

Thought Paralysis

THE VIRTUES OF DISCRIMINATION



FARHAD DALAL

Exploring Psycho-Social Studies



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THOUGHT PARALYSIS

The Virtues of Discrimination

Farhad Dalal

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For Angelika

*For whom I have provided many an opportunity
to practise the art of tolerance.*

Introduction: thought paralysis

Over the past few decades there have been many heroic struggles and enormous efforts put into challenging the inequalities and iniquities endemic in our society, specifically in the areas of “race”, gender, class, and disability. And, indeed, a great many positive changes have taken place. For one thing, the struggles have brought about a profound change in social conventions in Britain, so that it is no longer acceptable in polite liberal company to say dismissive or hateful things about women, Blacks, or lesbians; changes in the legislature mean that same sex relationships are granted official recognition—something that was unimaginable fifty years ago. Yet, it is also the case that despite these efforts, despite substantial changes in the legislation and so forth, the statistics tell us that racism and sexism continue to flourish; for example, in the 2010 season of the BBC Proms concerts “only 1.6% of the conductors and 4.1% of the composers [were] women” (Thorpe, 2010). But worse, in some cases *the situation has actually deteriorated*: two cases in point being the fact that the pay differentials between men and women have actually *widened* in the last year or two (Hencke, 2009), and the fact that in the five years from 2004–2009 there has been a 70% *increase* in the numbers of Black and Asians stopped and searched on the streets

of the UK in comparison to the previous five years (Travis, 2010). At the same time, these very same institutions make proud claims in their Equal Opportunity statements that they subscribe to the values of inclusivity, fairness, non-discriminatory practice, and so on. They back their claims by pointing to the fact that they require all their employees to participate in “equality and diversity” trainings, in order that they develop more tolerant and inclusive attitudes towards others. Despite these efforts and claims, there remains quite a gap between what institutions say they are doing and what is actually happening.

The contrast between the achievements of the Equality Movements and the road yet to be travelled by them is found in two articles that happened to appear on the same day in the *Guardian*. A glimpse of the achievements are found in an article describing the return of the “Freedom Riders” to Mississippi, to mark the fifty-year anniversary of the first struggles against segregation. One returning veteran of the early struggles remarked,

There are only two kinds of bathrooms now, men and women. The last time I was here there were eight: white men, coloured men, white women, coloured women, white men employees, white women employees, coloured men employees and coloured women employees. [MacAskill, 2011]

It is a testament to the achievements of the struggle that it is so hard in this day and age to even imagine that strict apartheid was the social norm in parts of the USA (and not so very long ago at that). Meanwhile, in the UK at that time, while there was no formal apartheid, virulent racism and sexism were the prevailing norms.

A glimpse of the road yet to be travelled is provided by the headline, “14,000 British professors – but only 50 are black” (Shepherd, 2011), which computes to just 0.34%. The headline speaks for itself.

So, how is it that, regardless of the enormous amounts of money and effort being poured into equality initiatives, inequality continues to flourish to the extraordinary extent that it still does? One explanation favoured by those on the “right” is that these initiatives go against “human nature” and so are bound to fail; they would say that the paucity of Black professors is simply due to their (lack of) ability or their poor work ethic. The book proceeds in a different direction. It attempts to answer this question by critically reflecting on the assumptions that formed the rationales of the equality enterprise.

And, while acknowledging successes of the equality movements, the work focuses on some of the dead ends that the equality project has found itself in, in order to learn from them. One reason for some of the wrong turns taken by some influential streams of the equality movements (particularly by those that “celebrate diversity”), is that they subscribe to a singularly impoverished version of human psychology as well as sociology.

