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Xenophobia and the Need for Vigilance

“Holding anger is like grasping a hot coal
with the intention of throwing it at someone else:
you are the one who gets burned.”

BUDDHA

I recently spent some time in Barking, in East London, a place which has been associated with immigrants since Huguenots escaping Roman Catholic intolerance arrived in the seventeenth century and brought with them the fried fish and chips the English mistakenly think is a native dish.

Nowadays in Barking you can buy your newspaper from a Bangladeshi newsagent, phone a cab from the Greek Cypriot taxi office, choose between an Indian or Chinese takeaway, get your daily bread at the Jewish baker's, or pick up some shopping at the Russian grocer, a place also popular with the Lithuanians and Poles who are more recent arrivals.

Tolerance at Work

East London is one of the most vibrant and cosmopolitan places on Earth and, for the most part, it works. Despite the concerted efforts of racist groups, people interact, work together, shop at each others' shops, live side-by-side, catch the same buses, pay the same taxes, drink the same water and breathe the same air.

This is, of course, no mystery. Almost every person in every part of every country in the world wants essentially the same things: peace and security under the rule of law, a warm, dry place in which to live, bread on the table and the work needed to pay for it. The freedom to worship and the right to participate in the political process are important but secondary issues.

The problems of racism, intolerance and xenophobia have always come from a small minority. This minority is usually loosely-based,

underprivileged and inarticulate, but there are times when like-minded bigots form organized groups and seek to recruit others.

The groups may be as shambolic and primitive as a pack of football hooligans, or as disciplined and deadly as the *Schutzstaffel* (SS). What they have in common is an intoxicating mix of focused aggression and genuine camaraderie. Two personal anecdotes may serve to illustrate this and its more positive counterpart.

When I was growing up in the London borough of Greenwich in the sixties, a small number of Hindu families moved into the area. They were dignified, respectable people who wanted only to live in peace. By and large their wish was granted, but they did suffer minor incidents of what I call *soft racism*.

One day I was out walking with my elder brother and his friends. As we approached a Hindu woman one of our group said, "Hold your breath." To my eternal shame I did as instructed. I sometimes wonder how that woman must have felt, a woman whose culture was producing great art when my ancestors were hunter-gatherers painted blue.

I suspect that she accepted our ignorant disrespect with the dignity for which her people are justly renowned. The pang of conscience I felt at the time was overpowered by the comfort of feeling part of a group, the strength in numbers, the congratulation of peer approval.

Moving forward to the late seventies, I found myself part of another group, and I am happy to say that this one was considerably more honourable than the last. At that time, an openly racist political party, the National Front (NF), was gaining in strength.

By using tactics such as claiming that immigrants were causing unemployment among the indigenous (ie. white) people, the NF played on the fears of some of the working class and scapegoated those who had come, as was their right, from former British colonies to seek a better life in the UK.

The party not only gained a significant number of votes in local elections, but succeeded in fomenting fear and hatred within many communities. An organisation called the Anti-Nazi League (ANL), with its affiliate Rock against Racism (RAR), organised marches and concerts to counter the wholly negative message of the racists.

During one of these marches I found myself walking amongst a group of elderly men whom I later identified as surviving members of the opposition to Oswald MOSLEY's British Union of Fascists (BUF) from the thirties.



As we walked through Brick Lane in East London, the sky suddenly filled with glass. A group of racists who had gathered at a pub and waited for the march were throwing beer glasses into the demonstrating crowd.

As the glasses hit us or smashed to the ground, I instinctively raised my arms to protect my head, but I noticed that the elderly men continued marching, their heads held high and their backs straight.

They would not show fear in the face of evil. That was, for me, a fine and inspirational example of passive resistance, and I instantly recognised those men as exemplary role models for the cause against hatred and intolerance.

The racists themselves presumably congratulated each other on well-aimed throws, and no doubt felt secure in the knowledge that they were safe from harm, since the demonstrators were peaceful and the sympathy of the police was with them.

