'race' and ethnicity suggests that precautionary discourse may be profitably analysed in relation to what the legal scholar Davina Cooper describes as *diversity politics*:

(Diversity) is a broad, discursive space that emerged out of the very particular social, cultural and political conditions of the 1980s and 1990s . . . the upsurge of neo-liberal ideology, the backlash against radical feminism, the expansion of lesbian and gay politics . . . and the struggles around multiculturalism and anti-racism. Intellectually, diversity politics sits at the confluence of several currents that include liberalism, communitarianism, poststructuralism, post-Marxism, feminism, post-colonialism and queer studies. Into the twenty-first century, the politics of diversity continue to exert a powerful influence on progressive and radical thinking in the West.¹

The critical focus in diversity politics on re-evaluating historical modes of knowledge production and contemporary cultural representations recognises that culture is a site of competing political imaginaries. Thus the intellectual confluence discussed by Cooper has been instrumental in questioning racialisation, heteronormativity, patriarchy and abilism in ways that reject contingent offers of majority 'tolerance' and instead challenge the assumed frameworks through which society self-produces. Norman Fairclough characterises 'political correctness' as a *reactive categorisation* of the forms of 'cultural and discursive intervention' developed by diversity politics on ' . . . the assumption that changing discourses will, or may, lead to changes in other elements of social practices through processes of dialectical internalization . . . changes of discourse are not merely re-labellings but shifts to different spheres of values'.²

In Reville's argument, and in the writing of well-known journalists such as Kevin Myers and John Waters, this anti-foundational intellectual confluence is reduced to an all-encompassing notion of default relativism, a reduction which indicates both an acknowledgement of and unwillingness to deal with a diffuse yet insistent epistemological challenge. This challenge is of course not only epistemological, it is political; the increased importance of civil society in articulating and in many instances institutionalising diversity politics has meant that the public discussion of issues of social power and identity has become polyvocal, and increasingly structured around modes of discursive conduct aware of the constructionist nature of language. It is at least partly the legacy of deconstructionist projects that accounts for the injured refrain that PC stifles free expression; it gnaws at

the sublimated normatives of 'commonsense', 'reasonableness' and 'right-mindedness'. As Norman Fairclough argues:

part of the controversy over 'PC' is attributable to often implicit differences between those who assume some form of 'discourse theory', which implies that representations are always positioned, value-laden and chosen against alternative representations. This compares with those who assume a transparent and direct relationship between what is said/written and 'the language' without the mediating level of discourse.³

As I shall argue, this denial of the mediating nature of discourse is not only a political investment but is deeply disingenuous; preactionary discourse is keenly involved in hegemonic contest. Socially, it is the shift in late capitalist societies to forms of political organisation around 'issues' and questions of recognition that fosters the mythology of an irrational advance by the synchronised storm troopers of political correctness. In Ireland, this is represented in recent years by the high profile development of the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) and the Equality Authority, but may also encompass a wide variety of NGOs, government initiatives, universities, and a free-floating signifier of left-wing liberalism termed 'the media'. However, the vehement coverage of these agencies and the questions they are associated with needs to be related to anxieties concerning nation, race and Western civilisation, in turn to allow an understanding of how a selection of privileged establishment commentators seem, quite genuinely, to see themselves as victims of a crushing, degenerate orthodoxy.

This article is based on a study of opinion pieces by selected journalists in *The Irish Times*, *The Irish Independent* and *The Sunday Independent* between March 2005 and March 2007.⁴ The analysis questions the ways in which 'political correctness' is understood and used, the agencies and issues it is associated with, and the effects attributed to it. In the selection of arguments discussed, I focus on the ways in which 'PC' is held to be repressing informed and honest debate on immigration, and specifically the 'racial/civilisational' challenge of Muslims and Islam. This focus is not only a useful illustration of the discursive dynamics under discussion, but it is through the prevailing construction of Islam, and the licence provided by the 'war on terror' to throw off the shackles of 'political correctness', that the ideological anxieties of preactionary thinking can be most usefully examined. While I focus on specific journalists in some detail, this should not be taken to assume that I regard them, by extension from their work, as *preactionaries*. This is for a number of reasons. It would impose a unity of thought where it does not exist, gloss over important differences in belief and quality