The book will be arguing that the equalities project has floundered to some degree in part because of the machinations of vested interests, and in part because of the ways that the equality movements (particularly the “celebrators of diversity”), have conceptualized the problem (and the solutions that follow from them). At times these “solutions” have worked in the direction of reinforcing the difficulties rather than of dismantling them. For example, it turns out that both the racists and *some* proponents of multi-culturalism and diversity buy into the same essentialist premise, to believe that the “difference” each venerates is real and incontrovertible. The category beloved of the racists is that of “race”, while the categories beloved of the multi-culturalists and diversity promulgators are those of culture and ethnicity. But, peculiarly, the proponents of diversity utilize their category for the same purposes as the racists: to distance human groupings from each other in order to preserve their “authenticity”. The racists do this by denigrating those who are different, and the diversity promulgators manage this by idealizing and fetishizing difference. Caught between the two, the casualty, often enough, is thought itself.

A part of my developing argument will be that racism and the other processes of marginalization (of which racism is but a subset) are, in many ways, analogous to parasites. Parasites mutate and evolve to mimic the functioning of the host in order to fool the host into thinking that that the parasite is a good and healthy part of itself. This results in the parasite dropping “below the radar” of the defence systems of the host in order to sneak into its body. Once ensconced, the parasite leeches on the resources of the host, depleting and weakening it, and often enough killing it off entirely. In some cases, like that of the cuckoo, the host is sufficiently fooled into *actively* feeding and nourishing the parasite to the detriment of itself. With regard to equality, this is the kind of situation we currently find ourselves in. My contention is that *some* of the processes of marginalization have mutated into forms that fool liberalism into fostering them and giving

them succour, undermining its own integrity in the process. One of the more successful of the recent forms taken by these processes is the “celebrating diversity” movement. The central belief of the diversity movement, that you *must* respect difference, looks decent and innocent enough, but it is not. It is insidious, because it has fooled the host (democratic liberal society) into switching off its immune system, this being the capacity to think. How the processes of marginalization have managed this feat is, in part, what the book is about.

An anxiety and a caution

The danger in writing a book critical of *aspects* of diversity, multiculturalism, and the like is that it might be construed that I am against the emancipatory project *per se*. Further, the critique could be used to give succour to the racist, or those who cry “political correctness” in order to stifle and undermine challenges to the current order of things. So let me be clear on where I stand: unlike some right-wing pundits, I *do* think that there are many anomalies with regard to equality in our society. To my mind, there is no question that there are serious and very real issues to be thought about as to how and why only some “kinds” of individuals appear to make the grade and other kinds hit “the glass ceiling”. All of this is beyond question and dispute. There is evidence aplenty that racism, sexism, and the like continue to flourish. For example, in the four-year period from 2005 to 2009, the Metropolitan Police Territorial Support Group (a specialist police unit) has had over 5000 complaints made against them for “oppressive behaviour”. And of these, just 0.18% of the complaints were upheld; the rest were deemed unsubstantiated (by the police themselves). One officer has had thirty-one complaints lodged against him, of which about twenty-six were lodged by Black and Asian men. In other words, not only does racism continue to flourish, there seems to be very little real will to confront it by the authorities, and is, often enough, being perpetrated by the authorities themselves. But it is also an error to talk of the authorities as a “them”, as though they were all of one mind. In this instance, the police force’s watchdog, the Metropolitan Police Authority, is deeply critical of the Territorial Support Group, saying that “it’s time for an ethical audit and thorough overhaul. They desperately need better training” (Lewis & Taylor, 2009).

Why training is not the answer to this sort of situation is something I will address later in the text.

So, while I agree with the equality movements that there are profound issues regarding inequality and injustice that need challenging, I disagree with some of the strategies being proposed as how to solve these problems. Some of my disagreements are at a fundamental level, not just with the solutions proposed, but with the very way in which the problems are being conceptualized in the first place.