Blind Hatred or Primitive Instinct?

Why is it that some people feel the need not only to hate those who are different from them, but also to manifest this antagonism in violent physical action? We may find the answer to this in its opposite phenomenon, altruism.

The biologist Richard DAWKINS has suggested that the reason why we help total strangers when there is nothing to be gained for ourselves lies not only in our upbringing, our religious or moral education, but also in a sound biological function.

In ancient communities, which consisted of up to two thousand people, it simply made good sense for everyone to help everyone else because each person was, or might become, related to every other person in the community.

When the community became unmanageably large, it split to form two distinct communities. In our complex and fragmented world today, we have largely lost that simple group identity. We have formed groups within groups; mutually exclusive factions for which antagonism of the *other* acts as a cohesive force within the group to which we belong.

The problem of racial intolerance and suspicion of the *other* may be simply a result of the fact that the *other* is clearly recognisable as different. The skin is a different colour, the language is incomprehensible, the food smells strange, the customs are odd. Let us remember the etymology of the word *barbarian*: it was originally imitative, suggesting “bar bar”, the gibberish of uncivilised non-Greeks.

When we perceive two things which are essentially similar but have some differences (two pens, for example), the first thing we do is compare them. In our comparison we find difference, and, in finding differences, we find disparity, inequality and thus superiority and inferiority.

It is inevitable that when two things are compared one of them will be conceived as inferior to the other, and because we all want to be on the winning side, I am likely to conclude that my pen is better than yours, my fish and chips are better than your goulash and knedliki, and that the Greenwich meridian is more authentic than the Bratislava meridian.

If we are to combat xenophobic behaviour, we need to understand that the root cause may be natural animal instinct. When we have recognized that perceiving that which is different from us as inferior

is innate and perhaps even useful in self-protection, then we can rise above our instincts and see that what had an evolutionary function may not be appropriate in civilized society.

The way we see the different behaviour of others can lead to dangerous misinterpretation. A case in point concerns young West Indian men who stood before judges in criminal courts in Great Britain in the sixties and seventies.

The English judges, who had been brought up hearing from angry fathers and teachers the words: "Look at me when I am talking to you!" took the lowered heads and averted eyes of those they were punishing as a sign of recalcitrance. The young men, however, obeying the posture appropriate to the situation as taught by their Jamaican or Barbadian parents, were showing respect to the mistakenly insulted magistrate.

Sociologists suggest that this misinterpretation of cultural mores, as well as simple systemic racism, was responsible for the fact that black offenders received harsher sentences for the same crimes as those committed by their white counterparts. Differences in customs, dress, religion, cuisine and a dozen other things are often perceived as suspect, inferior or threatening.

When one group sees itself as distinct from (and usually superior to) another group, several things may happen. One or both groups usually construct stereotypes about the other. These can be relatively harmless or even flattering, but they may also be vicious and hateful.

In times of political tension and war, this phenomenon is usually more pronounced. As I am half Irish, I personally experienced a great deal of *stupid Irish* stereotyping from schoolmates and teachers during the seventies, when the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) was planting bombs in English pubs and mainland Britain was fearful.

This fear also found an outlet in jokes, which are a typical part of stereotyping. The Irish were of low intelligence and savage and so were not to be taken seriously or considered fully civilized. This is an old story from British imperialism in Ireland, and cartoonists and joke-tellers have been mining the stereotype for two hundred years.

The mention of Jonathan SWIFT, Richard Brinsley SHERIDAN, James JOYCE, Oscar WILDE, William Butler YEATS, Sean O'CASEY, Brendan BEHAN or Seamus HEANEY (and that is just literature) matters not at all to those who find comfort and superiority in stereotyping. Logic does not come into it.

When we consider that a person or a distinct group of people is

essentially different from us, we allow ourselves to see them as less than us. When we perceive people as inferior to us, it makes it easier to lose sympathy for them and their human right to freedom, equality under the law, dignity and respect.

