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“Living the British dream? Immigration, identity and the idea of citizenship
in 21st century Britain”

Both Conservative and Labour Election Manifestos 2005 agree on the benefits of immigration, focusing on the advantages that it conveys: social diversity, cultural richness and significant contributions for the economy’s overall growth. Nonetheless, both parties intend to bring immigration under control. Whilst Tony Blair defends an investment in the latest technology to keep borders strong and secure and thus reduce threats from overseas, Michael Howard insists on the idea of ‘bringing immigration back under control’ and he seems to be more inflexible concerning this specific issue and dedicates more discussion to it than Blair.

‘It’s time for action’ is the conservative leader’s *leitmotif* in the process of attaining the British dream. According to Howard ‘Everyone should have the opportunity to live the British dream’. And he goes on to focus on the core values that stand for the hallmark of Britain, establishing a comparison between the American and British nations:

One of the reasons why America may seem more successful at integration is that minority communities buy into the American dream. The notion that the boy from the log cabin can make it to the White House is more myth than reality, but it is a myth with a powerful hold. In reality ordinary people in Britain are more likely to make it to Downing Street and to the top of other walks of life. But no one here talks about the British dream. We should. (...) We need to inculcate a

sense of allegiance to the values that are the hallmark of Britain – decency, tolerance and a sense of fair play.¹

But this state of perfection will only be acquired if, first of all, some problems are solved in the interest of British society and its values. Immigration is one of them.

Michael Howard's electoral promise is then to set an overall annual limit on immigration by establishing a fixed quota for the number of asylum seekers, representing a national control of asylum policies. This, indeed, seems to be a measure to be taken into account if we think about the latest terrorist attacks in London. However, it will have to be cautiously planned as it might lead some division over the issues of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity.

Great Britain is, in fact, a nation of immigrants. It has always been invigorated by foreign people, either immigrants or refugees. It has always been cross-bred. Over the centuries, Britain has been invaded by Celts, Romans, Anglo-Saxons, French, Dutch, just to name a few, who settled in a green, arable land, bringing in their traditions, their language and their cultures.

The formation of the British (English) nation was thus the result of a mixture of distinct peoples. In addition, (and if we think about Miroslav Hroch's theory on the process of nation formation) cultural and linguistic bonds were necessarily shared between these people who lived in the same territory, sharing thus a common past. (Hroch: 1996,79). These characteristics represent some of the main conditions for becoming a member of a nation. Therefore, national identity means inclusiveness and identifying oneself with a collective whole, entailing mutual obligations between defined people and a state. (Verdery: 1996, 229.)

According to Charles Tilly, citizenship is the ultimate representation of that tie: '(...) the identity 'citizen' describes the experience and public representation of that tie.

Such an identity does not spring whole from a deliberate invention or a general's ineluctable implications but from the historical accumulation of continual negotiation.

(Tilly: 1995, 227)

The process of nation-building has always been, and continues to be, a permanent struggle between invisible practices of power. Groups within a society can be rendered visible or invisible; they can be assimilated or eliminated (Verdery: 1996, 230). Immigrants undergo this process of either integration or exclusion, having to deal with questions of place, set of manners and codes, or of birth and blood which have been included in the project of nation-making. But are they really fundamental?

Our main concern is not to present exhaustive definitions of nation, or of national identity, but to look for ways to celebrate the part immigrants have played in British history, struggling for citizenship and therefore inclusiveness. We will also give special attention to the Pakistanis who, for the last four decades, have been facing racial discrimination from their fellow Englishmen.

However, British people don't like to think that their history is mainly based on immigration and they prefer to select the most noble and stable events of their history. 'They construct mythologies around the national character as still and virtuous' (Winder: 2004, 1). Immigration is, most of the times, seen as a burden, and immigrants are seen as needy beggars, according to Robert Winder:

It (immigration) is one of those grim, unsettling words that clangs on our consciences as a duty, an issue – a burden. Britain's surliness towards foreigners is legendary and well-documented. Yet immigration – more grandly defined or imagined – is not only one of the biggest stories of British life; it is one of the most resonant, and one of the oldest. Ever since the first Jute, the first Saxon, the first Roman and the first Dane leaped off their boats and planted their feet on British mud, we have been a mongrel nation. Our roots are neither clean nor straight; they are impossibly tangled. (Winder: 2004, 2)

In fact, this tangled web of identities, of multicultural and multi-ethnic communities has been reshaping British culture for the last decades.