of intellectual engagement, and perhaps most importantly, replicate the very strategies I am attempting to critique. Nor am I unreceptive to aspects of the rejection of institutionalised discourse they offer – the ‘broad discursive space’ of diversity politics undoubtedly witnesses what Stuart Hall has described as a ‘vanguardist’ politics of demands,⁵ and is weakened by what Cooper sees as ‘thin and hesitant processes of differentiation’ between claims to social justice.⁶ As I have argued elsewhere, collapsing the specificities of ‘difference’ and power geometries into globally franchised frameworks of ‘diversity’ and ‘multiculturalism’ is politically disabling, and in disseminating an abstract vocabulary of cultural celebration congruent with the grammar of consumer society, easily leads to the forms of unreflexive ‘culture-talk’ abhorred in preactionary discourse.⁷ Nevertheless, I contend that the strategies outlined constitute a pre-emptive backlash politics, and not only in their refusal to recognise inequalities of power and possibility in society, or in their dismissal of the experience of racism. The absence of evidence and specificity, the dependence on metaphor and false dichotomies and the refusal of any form of hermeneutic engagement with different positions suggests that an appeal to Enlightenment veracity is more a stance than a practised intellectual commitment.

The globalisation of posturing piety

With a speed and rapacity that bird flu might envy, PC has colonised the public spheres of the Western world. The following medley from articles by John Waters, Kevin Myers and Ian O’Doherty fingers the culprits and spells out the consequences. ‘Soft-focus Irish lefties’ have in recent years developed a ‘Hibernian form of the European-wide, EU sponsored self-hating political secularism’ that through ‘sanctimonious rock-climbing’ and ‘piety and posturing’ have ‘fuelled a climate of growing repression’. The ‘self-hating’ ‘right-on crowd and their lynch mob’ favour ‘winsome little nursery rhymes about multiculturalism’ and ‘bawl the usual imbecilic pieties about racism’ when confronted with ‘honest attempts at debate’. Their ‘Dogmatic Europhile Multiculturalism’ is ‘baffled by self-created concepts like “racism”, “tolerance”, “sensitivity” and political correctness’, and the ‘subject of immigration invariably prompts an adolescent moral grandstanding’ where ‘debate becomes a morality contest in which the winners are the side which can most loudly declare their love of immigration as they denounce sceptics as racists’. In fact racism gives people ‘wishing to exercise personal political grievances and agendas or take their moral superiority for a walk’ a platform. Chief among these are ‘elitist activists’ and ‘the media, the NUJ, journalism schools and university campuses, all dedicated to enforcing the

doctrinal agenda of our new sinisterly frivolous liberal hierarchy'. The 'Chicken-Licken, sky-is-falling hysteria of taxpayer funded unelected quangos' cries racism over sceptics, while the 'pc police' offer the 'weak-minded hospitality of the doomed' to Islamic radicals. It is worth mentioning at this point that in the articles reviewed by these authors that feature collective representations of this form, no person, text or policy is specifically mentioned unless used as an initial point of entry to their argument, or in direct rebuttal to criticism.

The courage of these writers in the face of such an onslaught may be surprising to those on the left who regard, in turn, 'soft-focus' notions of multiculturalism and the politics of recognition as a gift to the conservative right, in their dissipation of anti-racist politics,⁸ and more generally, a 'politics of re-distributive social justice'.⁹ However the recurring logic in this preactionary scabble is clear, and dependent on an insistent inversion of lived reality: 'minority' issues are an elite interest, instrumentalised through rigid applications of ideological frameworks which advance the interests of diversity politics irrespective of the needs of a silent majority, and mainly as an exercise in self-aggrandisement. The first thing to note about this argument is that for all its distaste for 'Hibernian forms' of international discourse, it is itself both a strategy and style taken from the US, UK, Australia and elsewhere. Preactionary discourse constantly advocates learning dire lessons on immigration from the experiences of these countries, but lessons can also be taken from the migration of political opportunism. Will Hutton, in criticising David Blunkett's use of the term 'political correctness' in the wake of the Cantle report into the Bradford, Burnley and Oldham riots in 2001, notes that it developed in US conservative discourse as a political tactic, in particular as a blanket impediment to debates over substantive equality:

Political correctness is one of the brilliant tools that the American Right developed in the mid-1980s as part of its demolition of American liberalism . . . what the sharpest thinkers on the American Right saw quickly was that by declaring war on the cultural manifestations of liberalism – by leveling the charge of political correctness against its exponents – they could discredit the whole political project.¹⁰