And when we take that quantum leap and believe that our sisters and brothers are *sub-human*, it leads to the belief that we may humiliate them, subjugate them, persecute them, murder them. This was, as all honest people know, the consequence of Nazi ideology in the last century.

Wolves in Sheep's Clothing

When the world learned of the horrors of the death camps, the remaining Nazis and their admirers soon realized that the intentions and methods, which had seemed so reasonable to them, were totally unacceptable to the vast majority of civilized people.

Some of them, therefore, began denying that the Shoa (Holocaust) had ever happened. There is neither need nor space here to give detailed rebuttal to the claims put forward by Nazi sympathizers.

The body of evidence, both eye-witness and documentary, is widely available, overwhelming, corroborative and accepted by a vast number of professional historians working in universities and governments around the world. So what can these deniers hope to achieve by bluntly stating, in the face of the truth, that the monstrous crimes of the Third Reich did not take place?

They hope that with the passage of time, and with the help of growing public cynicism concerning official information, each successive generation will come to question the value of the generally accepted truth, and that they, the deniers, will gradually be able to revive the programmes of the Nazis with all that entails.

There are many groups that wish to undermine the truth of the Holocaust, but one stands out. The *Institute for Historical Review* (IHR) and its publication the *Journal for Historical Review* (JHR) both strive to present themselves as academically respectable. They organize meetings at which history is discussed in conference centres with all the appearance of normality and credibility.

The journal includes 'revisionist' articles on historical incidents other than the Holocaust in order to give the impression that it is concerned with a wider exploration of historical truth. One look at its website, however, should be enough to convince anyone that the principle aim of the IHR is to propagate misinformation about the Holocaust and hatred of world Jewry.

The IHR's associates have conducted campaigns on university campuses, in which they have placed, or tried to place, advertisements in campus newspapers questioning the 'claims' of mainstream historians. Some universities have accepted the advertisements, citing the first amendment of the American constitution and academic freedom as their reasons.

Other universities have refused the pieces, pointing out that though the first amendment prohibits the government from interfering in free expression, the amendment does not oblige every private publication to print whatever an advertiser demands. Those publications also point out that the advertisements simply contain falsehoods and so should not be accepted.

Many academics, for example Deborah LIPSTADT of Emory University, Georgia, United States of America (USA), refuse to engage the deniers in open debate. These academics state that appearing on a debating platform with deniers would both give them a legitimacy they do not deserve, and would give the impression that there were two sides to the Holocaust truth.

The deniers consistently state that they merely wish to put forward their side of the story. This is like the *Flat Earth Society* demanding a platform at the highest possible academic level to debate with world-renowned geologists whether or not the world is flat.

To do so would be to insult the intelligence of their peers, their students and the general public. Nobel Prize-winning scientists do not sit down with Creationists and discuss whether the world began on a Tuesday or a Wednesday six thousand years ago.

It is the same with Holocaust deniers. If they are provided with the oxygen of publicity, they will achieve credibility. By accepting deniers' advertisements, universities gave the impression that these people actually had something to add to academic debate, and the result was that television and radio stations then invited deniers to air their views to a much wider audience.

The Holocaust deniers also engage in wider publishing, as well as encouraging people to read the work of other deniers. By quoting each other in their publications, deniers build up an impressive-looking bibliography by a kind of cross-pollination, which adds to the illusion of academic respectability.

One author takes one piece of "evidence," for example that Anne FRANK's diary was written in green ballpoint pen, and extrapolates from that "fact" that the diary is a fake. Another author quotes the first as a published authority and is, in turn, quoted by a third author

who then suggests that there is a weight of evidence to support the truth of the green ink story.

A person new to the activities of Holocaust deniers, a first year university student for instance, might be given a copy of one of these texts and be impressed by the meticulous footnotes and bibliography. "It looks just like the other journals in the library," the unwary may think. "There must be something in it."