I also want to distance this book from the many works emanating from the right of the political spectrum that mock and lampoon some of the suggestions and prescriptions put forward by the equal opportunity movements. Their purpose is destructive, to undermine the entire equalities project and to normalize prejudice, hatred, and bigotry as “natural” phenomena. To this way of thinking, the ones causing difficulties are the equality pundits and their ideologies and the poor victims are beleaguered Whites, embattled in their own land. For example, here is a scaremongering, inflammatory headline in the pages of *The Times*: “Adoption couples blocked by race barrier”. The article begins:

Thousands of families seeking to adopt a child are being turned away at their first inquiry, with hundreds told that they are simply the wrong race. One family in four was turned down, of which 13 per cent were told it was because their ethnicity did not match the children waiting for a home . . . [Bennett, 2011]

A little later in the article, the hint is made explicit: that it is White families who are being blocked from adopting “ethnic” children. I do not want to take up the issue of whether families of one colour ought to be able to adopt children of another colour. Instead, I want to focus on how mischievously the paragraph is crafted and what it invites the reader to think. At first read it seems as though thousands of (White) families are being blocked from adopting babies. But a second read tells us that one in four were turned down for a multitude of reasons, *out of which* thirteen per cent were denied because of their ethnicity. The arithmetic is simple: thirteen per cent of twenty-five per cent comes to just over three per cent. In other words just over three out of every hundred applicants were turned down because of their ethnicity—not as exciting as the “thousands” and “hundreds” announced in the initial sentence. It then also turns out that the “thousands” and

“hundreds” referred to are not literal, but *extrapolations* from a research whose “sample is small”. Surely the intention of the article is malicious, in that it seeks to foster and inflame the racist way of thinking.

So, although this book is going to be critical of certain lines pursued by the diversity and equality movements, my intention is not to attack in order to dismantle the equalities agenda *per se*. Rather, the intention of this work is to *strengthen* these emancipatory movements by critiquing their weaknesses, anomalies, conceptual confusions, and so forth. To use an arboreal analogy, I consider this work as pruning rather than felling.

To anticipate some of the discussion yet to come, in my view, racism at a systemic level and the like are not caused by “ignorance” or by psychologically malfunctioning individuals, but sustained and produced by power relations. The reasons as to why the situation has not progressed more than it might have are several. The first and foremost reason is, quite simply, that institutions and those in power resist structural change (not necessarily consciously) and find ways of apparently complying with equalities enterprise without actually doing so. The equalities enterprise becomes perverted into a paper exercise, the intention of which is to be seen to be doing good rather than doing actual good; the way that they have managed this is by stripping ethics out of the conversation and replacing it with bureaucratic procedure. Further, the diversity agenda has been hijacked by some corporations who purport to subscribe to the emancipatory project for justice but, in fact, exploit the notion of diversity to further enhance their profit margins. These, I contend, are the main obstacles to real change, but this does not let the equality movements off the hook regarding the ways that they themselves have contributed to this situation. The weaknesses of some of the reasoning from sections of the equality movements have created hostages to fortune that have been opportunistically exploited by vested interests, not only in the service of sustaining the status quo, but also of dismantling the equalities project entirely. Their wish, in contrast to mine, is to fell rather than to prune. For example as the book is going to press, the UK government is “consulting” the general public about whether *The Equalities Act* of 2010 should be scrapped entirely, or, at the very least, seriously curtailed because of the “red tape” it generates. It does create red tape, but that is its function, which is as an inhibitor of certain kinds of unethical activities, one of which is as follows. Ian Duncan

Smith, the Works and Pensions Secretary, wants employers to give priority to British workers over “immigrants” from Eastern Europe. But to do this would be to break the law as found in the Equalities Act. So, it would suit his agenda to have this tiresome bit of red tape removed from the statute books. Once freed of this red tape, companies can get back down to the business of favouring the “us” over the “them”, and, astonishingly, being rewarded by the government for doing so. Duncan Smith’s proposal is extraordinary for its naked advocacy of a return to a version of racism, with the key term changed from “Whites” to “British workers”. It is exactly to prevent this sort of thing that the Equality Act exists. But it is also the case that the real problem is not red tape, but the business mentality that puts profit before any sense of loyalty, commitment, or community.