The irony Hutton captures is that conservative ideological agencies quickly adopted a politics based on the 'mediating level of discourse' while accusing their opponents of the frivolity this apparently represents. 'Political correctness' has migrated globally with such force precisely because it seems to describe the infiltration of discrete, stable public debates by cosmopolitan ideologies, and thus allows the recasting of indigenous social justice issues,

and those that advocate them, as elite impositions. Teun Van Dijk, for example, has shown how 'political correctness' is a charge built on notions of the 'loony left' and 'anti-racist busybodies' in the UK and Netherlands in the 1980s.¹¹ The former Australian Labor leader Mark Latham has discussed the perceived division of Australian society into 'residents' and 'tourists', where tourists' interests in multiculturalism and Aboriginal rights are seen as an extension of their cosmopolitan habitus.¹² This free-floating liberal establishment can exist anywhere; Vanessa Trapani, in a discourse analysis of Polish parliamentary debate, shows how political correctness recurs as a synthesizing metaphor for the European Union and the distant agencies of global capitalism.¹³ Gary Younge makes the point – suggested by these examples – that the general utility of PC lies in its vague yoking together of socio-cultural questions with suggestions of elite ideological manipulation:

Over the last month 'political correctness' has been used in the British press on average 10 times a day – twice as frequently as 'Islamophobia', three times as 'homophobia' and four times as 'sexism'. Its ubiquity is due in no small part to its flexibility. During that period it has been used to refer to the ill-treatment of rabbits, the teaching of Gaelic, Mozart's opera *La Clemenza di Tito*, a flower show in Paris and the naming of the Mazda3 MPS. But it's most commonly invoked to suggest that honest conversations are being curtailed by a liberal establishment intent on imposing its beliefs on an unwilling public.¹⁴

Younge's comparison of usages is significant, as it begins to tease out the ways in which 'victimhood' is inverted in the logic of PC accusation. As Van Dijk noted in his discussions of UK press and parliament in the 1980s and 1990s, 'accusations of racism are often seen as more problematic than racism itself'¹⁵ – in other words, the chestnut 'I'm not racist, but . . .' derives its legitimacy from an apparently reflexive acknowledgment of elite liberal power and surveillance, which having been acknowledged, places racism solely or primarily as a projection of that surveillance. This denial is made possible by the limited construction of racism as a product of discrepant prejudice or individual aberration, rather than as a thoroughly modern phenomenon. As Alana Lentin has demonstrated, the post-Shoah rejection of *race* in favour of *culture* did not undo the political heritage of racial thinking, that is, the constitutive role of race in disciplining what Goldberg terms the 'repressed heterogeneity' of the modern nation-state.¹⁶ The culturalisation of racism implies that racism can be largely eradicated through education and awareness, however culture-based projects do not fundamentally interrogate the historically generated 'problem of difference', the capacity of racism to adapt to discourses of culturalisation, nor the persistence of racialisation.¹⁷ In

naturalising these evasions, the socio-political agencies held in preactionary discourse to incessantly 'bleat' about racism often naively disable the critical possibilities of anti-racism. When racism is held to be eradicable through a rational rejection of race and an openness to other cultures, the charge of racism becomes nothing more than a slur on those that *obviously* regard these as reasonable starting points.

Ghassan Hage masterfully unpicks the moves through which the accusation of racism – be it an actual or assumed one – is positioned as a ritual barrier that those plain-speakers who transcend the mediation of discourse are ruefully compelled to negotiate. In *Against Paranoid Nationalism*, he notes the striking growth in contemporary 'anti-racism' in Australia:

While not claiming to have investigated the matter empirically, my impression is that in 2001 a record number of Australians declared themselves to be opposed to the use of the terms 'racist' and 'racism'. Everywhere I turned people were courageously stating things like 'I am not racist', 'that's not racism', 'I did not mention race, I am talking about culture'.¹⁸

Hage's work is crucial in understanding the wider social purchase of the conservative elite use of political correctness, and this aspect of it will be discussed in conclusion. The point here is how the *experience of racism* is denied through the simple denial of racism. With racism conceived of as an individual-cultural anomaly, the charge of 'racism' becomes nothing more than a ritualised risk produced by the doctrinaire orthodoxies of the new establishment – 'bawling the usual imbecilic pieties about racism'. Running that risk becomes an audacious act of 'speaking out':

These courageous people may appear to be in power, they might appear to have pages of newspapers and endless radio and television time at their disposal, but every now and then the repressive conditions under which they operate reveal themselves . . . they say something along the lines of: 'I know they will get me, but I am going to say it . . .'. 'They', in case you've been kept in the dark, is the formidable powerful ultra-left revolutionary council of political correctness.¹⁹

This inversion of power does more than merely provide a frisson of subaltern daring for highly paid, widely disseminated, predominantly white male columnists. Focusing on the apparent power of the advocates of 'political correctness' elides the realities of disempowerment experienced by those subjected to racism. Or, to put it another way, if 'the race relations industry' can be established as a powerful lobby group, then any voice raised against racism can be attributed to and negated through 'it'. This is what allows