Britain has always had a position of economic and political supremacy in the world. In the 19th century the Empire gave Britain its power and made the British feel God's chosen. However, the end of the Empire and the two World Wars in the 20th century distorted this image of a supreme nation. By mid-century Britain was struggling for survival and wanted to recover from the destruction of the Second World War.

As a consequence of the end of the Empire and of the creation of the Commonwealth, many people from the ex-colonies immigrated to Britain. In the 40s and in the 50s of the 20th century, workers from the West Indies were invited in to reconstruct Britain after the 2nd World War. Immigrants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh arrived in the 50s and in the 60s, in an attempt to escape poverty and political instability.

The search for work and for better living conditions seems to be one of the main reasons why people immigrated to Britain. Nonetheless, after the breakdown of the Iron Curtain, Britain hosted a new type of immigrants, the refugees from the Eastern countries. Among these there were victims of the war in the former Yugoslavia. This fact changed British political strategies a great deal and it caused an onset of protests based on nationalist assumptions. The Conservative Party created the Law of Asylum and Refugees in 1996, which intended to reduce the number of people asking for political asylum and to control illegal immigration. Workers were punished with a £ 5.000 fine if they employed illegal immigrants.

Edward Said, a remarkable intellectual of our times, traced the map of the contemporary world as follows:

For surely it is one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age to have produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons, and exiles than ever before in history, most of them as an accompaniment to and, ironically enough, as afterthoughts of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts. As the struggle for independence produced new states and boundaries, it also produced homeless wanderers, nomads, vagrants, unassimilated to the emerging structures of institutional power (...).

And in so far as these people exist between the old and the new, between the old empire and the new state, their condition articulates the tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions in the overlapping territories shown on the cultural map of imperialism.

(Said: 1994, 402-403)

The immigrants and the refugees searching for political asylum consequently became the scapegoat for racist people (these are the ones who are often unemployed or belong to extremist groups, such as the skinheads). They are easily identified first of all by the colour of their skin, by the language they speak or by the clothes they wear. They are the others, an epithet used by Eric Hobsbawm:

What exactly is being defended against the 'other', identified with the immigrant strangers? Who constitutes 'us' poses less of a problem, for the definition is usually in terms of existing states. 'We' are French, or Swedes, or Germans or even members of politically defined sub-units like Lombards, but distinguished from the invading 'them' by being the 'real' Frenchmen or Germans or Brits, as defined (usually) by putative descent or long residence. Who 'they' are is also not difficult. 'They' are recognizable as 'not we', most usually by colour or other physical stigmata, or by language. (Hobsbawm: 1996, 262)

However, the debate does not arise from the number of immigrants (Britain doesn't have a high percentage of immigration when compared to France, for example), but on the problems that the ethnic minorities face every day. These people were born

and brought up in Britain, a fact that points to the problem of national identity. They are given citizenship, but they still feel like foreigners in their own country.

The census of 2001 indicates that there are over three million non-white immigrants. They represent 9 % of the total British population. Over a million are Asian. The Indians, the Pakistanis and the Bangladeshis are the biggest ethnic minorities. These ethnic groups established themselves in the Southeast of England and in the Midlands. In Spitalfiels, East of London, 60 % of the population comes from Bangladesh. The Pakistanis settled mainly in Bradford represent 20 % of the population, and in Birmingham they are 22 % of the population. The Pakistanis have reached a total of 476.000 according to the latest census. London has the highest proportion of minority ethnic communities. Nearly 50 % of the London population is non-white.²

In these places, multiculturalism performs a major role. The Church of England has been replaced by mosques or temples and the old shops have given place to sari shops and halal butchers. (Paxman: 1998, 73)

Nowadays, as a consequence of the recent terrorist attacks in London and of the war against Iraq, racial discrimination is even more arising from the colour of the skin and religion. Islam represents an evil force for those who are not in favour of the immigrants' integration in their country. But even within the Muslim culture there is a hierarchy of prejudice concerning the different Muslim peoples. The Pakistanis are the ones who have been suffering the most. According to Tariq Modood, the Pakistanis are a racial underclass in Britain. In fact, quoting Modood, 'they have had the most adverse impact from immigration laws and rules, they have the worst housing and suffer from the highest levels of attacks on persons and property'. (Modood: 1992, 261) The Police also agree with this racist behaviour, frequently stating racist remarks about the Pakis:

