Social Diversity

I am concerned, in this piece, with some general issues concerning social diversity. I will, as a background, discuss the situation in Britain. But my argument, here, is a much more general one. I will address these problems in two separate pieces – this, and a subsequent one on 'multiculturalism'. I can, in all this, write only in the very broadest and most impressionistic terms.

1. Introduction: a British Story

Britain, like many Western European countries, has, since the Second World War, received many immigrants from countries across the world. In Britain's case, this includes many people from countries in the former British Empire (and subsequently the British Commonwealth). In addition, during the period when Britain was a member of the EU, it attracted many immigrants from especially the poorer parts of the EU. Migrants have made an important contribution to the working of the British economy, and it is striking the way in which people who had initially planned just to come to Britain to make money – some of which they sent back to support their families in the countries from which they originally came – have settled, had families, and we now have members of a third generation who have been brought up as British.

Britain has not been the easiest of places for people to settle in. The population of Britain were, historically, a mixture. 2,000-odd years ago, they were the products of various tribes which, subsequent to partial Roman invasion and settlement, were then invaded and settled by people from Northern Germany, and subsequently Scandinavia. There was then, famously, a conquest and settlement by Normans from France. The Normans were the basis of an aristocracy, which had an important and continuing influence in Britain until the early years of the Twentieth Century.

Indeed, while their political influence declined through the Twentieth Century, socially they played a continuing role as a model for the upper middle classes. In Britain, agricultural improvement, and then the 'industrial revolution' was of great significance. But in these, aristocrats and wealthy land-owners played an important role. While those from

other parts of society who became successful, for example in industry and trade, could assimilate into the 'ruling class'.[1] A consequence of all this, was that in Britain, a relatively small group of people who knew one another and were related by family ties, but which was also permeable to talented people from outside this network, played a key role in what happened.

All of this was reinforced by the role played in the Nineteenth and the first part of the Twentieth Centuries, by the role of 'public schools' (i.e. exclusive private schools), and Oxford and Cambridge as centres of education. Further, in London – which was very much the centre of British life – private clubs formed important meeting-places for men. While dinner parties in the more expensive parts of London, represented a way in which these contacts and influences continued.[2] There were, certainly, elements of meritocracy – e.g. entry into the track leading to senior positions in the Civil Service being awarded on the basis of merit. But those who would benefit from these options would often be drawn from the small part of society that I have described, or become assimilated into it. Similarly, the senior officers in the armed forces in the First and then the Second World Wars, also broadly shared the same kind of ethos.

In the early years of the Twentieth Century, another path to politically influential positions opened up, by way of the Trades Union Movement, and the Labour Party's role in government both national and local. Ramsay Macdonald, became leader of the Labour Party, while Ernest Bevin and Herbert Morrison played major roles in Labour politics in later

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[1] On these issues, see Peter Marsh's review of M. L. Thompson's **Gentrification and the Enterprise Culture: Britain 1780-1980**, **The Business History Review**, Spring, 2002, Vol. 76, No. 1 (Spring, 2002), pp. 194-6.

[2] I had personal experience of being at the edge of the very end of this, when I was Director of Studies at the Centre for Policy Studies in London in the mid-1980s. See also my 'Lunching for Liberty and the Structural Transformation of a Public Sphere: On Britain's Institute for Economic Affairs', **Il Politico**, LXXXIII, n. 1, 2018, pp. 68-96. An interesting picture of this, from the inside, is offered in the autobiography of the journalist Peregrine Worsthorne, **Tricks of Memory**, London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1993.

years, all coming from humble backgrounds and with very limited formal education.

In the latter parts of the Nineteenth and then the Twentieth Centuries, educational opportunities started to open up to a wider proportion of the population. But people would have needed to be both lucky and very talented to be able to move into the higher sections of society. In the period immediately after the Second World War, some publicly-funded schools offered opportunities similar to those in 'public schools', and such figures as Ken Clark (Conservative), and Jack Straw (Labour), both from very ordinary backgrounds, were able to achieve significant positions in politics.

In more recent times, there are much wider educational opportunities, and people with reasonable talents are now more easily able to acquire a good school and university education. But it is striking just what a role people from major public schools continue to play in British government and society.

I have discussed all this, just to bring out the degree to which Britain was – and is – an elite-dominated society. The aristocracy, as such, no longer play a significant role (the House of Lords is dominated by appointed 'Life Peers'). But upward mobility is, very often, the work of several generations.