Irish preactionary discourse to dismiss anti-racism – and any other movement related to diversity politics and equality – as *victimology*. ‘Diversity’ is especially vulnerable to this charge; without what Davina Cooper calls a ‘recognition of the role of power in structuring social diversity’ and an ethical engagement with ‘legitimately different ways of being’,²⁰ discourses of diversity are easily lampooned as relativist, or worse, willfully biased towards exotic minorities. As Ian O’Doherty puts it, ‘we live in a time of great tolerance and great understanding here in Eurabia – as long as you’re from an ethnic or religious minority’.²¹

Anxious teleologies of migration

Preactionary discourse in Ireland is rarely simplistically ‘anti-immigrant’, and such simplistic accusations have merely helped to consolidate the myth of intolerant dogmatism. The writers surveyed differ in their emphases, but most regard migration as a ‘good thing’ when it is ‘controlled’, and see migrants as having dynamised Irish society economically and culturally. However, distinguishing between implicitly racialised ‘migrant groups’ is essential, as at the basis of preactionary anxieties are visions of catastrophic demographic change in Europe. Thus the routine criticisms of relativist multiculturalism and its blinkered advocates are anchored in the assumption that such discourses and practices are ultimately repressed recognition of a radically altered future. The urgent danger posed by PC is that multiculturalists are throwing open the gates of the citadel to the increasingly noisy Trojan horse of fundamentalist Islam – ‘the weak-minded hospitality of the doomed’. The manifold critiques of Enlightenment certainties associated with postmodernism, postcolonialism and diversity politics can only be regarded, in this context, as self-hating; ‘Self-hatred is now a defining feature of West European culture’.²²

According to Kevin Myers, ‘the year in Ireland is not 2005. It is about 1965 in terms of the French and British experience of immigration’.²³ What Myers is suggesting is a recurring argument in preactionary discourse; that Ireland, as a relatively new site of inward migration, should learn from the experiences of elsewhere, but in particular the UK, France, USA, Australia, and the Netherlands. Comparative analysis in and of itself is an uncontroversial suggestion, dependent on how the framework for comparison is elucidated. Thus the devil (or whatever gendered symbol of dualistic inappropriateness you are comfortable with) is indeed in this detail, as comparisons with Canada, Sweden or Malaysia are rare. In other words, the comparative compulsion in preactionary discourse is informed by teleological visions of migration, dependent in turn on familiar and

resurgent notions of the 'non-western migrant' as fundamentally incompatible, of migration as inexorably leading to conflict, and of the urgent need for recourse to fantasies of assimilation. These national comparisons are chosen because – in admittedly very different ways – their dominant domestic narratives of migration feature past periods of politically correct atrophy and mismanagement that have been robustly re-directed by contemporary administrations. They also, of course, feature heavily mediated visions of societies riven by Muslim demands.

The constant comparisons with the UK are built on the systematic misrepresentation of the history of British multiculturalism as an organic response to the demands of postcolonial minorities for recognition and cultural autonomy, which in turn are held to have been institutionalised through liberal multiculturalist and politically correct projects. The tenacity of this misrepresentation derives from its wide circulation in British public discourse,²⁴ and its utility in Ireland is clear: if it is 1965 now, we still have the chance to avoid this period of liberal, culturally relativist mismanagement. The problems with this argument are manifold, and are primarily the product of ideological pronouncement over sustained historical and sociological analysis (a charge, interestingly, which is regularly leveled at the 'PC mob'). Take the following indicative examples:

The dependence on metaphor: despite its self-pronounced rigour, precautionary discourse is often dependent on carefully constructed metaphors, particularly as actual instances of what is at stake appear difficult to source. Kevin Myers, for example, is – when not simply dispensing fevered collective condemnations – happy to work through such satirical creations as 'Amnesia Crawthump, Pol Pot Professor of Multicultural and Ethnic Minority Studies' and 'Fallopia Whynge, the Yasser Arafat Professor of Women and Travellers' Studies', both of 'Marxtown University'.²⁵ While this is the pseudo-intellectual equivalent of saying something wildly transgressive while pretending to cough, metaphor plays a more central and substantive role in stabilising arguments. David Quinn, in an article entitled 'Walking over majorities to usher in the minorities',²⁶ written after Enda Kenny's strong-jawed description of Ireland as 'Celtic and Christian', helpfully interprets Kenny's neo-mysticism as a straight choice between being 'an integrationist' and a 'multiculturalist'. After the obligatory vignette of decontextualised relativist madness from elsewhere, Quinn does his readers a favour by scything through decades of sociological and political exposition and posing the choice thus:

Let's make this as down to earth as possible. If a guest comes into your house, you will make every effort to make them feel as welcome as

possible. But how would you react if the guest suddenly demanded that you throw out the drinks in the cabinet, remove the holy picture from the mantelpiece, and that your wife covers up her shoulders?