These organized Holocaust deniers try to distance themselves from the neo-Nazi thugs that can be observed in the USA and Europe; skinheads waving Nazi flags and committing acts of violence against those who oppose them, displease them or disgust them.

There are, however, links between those who purport to be part of the democratic process and those who openly preach discrimination on the grounds of race and skin colour, and even mass murder.

One such group is the British National Party (BNP). The BNP is the successor to the aforementioned National Front, and is an extreme right-wing political party, which advocates the forced repatriation of non-white immigrants, even those who were born in the UK.

BNP leader, Nick GRIFFIN, in 1998, during a trial in which he was convicted of distributing material likely to incite racial hatred said: "I have reached the conclusion that the 'extermination' tale [the Holocaust] is a mixture of Allied wartime propaganda, extremely profitable lie, and latter witch hysteria."

In 1992 the BNP allowed a group called *Combat 18* (C18) to act as security guards at its events. The group's name comes from the first and eighth letters of the Roman alphabet, AH, the initials of Adolf HITLER.

One prominent member, now in prison for murder, was Paul 'Charlie' SARGENT, who said in a 1995 interview: "I believe in Adolf HITLER and his solutions. We in Great Britain are the front-runners when it comes to fanatical Fascism. There has never been more support for Fascism in Great Britain than now. Ours is the natural politics of the British working man. My view is that all blacks should be killed."

The BNP and C18 later severed official links, but there is little doubt that although the BNP leadership has distanced itself from these murderous thugs, ordinary members of both groups keep in close contact. The BNP now denies that it is racist and denies that its leader is a Holocaust denier. The weight of evidence suggesting otherwise is, however, formidable.

Perhaps the most frightening aspect of C18's activities is its *Redwatch* internet sites. On these sites can be found the photographs,

names and often addresses of people who have opposed far-right organizations.

To avoid being closed down, the *Redwatch* sites use multiple servers and usually operate from the USA, where they can hide behind the First Amendment. The sites are careful to avoid legal action and always include a disclaimer:

“This website contains no threat nor is it intended that the material should be used for any unlawful activity.” The *Redwatch Poland* site adds that the site is “strictly an informational database to help the public keep informed about the criminal and destructive tendencies of persons engaged in anti-fascist, anti-racist and left-wing activities.”

On this site can be seen a picture of a group of students who are engaged in tidying a Jewish cemetery. Below the group picture are enlarged images of individuals from the group, together with their names and other personal details including their addresses and even instructions on which buses to take to get there. The message to C18 members and sympathisers is crystal clear: find these people and attack them.

It is, unfortunately, unlikely that a hardened racist will change his or her behaviour. The confirmed bigot has invested too much energy in formulating views and cultivating friendships with like-minded people.

Whether we are talking about a skinhead standing on a street corner and abusing passers-by or a false priest with a radio station and a fat bank account, these people are probably lost to us. Instead we should look to the young.

We must continue to educate each generation about the truth of the Holocaust, we should enlighten people who are unaware of the activities of racists, and we must never forget that the human rights of the minorities in our own countries are sacrosanct.

We can measure ourselves by how we treat those who are powerless, vilified and downtrodden. Let us then lobby our politicians, write to our newspapers and tell our friends when we encounter xenophobic behaviour, and let us not forget to hold to account those of our leaders, our teachers and our ministers who are tempted to court popularity at the expense of the weak.

Peter FOULDS is an English language teacher who lives and works in Poland. He has taught people of over thirty nationalities in Great Britain, Turkey, Russia, Czech Republic and Poland. This experience has taught him that people are essentially the same under the skin, and that xenophobia is the result of ignorance and insecurity. This article is an edited adaptation of a lecture on xenophobic behaviour given at the WSCF-CESR seminar on *Overcoming Nationalism, Xenophobia and Populism in Modern Societies of Central Europe*, held in Senec, Slovakia in July 2007. He suggests the following websites: www.nizkor.org, www.lipstadt.blogspot.com. His email address is teflcat@wp.pl.