2. Britain, continued: Immigration

Britain has also had a history of immigration. Much of this was in relatively small numbers. But French Calvinist Huguenots moved to England in quite large numbers – e.g. about 50,000 – following religious persecution in France at the end of the Seventeenth Century.[3] At the end of the Nineteenth Century, into the Twentieth Century, about 140,000 Jews, fleeing persecution in Russia, moved to Britain.[4] There also developed small Muslim populations in several British port cities,

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[3] See 'Refugee Week', **The Independent**, Friday 19 June 2015; https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/refugee-week-huguenots-count-among-most-successful-britain-s-immigrants-10330066.html

[4] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_England

from a variety of countries.[5] There were also black faces in Britain – it has been estimated that there were around 15,000 such people in the Eighteenth Century.[6]

It is also important to note the large-scale immigration that took place from Ireland in the middle of the Nineteenth Century, following the potato famine: by 1860 there were some 800,000 people in Britain who had been born in Ireland. While some of these people were of British background, the bulk of them were Catholics, from poor areas in the South and West of Ireland.[7] They were typically to be found in the very poorest and most miserable areas of towns and cities in Britain. And – despite the fact that they are physically similar to the more general British population – they were identifiable by their Catholicism (and by the separate school system which the Church operated). A residue of hostility to them still exists in Liverpool and Glasgow – kept alive by tensions between the Republican and Unionist populations in Northern Ireland.

It was only after the Second World War that very large numbers of people emigrated to Britain from the West Indies and the Indian sub-continent. There were deliberate efforts made to recruit from the West Indies, in the face of a post-war labour shortage, particularly to jobs in transportation and the Health Service. There was migration particularly from some particular rural areas in Pakistan – often to manufacturing towns in the north of England – and subsequently from Bangladesh. There has also been significant migration to Britain from other parts of the world, with the consequence that in the 2011 census, less than 50% of the population of London was categorised as 'white British'.[8]

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[5] See Humayun Ansari, **The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain Since 1800**, London: Hurst,2018.
[6] Cf., for example, https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/the-slave-trade-and-abolition/sites-of-memory/black-lives-in-england/
[7] See Amy J. Lloyd, 'Emigration, Immigration and Migration in Nineteenth-Century Britain', https://www.gale.com/intl/essays/amy-j-lloyd-emigration-immigration-migration-nineteenth-century-britain
[8] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnic_groups_in_London#:~:text=Londo

There was opposition to large-scale Jewish settlement in the East End of London, but overt anti-Semitism (which had been quite common) started to be more muted after the horrors of Nazi Germany became well-known. The post-World War 2 immigrants typically went into working class occupations. While those from the West Indies had had British-style education and often saw themselves as going back to the 'mother country', they experienced a lot of overt racism. (And, in addition, did not really realise what the character was of the society into which they were moving.[9]) Their local patois was also not always readily understandable by people in the locations into which they moved.[10] There has been, in recent years, an attempt to over-play the historical presence of people from Africa and the West Indies in the United Kingdom prior to the mass-immigration following the Second World War. I am struck by a report that I came across, in some notes that my brother made, that in the period prior to the War, our grandfather – who was a retired London teacher! – remarked that he had just seen a black man for the first time.

Things were difficult for these immigrants, and they have also been difficult for their descendants. Those of West Indian (and subsequently, African) background are distinctive because of their colour. Those from Bangladesh and Pakistan are also somewhat physically distinctive, but have been separated from the wider population because of their religion. (A combination of those elements in Islam and traditional patterns of life brought with them from the rural settings from which they migrated has served to cut some Muslims off from social mixing with the wider population.) It is important to note, however, that while in broad terms people whose backgrounds were from Pakistan and

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n%20has%2C%20in%20recent%20decades,diverse%20cities%20in%20the%20world.&text=At%20the%202011%20census%2C%20London,24.5%25%20born%20outside%20of%20Europe.

[9] Andrea Levy's novel **Small Island**, London: Tinder, 2004 offers a striking fictional account of some of the experiences of people coming to Britain. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind the bad conditions – e.g. with regard to housing, after the wartime destruction of the housing stock – that much of the population was experiencing.