The imagined guest is, of course, an imagined Muslim, and the lesson to be learnt is that 'guests' must adopt a whole fabric of rarely specified yet powerfully coherent 'ways of doing things'. Such metaphors thrive on their yawning over-simplification, so let's make this as down to earth as possible: if Ireland needs to overcome its recalcitrant refusal to learn from the mistakes of others, why not offer actual evidence from elsewhere, particularly when taking a stand against those who refuse evidence-based argument?²⁷

Flawed comparative logic: when parallels are established with our possible futures, it is rare to see qualified analysis of the nature of the comparison, particularly as contextualization is explicitly identified as a relativist liberal response.²⁸ Such a principled stand reinforces the teleological construction of migration, and often relieves the author of such tedious arabesques as historicisation. This is evident in the studious avoidance of postcoloniality and racism in discussions of the UK, France and the Netherlands. This avoidance furthers the preactionary disavowal of the power geometries of race and state, and in insisting on seeing migration to postcolonial countries as alien, random flows, furthers the imaginary geography of a West cleansed of its fundamental interdependencies with its colonised, constitutive others.²⁹ Eviscerating the specificity of human movement in time and place allows a range of examples to be marshalled that, while intended to display effortless erudition, do anything but:

So I will admit that immigration is usually a good thing, and that immigrants are usually of benefit to their host country, et cetera, et cetera et cetera. This is the rogation of modern piety, and like most rogations, it is pretty meaningless. Ask the Berbers of Morocco their opinions of the Arab immigrants who changed their country. Ask the Maoris a slightly different question . . . best of all, ask the Hurons and the Choctaws what they think about immigration to their country.³⁰

Cumulative inconsistencies: it may not be wise, in an era of spin, to hold anyone to such drab criteria as consistency, however this criteria is demanded by preactionary discourse's rationalist foundation. John Waters, who increasingly straps on the pith helmet of the Enlightenment warrior when it comes to the 'clash of civilizations', wrote of a radio discussion with Anjem Choudary, a lecturer at the London School of Sharia, and on the basis of Choudary's predictably militant rejection of the categories of 'moderate and extremist' noted:

It could hardly be clearer. Muslims reject the laws of democratic societies and insist on their right and duty to impose their own laws wherever they are. Muslim leaders are either complicit in this arrogation of authority or powerless to prevent it. And there is no such thing as a 'moderate' Muslim. In other words, we have incubating in our societies cultures utterly at odds with our values and laws.³¹

The next week, Waters wrote:

It is, of course, a mistake not to distinguish between Islamist extremists and the wider Muslim community, but the error is understandable when Muslim leaders, by silence or equivocation, fail to establish the demarcation. In this regard, I was uplifted to read reports that, during his most recent visit here, Irish Muslim leaders banned the appalling Anjem Choudary from their Cultural Centre. This discussion urgently needs to move beyond piety and posturing.³²

Note the absence of a personal pronoun; the understandable error is not Waters', as the burden of proof always lies with the 'migrants' in the first instance. Without a hint of reflection on the demand that people offer themselves to be recognised within his preferred modes of categorisation, 'moderate Muslims' simply materialise from one week to the next in uplifting fashion.³³ It is, of course, a mistake to regard this as breathtakingly arrogant journalism, but the error is understandable when opinion leaders, by silence or equivocation, fail to establish coherent notions and approaches from one week to the next.

Lack of proportionality: the 2001 attacks on New York and Washington have, among other things, constituted *all* Muslims as objects of anxiety. In Europe, resurgent debates over the essential identity of Europe have, in this period, been energised by the increasingly virulent depiction of Muslims as the enemy within: culturally irreducible, globally oriented and locally (self-) segregated, in need of civilizing assimilation but essentially resistant to it. Here I must rehearse my own 'ritual rogation'; analysing the construction of Muslims in Europe and the political capital of these constructions in European countries does not mean that violent Islamic networks do not exist. However precautionary discourse explicitly sees Muslim immigration as an impending civilisational catastrophe. The shift is not just demographic, but a violent cultural one which will undo the universalist heritage of European democracy and thought. As John Waters sees it, 'Muslim victimhood, albeit expressed in the language of hate and rage, is the virus that threatens to collapse European civilization, because liberals cannot resist a victim, even one seeking to destroy them'.³⁴ Myers, also writing during the 'Danish cartoon

controversy', is equally explicit: 'As I have said many times, we are at war: a generational, cultural, ethical, political, terrorist and demographic war. Sure we can give ground on the issue of the cartoons of the Prophet by beheading a few Danish cartoonists, thereby giving the Islamicists their Sudetenland'.³⁵

