



The London Bombings: A Crisis for Multi-Culturalism?

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Source: *Anthropology Today*, Oct., 2005, Vol. 21, No. 5 (Oct., 2005), pp. 1-2

Published by: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3695079>

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Copy dates: 15th of even months (February, April, June, August, October, December).

Publisher: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, phone: +44 (0)1865 776868, fax: +44 (0)1865 714591

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Information for subscribers: Six issues of bimonthly ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY are mailed free of charge per annum to Fellows and Members of the Royal Anthropological Institute (registered charity no. 246269). Subscription prices for 2005: Premium Institutional: £64 (UK/rest of world except N America), US\$108 (N America). Member: €31, £21, or US\$35. Single copy: £9 UK, or \$14

overseas. 5% VAT applicable in the EU and 7% GST in Canada. Premium institutional price includes online access to the current and all available previous year electronic issues. For further options, visit www.blackwellpublishing.com/journals/anth.

Back issues: Single issues from current and recent volumes are available at the current single issue price from Blackwell Publishing Journals. Earlier issues may be obtained from Swets & Zeitlinger, Back Sets, Heereweb 347, PO Box 810, 2160 Lisse, The Netherlands.

Periodical ID: ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY, 0268-540X (formerly 0307-6776) (print), ISSN 1467-8322 1467-8322 (online) is published bimonthly.

Postage paid at Rahway, NJ and additional offices. Postmaster: Send all address changes to Anthropology Today, c/o Mercury Airfreight International Inc., 365 Blair Road, Avenel, NJ 07001, USA.

Journal Customer Services: For ordering information, claims and any enquiry concerning your journal subscription please contact your nearest office: UK (customerservices@oxon.blackwellpublishing.com); Tel: +44 (0)1865 778315; USA (subscrip@bos.blackwellpublishing.com);

Tel: +1 781 388 8206 or 1 800 835 6770; Asia (subs@blackwellpublishingasia.com); Tel: +61 3 8359 1011.

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Advertising: Managed from atads@therai.org.uk. 2005: Full page: £487.67. 1/2 page £263.70. 1/3 page col. £180.95. 1/2 col. £91.58, plus VAT if applicable. Repeat discounts. Copy date: 7th of odd months. www.therai.org.uk/pubs/advertising.html.

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Printed in the UK by Henry Ling Limited, at the Dorset Press, Dorchester DT1 1HD.

The London bombings: A crisis for multi-culturalism?

Guest editorial by Keith Hart

The London bombings of 7 July have provoked an orgy of anxious introspection in the British media. Its chief focus has been the parlous condition of our national identity. How could four British men blow up themselves and scores of innocent commuters? If the second, failed round of bombings seemed to play into the phobias of the Tory press about parasitic and ungrateful immigrants, the first event undermined complacency about the British model of multi-culturalism.

It is not surprising that the right-wing newspapers would call for loyalty to crown and country, nor that this government would suspend the rule of law in order to be seen to be dealing with Muslim 'extremists'. More remarkable were Polly Toynbee's discovery, in *The Guardian*, that there might be something to the French ban on religious symbols in school after all, and Jonathan Freedland's article in the same newspaper on 3 August, 'The identity vacuum', where he argued that Britain's hold over its ethnic minorities is 'weak' and something should be done about it.

Freedland's approach had the advantage of being simple. Britain allows the difference of its constituent ethnic cultures to go largely unchecked ('multi-culturalism'). The French have a strong national identity, but are intolerant of cultural difference. The Americans have a strong national identity which allows for ethnic difference (sometimes also called 'multi-culturalism'). So Arab-Americans give their first loyalty to their country, whereas British Muslims have nothing to fall back on but their religion. The conclusion is that somehow 'Britishness' must be reinforced by moving towards the American model, but not the French.

* * *

This made me think of de Tocqueville, who also regularly compared the three countries. In *Journeys to England and Ireland*, recounting travels originally made in 1835 with his English wife, de Tocqueville observed that England had the strongest state in the world, but a weak and decentralized administration. By the first he meant the ability of the ruling class to project power inside and outside Britain; by the second the independence of the shires and municipalities. France, on the other hand, had an administration strongly centralized in Paris, but the state's power was much weaker, even if symbolically more prominent.

In some respects the two countries have moved in opposite directions since 1945. Both states have been drastically weakened by the loss of empire and the rise of American hegemony, but the French have maintained the means of projecting some independent state power, whereas Britain has opted to become bag-carrier to the American empire. The most striking contrast, however, lies in the trend of administrative relations between the centre and its periphery. In France all the major provincial cities are enjoying a renaissance, building their own metros, erecting huge arts complexes and asserting their leadership as regional centres. In Britain, especially since Thatcher, the grip of central government over cities and counties has grown inexorably tighter. This is so despite the establishment of parliaments with limited powers in Edinburgh and Cardiff (Whitehall still controls finance) and a renewed air of vitality in a few cities like Manchester.

London's share of the country's wealth and power has increased disproportionately over this period. The

media exhibit the same extraordinary concentration, with *The Manchester Guardian's* move south its most poignant symbol. The functional integration of politics, finance, communications and transport in London has been reinforced by the decline of traditional industries elsewhere and the rise of the service economy. It also helps that the world's rich have decided that London is an entertaining place to park themselves and their money.