In sum, the fact that the book consists of a deep critique of aspects of the equality movements is not to suggest that the main difficulties are caused by them. The intention of my critique is to pre-empt the exploitation of conceptual weaknesses for reactionary ends. The argument of this book tries to tread the thin line between the apologists, those who deify otherness and difference (diversity peddlers and liberals of a certain persuasion), and the zealots, those who hate and vilify various kinds of others (racists and right-wing pundits).

Two short (schematic) stories and a moral

When Harry was about thirty years old, his promising life trajectory came to an abrupt halt when he was hit by a series of catastrophes. He became depressed. Unable to sustain an independent life, he moved back into the parental home. He began each day by switching on the television and playing computer games. When Harry’s father, Jim, remarked to his wife, Sue, that he thought that their son beginning each day in this way was not helpful to his recovery, she rebuked him. Sue said that Jim had just made a *judgement*; she thought it wrong to make judgements about others because judgements *impose* something on them. In her view, then, the making of judgements about others is unethical and should be avoided at all costs.

Jim was troubled; was it the case that he was wrong to form a judgement about what his son was doing? Ought he instead to stand back and accept Harry on his own terms and rationales? And if so,

what was Jim to do with his concerns regarding what he was witnessing? Jim ended up in a state of confusion and paralysis.

* * *

The other day, while taking a walk in the countryside along a river, I passed a woman speaking into her mobile phone. I noticed myself have the fleeting thought: her awareness is not in the present; she is not taking in the beauty of the setting, and instead she is preoccupied with something and someone elsewhere.

* * *

The first episode captures exactly the predicaments generated by the prevailing ethos being promoted by *some* multi-culturalists and celebrators of diversity. According to their pronouncements, it would appear that to make judgements about others is wrong *per se*, and instead one *always* ought to accept and respect what ever it is that “they” are doing because it is their way. This is because one’s disapproval of “their” ways is born of a judgement made on the basis of “our” way, and so it has no legitimacy. If we are to judge them, we must do so on their terms, not ours.

Not only has this way of thinking become a taken-for-granted norm in many quarters of the equality movements, it is also the norm in the day-to-day life of many ordinary citizens (as Jim’s story shows). Citizens with liberal sympathies learn to live lives that have the appearance of being compliant with the diversity ethos; they learn to silence their inner responses in order to be seen to do the right thing. But, as in Jim’s case, they are often left in a state of bewilderment, confusion, and paralysis. The fact that disapproval is ruled out of court means that the question that can never be asked is, what is the basis of the disapproval? Is the disapproval an expression of, say, racism, or does it have some other, more respectable basis?

While the liberal citizen is often silent and silenced, there are untold others who feel no hesitation or guilt, or any shame, in voicing their negative views about various “others”. They are not unlike the smug judgemental me on the river bank, who, in a subliminal flash, made a series of unreflected unsubstantiated assumptions, culminating in the condemnation and dismissal of the woman while rendering

myself superior. This is an instance of judgementalism, and is indeed to be challenged and reproved.

The moral of the two stories show that there is an important distinction to be made between judgement and judgementalism, a distinction not kept sufficiently in mind by the equality movements. In their haste to challenge the *judgementalism* present in much human interaction, they have ended up vilifying *judgement* itself. This, then, is one of the key tasks of the book; it is an argument for the necessity of holding on to our capacity for judgement, and this is the thing: we need to be able to make judgements in order to counter the forces of judgementalism.

A culture of fear: another short story

It is also the case that a certain kind of fear has come to take hold in public conversations in connection to the marginalized and dispossessed, a fear that paralyses our capacities for discernment. For example, in the UK, the governmental agency called the Health Professionals Council has recently determined that “service users” must be drawn into all aspects of the work of health professionals: sit on interview panels, have a presence on various regulatory committees, and so on. The intention behind the suggestion is a perfectly sensible one: to bring the experience of the “user” to the attention of the “provider” so that the provider might better attune what they provide to the needs of the user. That is the background to the story that follows.