[10] Cf. the Wikipedia article on Jamaican Patois: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jamaican_Patois

Bangladesh have not been particularly upwardly mobile in Britain,[11] the same is not true of people from India (or of ethnic Indians who were living in, and were then expelled from, countries in East Africa). The key difference, here, was that these people more often brought with them skills and education with which it was much easier to be upwardly mobile.

3. What is to be Done?

Issues of different kinds are raised by this material – and also by some of the responses that have been made to it.

3.1 Social Mobility

At one level, it is important that we develop realistic social and historical knowledge about the societies in which we are living, and that we work towards a reasoned consensus as to our current situation, and the prospects for making changes. Clearly, to get to this will involve work by people who are motivated by passionate personal and ideological concerns. But we need to be clear that, as all of us have ideals and preconceptions, truth, or simply improvements to our knowledge, can only be reached if people with different views can participate freely in the discussion. The greatest service that someone can do us, if we care about truth, is to explain in a non-aggressive way, how we have got things wrong. But this requires that the public forum be open to exchanges from **all** points of view (but this is not an excuse for rudeness or offensive behaviour).

Issues about social mobility are tricky. If my account in the first part of this piece is roughly along the right lines, then British society is not one in which one could expect a high degree of social mobility. In part, this is a matter of path-dependency. If a society has, historically, had a particular character, then this may render making radical changes difficult. In addition, two points should be mentioned here, explicitly.

First, at any one point, while innovation – and thus new opportunities – may be possible, the economy confronts us as having a certain structure (as captured, indeed, by how some people have interpreted the Marxist idea of 'relations of production'). There are, as it were, only certain numbers of positions available as senior people in the public service, or

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[11] Although there are obvious exceptions.

heading up most private companies, or in most professions, and so on. This can change over time. But it simply confronts us, at any one time, as a structure which limits what is open to us.[12] As the article cited in Note 12 indicates, what was perceived as increased social mobility in the 1950s and early 1960s and put down to democratization, can, historians are now suggesting, better be understood in terms of structural changes in the economy at that point. This issue seems to me of the greatest importance, as social mobility is typically taken to be a 'good thing', the British public seems to be concerned about it, and the British government has an active policy of promoting it (and a 'Social Mobility Commission' dedicated to this task). But to the degree to which what we are dealing with is structural, this concern may either be futile (if structural constraints are not understood), or mis-directed (if what is needed is structural change). All this is not to say that there are not good arguments against barriers to social advancement which can be removed: it is great both for the individuals involved and for the rest of society if people's talents can be put to good use. But to the degree to which the relevant structures do not change, upward mobility in one direction is presumably matched by downward mobility in the other.

Second, human capital which we acquire from our families and education, may be invaluable. This will include know-how and also contacts which can be tapped for information, which may be more or less relevant in terms of possibilities for social advancement. (My family, for example, were school teachers – which would have been useful had I wished to become a teacher, but was not of much use for anything else – such as, say, commercial activity.) But at the same time, structural change may mean that such knowledge (and skills) which were valuable at one time, become irrelevant.

What one can say, however, is that there are different paths open to immigrants which can make for social advancement. Historically, people

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[12] See, for a useful overview, Christina de Bellaigue, Helena Mills and Eve Worth '"Rags to Riches?" New Histories of Social Mobility in Modern Britain – Introduction', **Cultural and Social History**, 16:1, pp. 1-11, available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14780038.2019.1574053?needAccess=true.

have found interesting opportunities, by way of opening restaurants or stores with, if they were successful, the next generation being educated for professional positions. But not all immigrant groups have been able to follow this kind of path.

3.2 Racism[13]

Human beings have a history of being unpleasant to one another. Historically, there have often been elaborate rules which served to keep different groups separate.[14] And as we know all too well, there have been dramatic cases where different groups who have lived side-by-side in peace for many years, have turned on one another. On a large-scale basis, matters have not been helped by the development of nationalism, which has led people to feel that there are grounds for objecting to political rule, unless it is being undertaken by people of one's own ethnicity.[15]

More generally, however, people tend to be unpleasant towards – or to make unfunny 'jokes' directed at – people who are different from them. This may be a matter of their height or weight; their personal characteristics, their national origins, or their colour. People may obviously suffer social discrimination, or discrimination in terms of employment, on these grounds. This may happen either directly, or, for example, because, other things being equal, people would feel happier working with those whom they would take to share a cultural background. Clearly, the greater degree of shared cultural background one has with someone, the easier it might be to cooperate on limited

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[13] I am deliberately, here, not going to discuss issues to do with sexuality or gender, just because these would open up many more questions than can be sensibly addressed in an already over-stuffed article.