Consider, in the light of this, the background of those young men who blew up the London underground and a bus. It is trite to observe that their families moved into the mill towns of the north just when the industries and those locals who could were moving out. What is less obvious is the uneven pattern of racial segregation that has grown up there in recent decades. Occasionally riots in Oldham and Rochdale and the advance of the British National Party make the headlines. But the London media are tied by an umbilical cord to the political class whose activities sustain them, and the news flickers only fitfully before dying.

In the early 1990s I was watching a game of Lancashire League cricket in Rawtenstall, when I noticed that the home team included no South Asians. This was odd since another team, Enfield, had seven, led by a dashing pair of opening batsmen called Masood and Mushtaq, known to their adoring, majority white fans as 'Mas 'n' Mush'. Then I also noticed that there were no Asian spectators, even though the local streets and parks were full of South Asian kids playing cricket. I made some enquiries and found that the town was run by what amounted to an apartheid system. The local Labour council put all the South Asian immigrants into one or two housing estates and never mixed them with the 'indigenous' population.

Yet when I lived there, I recall Lancashire people saying with pride, 'We are mongrel folk,' and so they, or I should say we, were. Lancashire was empty before the industrial revolution and all the workers had to come from somewhere else. Around 1900, when Lancashire's three million people represented a quarter of the national population and contributed over half the value of the country's exports, one million of them came from Ireland. So I recall Rawtenstall's segregated cricket ground when I read about the race riots in the north or when a government minister makes a token visit there to investigate the context the London bombers grew up in. What strikes me is the extreme local variety of race relations, reflected in the contrast between the two cricket teams and their supporters. This suggests that any solution to the problems we are facing should address Britain's administrative hierarchy rather than the question of national identity.

There are two main issues here: one is our need to understand where British multi-culturalism comes from, and the other is to place Britain's current political crisis in a framework of social history which is appropriate to the problem.

De Tocqueville's formulation suggests that the British ruling class's famous tolerance for cultural difference was originally a sign of strength, not weakness. Let them have their petty religions and tribal cultures, as long as we get to run the show. This goes along with an imperial state whose power was normally masked at home, the so-called 'night-watchman state' whose apparent function was merely to safeguard property. This attitude still persists long after its political and economic base has withered away, to be replaced by a central government addicted to the manipulation of appearances. The Victorians had a strong commitment to public life and built a public infrastructure to match. We have lost both.

* * *

The end of empire, American hegemony and London's pre-eminence are the headlines of Britain's current political situation. I might mention other significant trends. Racist paranoia over immigration we all know about. The collapse

of the public sector is linked to the growing dominance of business corporations in the world economy. And the digital revolution in communications is eroding national boundaries. But there is one thing that no-one ever mentions. The United Kingdom, barely 300 years old this decade, is beginning to fall apart. Britain's creeping constitutional crisis has so many dimensions as to be almost invisible, because it is all-pervasive. I offer only a bare list here:

1. The European Union and national sovereignty
2. The pound sterling versus the euro
3. Scottish independence
4. The two Irelands
5. The monarchy and growth of republican sentiment
6. Regional devolution in England and Wales
7. The absolutist powers of parliament
8. An antiquated and unfair electoral system
9. The Lords in relation to parliament, the law and feudal property
10. The link between church and state

New Labour came to power with an agenda to address these issues squarely, but the longer it has stayed in government, the further into the background serious reform has been pushed. We should not forget that the British are a violent people with some historical experience of revolution. The image of Britain as a stable lynchpin of world society dies hard. It was fabricated by some talented Victorians on a foundation of real power; but for a century now social realities have become progressively separated from this cultural construction, despite its daily reproduction in the national media. It may be counter-intuitive to claim that the United Kingdom is a potentially unstable polity. But the London bombings have made it less so.

* * *

The British media, true to type, call for a revival of national identity by the cultural means they know best. What would happen to their circulation and viewing figures if the country broke up? We might also ask, what are the implications of this crisis for anthropological knowledge and methods? For contemporary anthropology is no less fixated than the media on cultural analysis.

The British school of social anthropologists was once famous for privileging 'society' over 'culture' as the object of their investigations. If you have forgotten what this meant, check out Fortes and Evan-Pritchard's introduction to *African political systems* again. We could say that the Germans and Americans have always favoured a cultural approach to anthropology and the British adhered to the French emphasis on society. The fact that this is less the case today reflects increasing deference to the United States and an almost automatic opposition to French ideas and practices. Perhaps the cultural imagination takes over when the gap between prevailing ideas and social realities becomes large. In any case, if multi-culturalism should be replaced by a stronger sense of national identity, it will take more than exhortations by the British government and the London media to put right the country's social malaise.

I leave British anthropologists with one last thought. The universities were once bastions of local cultural and political autonomy, especially when the British state was strong. This autonomy has been systematically removed in recent decades, to be replaced by the insane procedures of a central bureaucracy run amok. At a time of unprecedented institutional uncertainty for the United Kingdom, its universities have been stunned into passivity by administrative controls Louis XIV would have been proud of. If we paid attention to what is actually going on in British society, we might draw from our historical reflections more effective strategies of collective self-preservation. But then anthropologists are not the only people to have retreated into denial when faced with Britain's moral, political and infrastructural decay. ●