I was facilitating an event at which a team of health professionals were reflecting on their day-to-day practice. In the course of this conversation, it emerged that there was a shared *but unspoken* anxiety about asking the fundamental question: is it a good thing to involve service users at all? To ask the question was taboo; the fear was that to ask the question would be taken to mean that one was against service users *per se*.

A participant then described his recent experience of sharing an interview panel with a service user: the service user’s behaviour during the interview had been difficult in various ways. It had been a terrible experience all round. But then, and this is key, in a later review of the interview process he found himself not voicing his actual experience and, instead, found himself saying that the presence of the

service user had been productive. Several people identified with this “confession” and the conversation moved on to thinking about why it was that they found themselves “performing” in one kind of way in public while keeping their doubts and questions private. What became clear, then, was that they felt unable to exercise their faculties for discrimination and judgement to discriminate *between* various service users. Something silencing was taking place. In effect, the category “service users” was not only being treated as a single homogenous entity, but as a sacred entity. The result was their range of possible responses became reduced to two: *for* them (they are all good) or *against* them (they are all bad). There was no possibility of a more nuanced response to the differences *within* “them”.

Another task of this work, then, is to examine and counter the culture of fear and anxiety of speaking one’s mind, as this ends up working to the detriment of all. Interlinked with this task is the further one of understanding how and why “the one” comes to stand for “the all”, both in the problem as well as the solution.

I should say that I, too, am not immune from the sort of anxiety just referred to. As I write about the problems with a particular service user, I imagine a wave of disapprobation (somewhere in the ether) rising up against me. It is difficult to hold on to the view that to criticize one service user does not mean that one has dammed all service users. This kind of conceptual collapse is continually to be resisted.

In search of Obamaland

Many people might think that a work on the subject of equality is redundant because the equality movements have completed their work. They see in the extraordinary election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the USA in 2008 the death knell of racism, and take it to mean that we are now in a post-racial world. They take the fact that even in the previous Republican administration, President Bush had already appointed two Black people to senior positions (one of them a woman, to boot), Professor Condoleeza Rice and General Colin Powell, as further evidence of the end of racism and sexism. They point to the fact that over the past forty years, many democracies have had female leaders, something unheard of until relatively recently: Margaret Thatcher in Britain, Indira Gandhi in India, and Angela

Merkel in Germany, to name but three. The new prime minister of Iceland, Johanna Sigurdardottir, is openly lesbian—a world first. A recent President of India, Mr Narayanan, was an “untouchable”, something that would have been utterly inconceivable previously. So, when these sorts of facts are put together, we can see why it would seem to many that the equality movements have achieved their goals.

These “successes” are used by some to argue that the entire basis of the equality movements is fundamentally incorrect, in that they have misconstrued the nature of the problem. They reason that as some women, Black people, etc. achieve high positions, this is evidence that there is no “glass ceiling” and anyone can succeed if they just work hard enough. The corollary to this is that others do not succeed because they do not have it in them, or they do not try hard enough, or that it is a “life-style choice”. This last is the extraordinary claim made in Anthony Browne’s book, *The Retreat of Reason*, that “the cause of the gender pay-gap in the UK is not the result of women suffering sex-discrimination in the work place but because of their lifestyle choices” (Browne, 2006). More recently, Catherine Hakim, a sociologist, has claimed in a report published by the Thatcherite think-tank, the Centre for Policy Studies (2010), that the war for gender equality is over because it has been so successful. She is in agreement with Browne, and thinks that women gravitate towards low-paid jobs through choice. She concludes, “We cannot assume that a low percentage of women in higher-grade jobs is due primarily to sex discrimination”. It is a life-style choice born of women having different aspirations from men; “Few women aspire to be engineers or soldiers” (quoted in Gold, 2011). In her opinion, the drive for equality actually harms women’s prospects in the workplace. Reason has indeed retreated, but not from the places that the likes of Browne and Hakim have deemed.