- To be honest, I don't mind blacks, proper blacks. It's just Pakis, they claim everything.
- I class them as one thing and that's it, Pakis.
- I'll admit it, I'm a racist bastard. I don't mind blacks. I don't mind black people. Asians? No.
- A dog born in a barn is still a dog; a Paki born in Britain is still a fucking Paki.
- They actually think they're English because they're born here. That means if a dog's born in a stable, it's a horse.³

The Pakistanis (and the Bangladeshis) are, in fact, the poorest ethnic groups in Britain. They are all Muslims by religion; they come from only a few traditional areas of immigration: West Pakistan, the North-West frontier area, the Mirpur border area with Kashmir and the area bordering on the Punjab. Their society is strictly structured: women are excluded from any kind of work and have to keep to their traditional costumes. Conversely, men can wear western clothes and are the breadwinners of their families. They interact very little with other ethnic groups since assimilation might mean loss of their identity. Because they are less educated they tend to procreate faster than the average population.⁴

The clear absence of a reasonable number of Asian models in sport, in music or in fashion portrays a sad reality of a Britain segregated by fear and ignorance. Such a reality is also a consequence of the linguistic, religious and cultural barriers that make Asian integration in Britain so difficult.

The solution to these problems can and must lie in multicultural education. The media can also perform an important role in this process of integration, as, with the right orientation, they can help to decrease racial and ethnic hatred. Focus should

hence be placed in human rights and not in concepts such as nationalism or national territory. While keeping their own culture, the integration of these minorities in an inclusive culture is urgent. The expression ‘being quintessentially English’ turns out to be hard to specify in a particular period of time, as the ones who claim to have the unique and distinctive characteristics of the English, often come from other countries or their families are immigrants. Michael Howard and Michael Portillo are just two examples.⁵

The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 introduced some measures in order to pacify racial tensions. Section 1 of this Act requires people to have sufficient knowledge about life in the UK, relating to language and society. To become a citizen, an individual must make an oath to the Queen and a pledge of loyalty to the UK.⁶ Nevertheless, *The English Language Tests and Citizenship Ceremonies* will not stop illegal immigrants and refugees from entering the country.⁷ They don’t need to know the British history and culture to work for only “a few quid” a day.

In conclusion, British culture has become a melting pot of the different cultures of immigrants and ethnic minorities who, more or less peacefully, live in the same territory. In the 21st century, Britain needs to learn how to deal with this social and cultural phenomenon. The question that one should ask nowadays is what social integration model we want for our societies. The answer will definitely lie in the supervision of the migratory influx, honouring the difference and guaranteeing religious freedom. Only then could we begin to believe in the possibility of the idea of the British dream.

Both Conservative and Labour Parties strive for that utopian idea of a pluralist and cosmopolitan country. They both make a play for patriotism by frequently praising the country and its best qualities. Moreover, if decency is one of the British major

qualities mentioned, then it should not be forgotten when fair-play, justice, tolerance and, above all, inclusiveness are at stake.

¹ Taken from an article written by Michael Howard, 'Integration is about the values we share, not traditions that divide us' in http://www.conservative.com/title-do?def=news.show.article.page&Object_id=124407.

² In http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/uc/03/census_2001/html/ethnicity-stm

³ In Nitin Sawhney, "Whose Country is it anyway?", *The Observer*, October, 2003 in http://observer.guardian.co.uk_news/story/

⁴ In [http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/GenerateContent;](http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/GenerateContent;http://www.faithfreedom.org/Articles/sina/pakistanis_in_uk.htm)
http://users.aber.ac.uk/mof3/part2/minority_groups.html

⁵ Michael Howard, leader of the Conservative Party, was born in Wales. His father, Bernard Hecht, was a Romanian Jewish who had moved to Britain as an economic migrant. Michael Portillo, former conservative MP, was born in London, but his father, Luis Gabriel Portillo, was an exiled Spanish Republican and his mother, Cora Blyth, was of Scottish origin.

⁶ In <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts.2002/2004>

⁷ These tests were applied for the first time in 2004. The British government now requires all new citizens to pass a "Britishness test" demonstrating a minimum standard of English (level 3) and knowledge of the country, its government and its culture.

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