In this explicit racial 'we' sits both the anxieties of 'war' and the treacheries of PC; at a time of war there is no time for the parlour games of critique or the neuroses of 'self-hatred', and there are no other possible ways of being or modes of existence, anywhere in Europe, for those millions whose daily lives, allegiances and environments do not bifurcate neatly to fit the performative imperatives of the 'clash of civilisations'. This anxious, premonitory imaginary situates its authors as put-upon keepers of the flame. Hence the bizarre spectacle, following Jack Straw's comments on niqabs, burqas and his brittle comfort levels in *The Lancashire Telegraph* in October 2006, of an Irish debate on the burqa without a single attempt to ascertain who or how many people were implicated in this 'debate'.³⁶ In an earlier intervention on this, Myers proved himself to be a closet student of deconstruction, doubtless a strategic evil when faced with 'a complex war of civilizations (where) part of that war is sartorial':³⁷

When I see a woman shrouded in full burka in the centre of Dublin, my heart does not race with pride at the multiculturalism we are importing, for this is aggressive and monocultural intolerance, in a studied and disdainful rejection of our ways. The burqa proclaims its wearer's modesty, and is an insulting and explicit declaration of the immodesty of women who do not wear it.³⁸

The racialised aggression of this neat binary reversal is revealed by substituting 'burka' for almost any other item of clothing, or indeed any social practice: all, in being something that they are not, but in deriving meaning from that which they are not, can be taken as rejections of that which they are not but require to be what they are. On this sound basis, our taboo about covering the face should be reflected in law, Myers argues, presumably because in a war for survival the progressive rational disenchantment of cultural taboo by legal reason, not to mention civil liberties, can be contingently suspended (he is not the first to argue for or act on this in recent years).

A place where the taboo on covering the face is also flaunted is Camp X-ray in Guantanamo Bay. Paul Gilroy, in an essay on the melancholia of colonial loss and how it obscures the unromantic yet existing conviviality and everyday virtues of lived multiculturalism in urban Britain, discusses an interview with Jamal al-Harith – a Mancunian of Jamaican background – in *The Daily Mail* after his return from Gitmo. Sick of the 'culturally appropriate' meals given by captors respecting their diversity, he spoke of his and

other British detainees' obsession with Scottish Highland Shortbread. As Gilroy notes, 'it is there, in that hunger, lodged in those battered and humiliated bodies that the problem of assimilation specified in the 1960s should be laid to rest forever'. If it is 1965 immigration-time in Ireland, we could transcend 'piety and posturing' and lay to rest attempts to specify our own fevered vision of assimilation pretty much straight away.³⁹

Conclusion

A detailed reading of preactionary discourse reveals a mass of contradictions and elisions, produced, I contend, both by an adherence to the very forms of circuitous and self-referential arguments it claims to expose, and by the overwhelming desire of some of its chief proponents to situate themselves as visionary contrarians, fearlessly speaking the truth to a 'frivolously sinister' power. Some of the contradictions are obvious; while claiming to oppose orthodoxies that remain undeterred by reason or evidence, little of either are rehearsed in support of what are regarded to be self-evident truths. Where the PC mob peddle reassuring nursery rhymes, preactionary discourse cannot resist narratives of civilisational doom more at home in millenarian Christian video games. The constant dismissal of equality issues as victimologies that feminise the robust public sphere with anti-rational appeals to sensitivity and offence jar with the incessant need for certain writers to be positioned as victims of consensus, who are exposed to insensitive charges of racism, and who have their 'freedom of speech' threatened by other instances and modes of expression.

More fundamentally, preactionary discourse peddles ossified stereotypes of the Enlightenment and Western cultural heritage without ever working through what this means as a field of living epistemological and ethical demands. The defence of progress and rationality can rarely have been advanced by intellectual positions so devoid of curiosity and engagement. Indeed, as Ian Buruma has recently argued, the Enlightenment is increasingly deployed as shorthand for a 'new conservative order' defined against 'aliens and their values'.⁴⁰ While I agree that forms of cultural relativism are widely deployed, agreeing that a somewhat inchoate relativism has become a prevalent stance in a semi-corporate NGO sector and in diverse, mediated late capitalist societies is not the same as saying that this irrational, artificial edifice can now be dismantled. In contemporary public discourse there are few self-evident, supra-ordinate moral and ethical coordinates that can simply be restated loudly for the relativist dullards, and to assume so is to presume, in Colin McCabe's phrase, that 'running around on the rugby field of rational controversy will deliver a rational universe'.⁴¹ Precisely the

opposite: the defensive universal certainties of preactionary discourse and the free-wheeling cultural relativism of a depoliticised anti-racism continue to deliver each other.