The liberal ethos of the freedom to live and let live is under attack from fundamentalists of many different kinds. In consequence, there is a growing chorus of voices defending the principles of the Enlightenment and liberalism—a chorus I would gladly join. But here, too, there is danger. A closer look at some of these “defences” (e.g., Browne, 2006; Phillips, 2006) show us that they are the means of smuggling back in a great many reactionary attitudes which re-legitimize all kinds of injustices like racism and sexism.

For example, a normally sane colleague shouts out angrily: he will not be silenced! He has a right to condemn the Muslim practice of child marriage. I agree he has this right, and agree with his condemnation of the practice, but his self-righteous fervour is such that he has not noticed that a great many Muslims, too, find this practice abhorrent. Neither does he notice that some fundamentalist sects of other faiths (including his, the Judaeo-Christian) are also *for* this practice. What leaks out in his cry for justice is something akin to Islamaphobia.

Clearly, then, it is not the case that we are in a “post-racial” world, neither is it true that there is no racism, sexism, and the like. Untold statistical studies like those just cited show that there is still a great distance to go. There is ample evidence that the processes of marginalization continue to do their work in covert and overt forms, in all sorts of territories: ethnic minority households are almost three times more likely than White households to be in a poor neighbourhood (Institute of Race Relations (a)); the ethnic minorities appear to suffer from more “mental disorders” than Whites (MIND); in higher education the ethnic minorities are better represented than the general population, but then they find it harder to get jobs (Business in the Community); in the workplace unemployment rates for “ethnic minorities” are twice as high as for Whites (Institute of Race Relations (b)). The statistics with regard to women show similar sorts of patterns.

In sum, our societies are still riven by very real problems of marginalization of people perceived to be of a different kind. There is terror and there is horror; there is the destruction of lives and families, not only in war-torn Iraq or Bosnia, but also here, in ordinary everyday Britain, in neighbourhoods and workplaces full of genuinely decent folk (no irony intended). As these and other statistical analyses continually tell us, some “kinds” of people continue to do less well than other “kinds” in all arenas of life. As a character in Woody Allen’s film *Whatever Works* says, we might have a Black man for President, but he still cannot get a cab to stop for him in New York. He could also have added that it is inconceivable to imagine that a self-confessed atheist could be elected to the USA Presidency today (although he or she is more likely to be able to get a cab to stop for them). We are a long way yet from Obamaland.

The celebrators of diversity

Increasingly, the solution proposed by some to address these iniquities is the celebration of diversity: let us not hate and fear those who are different; instead, let us celebrate our differences from each other, let us celebrate our diversity. The injunction has become ubiquitous, at least here in the West, and specifically the UK and the USA—the axis of decency. In some arenas, it has become so taken for granted that diversity *per se* is a good thing and that it *ought* to be celebrated that no question remains save *how* best to celebrate it. At least, this is how it seems from even a cursory glance at the goings on within public sector services like health and education on both sides of the Atlantic, and also within private organizations of all sizes—from minnows to megalithic transnational corporations.

On first acquaintance, the celebration of diversity seems a perfectly sensible and decent idea. But then, while reading a book on diversity in organizational life, I found myself hesitating and pausing as I read the following sentence: “Both approaches [to diversity issues] have strengths” (Hays-Thomas, 2004, p. 12). I had “stumbled” because my expectation was to read the more usual phrase: “Both approaches have strengths *and weaknesses*”. As I immersed myself further in the literature on diversity, it rapidly became apparent that this was no slip of the pen, but an expression of a growing ethos, the ethos being that one should not criticize any point of view; instead, one should celebrate, understand, and accept all points of view regardless, else one would be being oppressive (recall Jim’s story). It seems to me that this strategy is singularly dangerous, as ultimately it seems to be suggesting that the way to stop individuals *unfairly* discriminating, is to stop them discriminating *per se*, with the result that thought itself becomes paralysed.