[14] Darío Fernández-Morera, **The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise**, Wilmington, DE: ISI, 2018, while having many faults, is interesting in documenting the way in which similar sets of exclusionary rules were operated by Muslims, Jews and Christians in Spain.

[15] Although the underlying theories made no sense (see, for example, Andrew Vincent, 'Popper and Nationalism', in Ian Jarvie, Karl Milford and David Miller (eds), **Karl Popper: A Centenary Assessment, volume 1**, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), and it is also not clear what the ethnicity of rulers should have to do with anything.

kinds of problem-solving. It is also worth noting, here, the research that Robert Putnam undertook, as part of his study of social trust, on the basis of which he argued that neighbourhoods in which there was diverse ethnicity exhibited comparatively low levels of social trust.[16] While I have been struck that, in a small village near us, there is a strong hostility towards all outsiders, and an unwillingness even to cooperate on schemes of benefit to everyone, with a nearby village.

We are also all familiar with terrible stories, in which those seeking accommodation find that explicitly or tacitly, they are excluded because of their ethnicity. At the same time, if people are, say, letting out rooms in their homes, they can typically size up the likely behaviour of people who come from a similar kind of background to their own. While if they misbehave, there will be a shared understanding of how this can be dealt with.

All told, there would seem to be everything to be said, morally, and in terms of improved social relations, if people were simply nicer to one another, and if we worked together to remove barriers to mutual comprehension, and worked to eliminate racist prejudices. At the same time, these matters are more complex than they may seem. For people construct personal, and, with others, group identities, by way of differentiating themselves from other people. It poses an interesting problem to ask: can there be identity without exclusion, and if so, how can we change our social arrangements so that things happen on this basis? In addition, it is currently not clear what we can sensibly aspire to here. At the same time, the purely personal aspects of things need, surely, to be backed up by anti-discrimination legislation.

Another kind of problem, relates to the basis on which people obtain employment. The broad picture of British history with which I started, offered an account in which people who applied for particularly desirable

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[16] See Robert D. Putnam, 'E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century the 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture', **Scandinavian Political Studies** 30 (2007), pp. 137-174. It should at once be mentioned that subsequent studies have taken issue with Putnam on this; see, for example, Patrick Sturgis et al, 'Does ethnic diversity erode trust?: Putnam's 'hunkering-down' thesis reconsidered', **British Journal of Political Science** 41, January 2011, pp. 57- 82.

jobs were known to those who might employ them. In certain fields, they would know people's families, and the schools and universities that they had attended. They would also – at those universities – know the people who were writing references for those seeking employment. At a more ordinary level, people were traditionally recruited to employment by way of family or ethnic networks.[17] In each case, these arrangements brought with them a kind of certification of people's reputation.[18] If one introduced into a company someone who was terrible, then there would be negative feedback on your own reputation. And just because of this, pressure would be placed on an employee by the person who suggested them, and the community from which they came, to do a good job. Clearly, all these things operate in part by being exclusionary towards those people who don't participate in the relevant networks. But if one repudiates such things, one has to ask: just on what basis should selection be made? If the answer is: merit, one has, further, to ask: just how is this to be done, and what is to count? I will explore issues concerning this, in a subsequent piece on the ideal of a meritocracy.

3.3 A Different Response

Today, one implicitly – or sometimes even explicitly – finds another approach being canvassed. It is the idea that all social institutions should be 'representative' in their character. By this is meant, roughly, that those who are in them should be numerically representative of the wider population in question. For example, there should, it is suggested, be roughly the same number of men and women, and members of different ethnicities, as there are in the wider population. This has further been extended to issues relating to disability, sexual identity, and then into the alphabet soup of distinctions which have been introduced in pursuit of wider concerns about gender identity.

If one asks: why?, different responses might be furnished. In part, these demands are related to older concerns that people had been

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[17] I was struck, when going back to the area in North Virginia in which I used to live, to find that the taxi drivers providing services to the airport had become, over the years, almost exclusively Afghani.