The pity of this stagnant cycle of straw-person knocking is that, in a strategic sense, preactionary discourse and a committed anti-racist politics largely agree in viewing managerial, state-sponsored discourses of interculturalism and diversity – that increasingly organise civil initiatives and frameworks of debate – as inadequate for understanding contemporary transformations in Ireland. As Ghassan Hage has noted in Australia, the strength of reactionary discourse in Australian politics indicates how the reliance of ‘White multiculturalism’ on celebrating the richness and gains of diversity has left scant space for speaking about losses. In Hage’s argument, this not only strengthens reactionary politics as a potential forum for people looking to articulate loss, but stems from the consistent disavowal of significant change: ‘White multiculturalism cannot admit to itself that migrants and Aboriginal people are actually eroding the centrality of White people in Australia’.⁴² The parallel is no more than suggestive, but in Irish terms this anxiety of erosion has been consistently articulated in preactionary discourse, and consistently avoided in managerial projects that focus on narratives of gain and richness. In this context, it is then entirely consistent for the Irish state to racialise citizenship⁴³ and propose increasing forms of biopolitical control over asylum seekers and the part-euphemistic category of ‘non-EU migrants’ while loudly proclaiming a commitment to diversity and interculturalism. The oft-proclaimed radical skepticism of preactionary discourse will not be brought to bear on this, of course, as it is embedded in the very elisions of race, state and power that preactionary thought depends on.

Notes and References

- 1 Davina Cooper, *Challenging Diversity: Rethinking Equality and the Value of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 5.
- 2 Norman Fairclough, “‘Political Correctness’: The Politics of Culture and Language”, *Discourse & Society*, 14: 17 (2003), 20, 22–3.
- 3 Norman Fairclough, “‘Political Correctness’: The Politics of Culture and Language”, 23.
- 4 This essay is based on an analysis of articles by selected journalists between March 2005 and March 2007. These journalists were Kevin Myers (‘An Irishman’s Diary’, *The Irish Times*), John Waters (regular column, *The Irish Times*), and Ian O’Doherty (I-Spy and regular comment, *The Irish Independent*). I also read a sample (50%) of opinion pieces printed in *The Sunday Independent* in the same period. Any article which dealt with: (a) descriptions of a ‘PC’ lobby; (b) political correctness in Ireland; and, (c) immigration to Ireland, was analysed. As this is a broadly discursive piece, I have also included other articles of relevance.
- 5 Stuart Hall, ‘Some “Politically Incorrect” Pathways Through PC’, in S. Dunant (ed.), *The*