The book looks at how and why this peculiar one-sided situation has come about (a situation that does more harm than good) to become the norm for those promoting equality and diversity programmes in organizations and society in general.

Two caveats and their consequences

The use of the term “diversity” emerges from the world view known as liberalism. In broadest terms, this world view is taken to be the bedrock of the beliefs and practices of democracy—our way of life in the UK.

Straightaway, I have to apply two caveats. First, that there are many versions and understandings of liberalism, some antithetical to each other; in other words, the notion of liberalism itself is imbued with diversity. Second, there are many inhabitants of the UK (and not just immigrant others) who would not identify with the “our” in the phrase “our way of life”. But what I have just revealed, to myself as much as the reader, is that *I do* broadly sign up in some unreflected way to the ethos of liberalism, that *I do* consider myself to be part of this particular “us”, despite being one of the immigrant others.

The phrase itself, “our way of life”, is contentious and tendentious, because even while it lays claim to something, it manages somehow to exclude and de-legitimate untold others. It becomes immediately clear that my uses of “us”, “we”, “them”, “the West”, and so on will inevitably draw on a number of unspoken assumptions, assumptions that might well clash with your, the reader’s, assumptions as to the nature of the “we” that is being spoken of. For example, there are some who would question whether I, as an immigrant (despite being in Britain since the age of twelve), can ever legitimately place myself as belonging within the British “us”. To the racist, I (and my progeny) will forever be one of “them”, and to the cultural essentialist, I could never get away from my true, essential identity, my Indian-ness. On the other hand, if I were to claim a continuing sense of Indian-ness, many would say that this is just nostalgia on my part, and, in the colloquial, they would describe me as a “coconut”—brown on the outside but white on the inside. So where do I belong? Which is the “us” that I may claim as my own? Is it really the case that this is an either/or scenario and that *I have to* choose between being *either* British *or* Indian?

Stepping back from the personal to the more general, we see that even while this self-same “West” is allegedly celebrating diversity, ironically, it finds itself confronted by an increasingly belligerent

“Rest”, and particularly by the burgeoning identity called Fundamentalist Islam. Should the notion of “celebration” be extended to them? And if not celebration, then should at least tolerant respect be extended? Some say “yes”, others “no”, and others again say “it depends”. Certainly, the stance taken by the governments appears to be contradictory. On the one hand, their rhetoric is one of encouraging their populations to celebrate diversity *within* their national borders, but, on the international stage, their stance is not one of celebration but of confrontation—war.

Tiptoe through the minefield of taboos

I, as an inhabitant of the West, one with not very well thought out liberal inclinations, find myself increasingly unable to speak and reflect on what is going on. Like Jim and the health professionals, I find myself gripped by a thought paralysis that is due in part to confusion, and in part to fear. This is because to engage *publicly* with the subjects of racism, rights, Islam, and so forth, in this place, day, and age, is to encounter a number of potent taboos. Taboos are Manichean structures, binary structures with no in betweens; things are either good or evil; in or out; good or bad, with nothing allowed between these alternatives.

There is George Bush’s Manichaeism: “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists”. Mr Blair’s version was: “You either support the war on Iraq, or you are a lover and supporter of the despot Saddam”. There is the Islamist’s binaried vision: “You accept the words of Mohammed (as I decree them) or you are an infidel deserving of death”. Next to which is the Zionist version: “Say anything about the Israeli attitude towards the Palestinians and you are anti-Semitic”. And next to that are untold others: “Say anything against the Palestinian Authority or Arafat and you are a rabid Zionist”; “Say anything about the USA’s desire for oil as one of its reasons for launching the war on Iraq and you are a paranoid conspiracy theorist”. And let us not forget the multi-culturalist Manichaeism: “Respect all differences, else you are a racist”, and its liberal counterpart: “Each *must* be allowed their absolute freedom of conscience, else we will be oppressing them”.