[18] See, for a useful study of reputational mechanisms, Daniel Klein (ed.) **Reputation**, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

excluded, as a consequence of racial or other kinds of prejudice, or procedures of social exclusion, explicit or inadvertent.[19] In part, there was a concern that problems and issues which were of particular concern to groups who had not been directly represented, might not be properly raised. (There are, however, issues about whether we are necessarily the best people to represent our own concerns. There is an old British proverb: 'The man who is his own lawyer has a fool for a client.')

Another possible thought here – though it is seldom voiced directly – is the assumption that people's ethnicity, or identity in other senses, should be understood to (properly) determine their opinions. This, for example, might seem to lie behind the unease that some people exhibit with regard to Mrs Thatcher's attainment of the leadership of the British Conservative Party, or the Black conservative Clarence Thomas's position on the U.S. Supreme Court. While these people are happy that a woman and an African-American are holding such positions, this was not what they had in mind. There is even a hint that such figures must, in some sense, be suffering from 'false consciousness'.

One might relate this, further, to the idea that various previously unpopular minorities should not simply be accorded legal freedoms previously denied to them, but also be 'celebrated'.[20] But there are obvious enough problems about this. For other minorities may include people who, while they are willing, if the law tells them to do so, to

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[19] the most obvious of these, relate to the products of various kinds of path-dependency. The working hours, and the general conduct, of the British Houses of Parliament, for example, clearly related to the fact that historically Members of Parliament were men who did not have family responsibilities. But a consequence of this is that women, and anyone who had family responsibilities, would be disadvantaged by rules which it would have suited the MPs to set up, in the past.

[20] There is, similarly, the strange idea that all members of a group who share nothing in common but the fact that they have – in different ways – a preference for sexual and in some cases social relationships with members of their own sex, constitute a 'community'. While it is often suggested that gay men form a wider 'community' with lesbians, and with others with whom they would seem not to have any obvious common interests.

tolerate certain kinds of conduct on the part of other people, in fact find that conduct reprehensible, and certainly nothing to celebrate.

This, it seems to me, brings us to the heart of one of the problems facing us in this area. It is that, in the face of significant social diversity, countries face some difficult choices concerning public policy. In terms of what has happened in Western Europe, one might contrast the approaches adopted in Britain and in France.

In France, as a product of a historical struggle for power between secularist proponents of the Republic and Catholics, a legal doctrine of 'laïcité' was adopted in the early years of the Twentieth Century. This claimed secular space for the – lay – state, and the consequences of this were, in turn, imposed onto Muslim immigrants to France.[21] In this model, religion was seen as something that was tolerated, but the place of which was seen as, properly, private. But this clashed with how some Catholics had understood their faith, and also later with some interpretations of Islam.

In Britain, there was an embracing of what might be called multiculturalism within the law. The notion, here, was that provided that individual groups acted within the law, they could enjoy a good deal of religious and cultural diversity. Britain's Jewish population in some ways acted here as a model. On the part of Jews in Britain, there was quite a spectrum of conduct, from assimilation, through mild cultural and religious separatism, to the development – typically based on Hassidic groups – of communities which lived their lives in almost complete separation from the wider community (other than the conduct of commerce with them). A strict interpretation of Jewish religious law would, in itself, serve to remove the observant from many kinds of interaction with the wider population.

All this led to complications: there is ongoing strife between the French government and some Muslims, unless they are willing to re-interpret their religious ideas in a way that is compatible with the French government's views. This has led to tension in two respects: on the one hand, with regard to the role of sharia law in the lives of some Muslims;

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[21] See, for a useful treatment, John R. Bowen, **Why the French Don't Like Headscarves**, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.

on the other, to explicit tensions with those Muslims who – after the fashion of the Muslim Brotherhood – interpret Islam as a systematic, and, indeed, political, way of life.

In Britain, issues arose in British state-operated schools, when there were tensions – from the 1980s onwards – between those running these schools in a standard way, and groups, in strongly Muslim areas, which wanted practises in Muslim-dominated schools to be shifted so that they fitted, more closely, with Muslim social ideals as they understood them.[22]

This, however, leads me to wider problems about multiculturalism, which I will address in my next piece on this topic.

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[22] See, for an interesting overview, Andrew Brown, **Trials of Honeyford**, London: Centre for Policy Studies, 1985. Available at: https://www.cps.org.uk/files/reports/original/111028092533-TrialsofHoneyford1985.pdf