- War of the Words: The Political Correctness Debate* (London: Virago, 1995), pp. 164-84.
- 6 Cooper, op.cit., p. 6.
 - 7 See, for example, Gavan Titley, 'Resituating Culture: An Introduction', in *Resituating Culture* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2004), and 'Everything Moves: Beyond Culture and Multiculturalism in Irish Public Discourse', *The Irish Review*, 31 (2004), 11-27.
 - 8 See Alana Lentin, *Racism and Anti-Racism in Europe* (London: Pluto, 2004).
 - 9 Norman Fairclough, op. cit., p. 20.
 - 10 Will Hutton, 'Words really are important, Mr Blunkett', *The Observer*, December 16 2001.
 - 11 Teun Van Dijk, *Communicating Racism: Ethnic Prejudice in Thought and Talk* (London: Sage, 1989).
 - 12 See John Mangan, 'Battler Stations', *The Age*, October 5 2004.
 - 13 Vanessa Trapani, 'The Discursive Dimension of Human Rights: Identity and Diversity Discourses within Contemporary Polish Debates' in Gavan Titley and Alana Lentin (eds), *The Politics of Diversity in Europe* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2007).
 - 14 Gary Younge, 'Take a potshot at the powerless and you too can win a medal of valour', *The Guardian*, March 6, 2006.
 - 15 Teun Van Dijk, op.cit., p. 10.
 - 16 See David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2001).
 - 17 See Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley, 'More Benetton than Barricades? The Politics of Diversity in Europe' in Gavan Titley and Alana Lentin (eds), *The Politics of Diversity in Europe* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2007).
 - 18 Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society* (London: Pluto/Merlin, 2003), p. xi.
 - 19 Ghassan Hage, op.cit., p. xi.
 - 20 Davina Cooper, op.cit., pp. 6-8.
 - 21 Ian O'Doherty, 'Ello, ello: wot's all this then?', *The Irish Independent*, 7 February 2007.
 - 22 Myers, Kevin, 'An Irishman's Diary', *The Irish Times*, 12 May 2005.
 - 23 Myers, Kevin, 'An Irishman's Diary', *The Irish Times*, 10 November 2005.
 - 24 See Arun Kundnani, *The End of Tolerance: Racism in Twentyfirst Century Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).
 - 25 Kevin Myers, 'An Irishman's Diary', *The Irish Times*, 28 October 2005.
 - 26 *The Irish Independent*, 26 January 2007.
 - 27 This is not to suggest that when evidence is proffered that it is accurate. Kevin Myers, for example, refers to the 'Christmas holiday in Birmingham being renamed the "Winterval"', so as not to offend immigrants, it apparently being assumed that native Christians had no feelings to be offended' ('An Irishman's Diary', *The Irish Times*, 10 November 2005). The problem with this example, and many others like it, is that they happen to be inaccurate, but circulated as urban myths that work well within the frame of a comment article. Oliver Burkeman has traced the myth of Winterval and other 'politically correct attacks' on Christmas and detailed how they inevitably involve the re-working of a tenuous link to fit the 'can it get any worse' expectations of relativist meltdown. Burkeman's discussion is worth quoting at length, not least for its implicit judgment on Myers' journalistic standards: 'Perhaps the most notorious of the anti-Christmas rebrandings is Winterval, in Birmingham, and when you telephone the Birmingham City Council press office to ask about it, you are met first of all with a silence that might seasonably be described as frosty. "We get this every year," a press officer sighs, eventually. "It just depends how many rogue journalists you get in any given year. We tell them it's bollocks, but it doesn't seem to make much difference." According to an official statement from the council, Winterval – which ran in 1997 and 1998, and never since – was a promotional campaign to drive

- business into Birmingham's newly regenerated town centre. It began in early November and finished in January. During the part of that period traditionally celebrated as Christmas, "there was a banner saying Merry Christmas across the front of the council house, Christmas lights, Christmas trees in the main civil squares, (and) regular carol-singing sessions by school choirs". Oliver Burkeman, 'The phony war on Christmas', *The Guardian*, 8 December 2006.
- 28 Kevin Myers, 'An Irishman's Diary', *The Irish Times*, 3 February 2006.
 - 29 See Walter Mignolo, 'The Many Faces of Cosmo-polis: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism', *Public Culture*, 12:3 (2000), 721-749.
 - 30 Kevin Myers, 'An Irishman's Diary', *The Irish Times*, 23 March 2005.
 - 31 John Waters, 'Faith, Reason and Violence', *The Irish Times*, 25 September 2006.
 - 32 John Waters, 'Straining the bounds of tolerance', *The Irish Times*, 30 October 2006.
 - 33 Research would also have shown that Choudry is often invited by programmes which explicitly seek polarised debate. See Ehsan Masood, writing in relation to BBC's *Newsnight*: 'Big Media, Small World', *Open Democracy*, 22 August 2006.
 - 34 John Waters, 'Liberals dig a grave for Europe', *The Irish Times*, 13 February 2006.
 - 35 Kevin Myers, 'An Irishman's Diary', *The Irish Times*, 10 February 2006.
 - 36 See Gavan Titley, 'Celtic, Christian and Cosmopolitan: "Migrants" and the Mediation of Exceptional Globalisation' in Michael Cronin (ed.), *Transforming Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming).
 - 37 Kevin Myers, 'An Irishman's Diary', *The Irish Times*, 27 September 2005.
 - 38 Kevin Myers, 'An Irishman's Diary', *The Irish Times*, 16 September 2005.
 - 39 Paul Gilroy, 'Melancholia and Multiculture', *Open Democracy*, 3 August 2004. See also Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (London: Routledge, 2004).
 - 40 Ian Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo Van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance* (London: Atlantic, 2006), p. 36.
 - 41 McCabe, Colin, 'Mumbo-jumbo's survival instinct', *Open Democracy*, 1 February 2005.
 - 42 Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 22.
 - 43 See Ronit Lentin, 'From Racial State to Racist State' in Alana Lentin and Ronit Lentin (eds), *Race and State* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006).