So, if I mention the fact that the war on terror has killed and maimed untold more innocents than all the terrorist attacks and suicide bombers put together, then does that make me an apologist for the terrorists? If I do not agree with *some* of the practices espoused by *some* followers of The Prophet, then does that immediately make me an Islamaphobe, a cultural imperialist, and a racist?

The paralysis is further reinforced because any and all number of distinct issues (and, therefore, taboos) are overlaid and linked, so that in addressing one issue, one inevitably falls foul of another. For example, I was taken aback (no doubt naïvely) when I read Moazzam Begg say in the book he wrote on being released from Guantanamo Bay that Palestine was “the best known *Muslim* issue” (Brittain & Begg, 2006, p. 44), and that his concern was for the *Muslims* in Iraq. Now, that is not how I primarily think of those embroiled in either of those contexts—as Muslims; neither do I think that the *sources* of the conflagrations have anything to do with religion (more on this in later chapters). In fact, in being asked by Begg to think about these events in relation to Islam, I find myself alienated from the victims in those contexts. In speaking in this way, Begg has appropriated those struggles for his own Islamic ends. The late, great Palestinian, Edward Said, certainly did not think about the conflict in Palestine in these simplistic terms. So, when Begg frames the Palestinian question in this form, then the only way I am allowed to take a position on Palestine or Iraq is to take a position *vi- à-vis* Islam: I can only be for or against Islam (just as I can only be for or against service users), and in the process (whether I want to or not) end up appearing that I am for or against Judaism or Christianity. Increasingly, I find there is less and less room for manoeuvre, and so I become paralysed and, emotionally, I take a step backwards.

But what is it that I step back into or on to?

Wherever I step, I am bound to fall foul of somebody’s sensitivities and taboos, including my own. The territory is literally a minefield of taboos. Confounded by the range of taboos, I find myself paralysed, because to step anywhere is potentially to cause offence and court disapprobation in myself as much as in others. Can I find a place to stand, indeed *is there* a place to stand between the apologists and zealots of all descriptions, be they theistic, Marxist, capitalist, or whatever?

Good guys and bad guys

How am I to think about what is going on? The “real” world is not neatly divided into good guys and bad guys. For example, on coming through immigration at Heathrow Airport a couple of years ago, I was powerfully struck by two events. First, that one of the immigration officers scrutinizing the passports was a female in a headscarf, clearly Muslim. I found the image anomalous: here was “the enemy” at the gate, but this time the alleged enemy, a follower of Islam, was actually guarding the gate at the British frontier! Does this mean that the xenophobes like Melanie Phillips (2006) are right and “they” have taken “us” over?

Anyhow, a few moments later, another similarly dressed woman approached a white Englishman ahead of us in the queue who, despite there being signs saying that for security reasons mobile phones were not to be used, was speaking loudly on his mobile phone. She drew his attention to the notices. He hardly looked at her, waved her off dismissively, and carried on speaking as though she were not there until he had finished. She stood helplessly by, watching him all the while.

None of us said anything.

The situation carried the additional irony that, in this vignette, Britain’s security was being potentially undermined by an “indigenous” Englishman, and being defended by a Moslem woman. Presumably, in his eyes she (as one of “them”) had no authority to tell him what to do in his “own” country.

Thought impasse

Let me go further into the sources of my own thought impasse. Growing up in London in the 1960s and 1970s, racism was open and commonplace. And, although I had never thought of myself in these terms previously, I found myself increasingly being named (and then naming myself) as “Black”. I had a growing sense of notional armchair solidarity (I was by no means an activist) with others who laid claim to this kind of identity. In brief, “Blacks” and other marginalized folk were the good guys. But what has happened to me in the current context is that I find that I have lost my “natural” allies, and so do not quite know *where* to stand or *with whom* to stand (see Cohen’s *What’s Left*, 2007). It is somewhat embarrassing when some of the people