

Nationality, ethnicity and culture: the Guardian hosts the racist ideas of David Goodhart

Part three

Ann Talbot
8 April 2004

In February, the Guardian published an article by the editor of Prospect magazine, David Goodhart, who questioned whether an ethnically diverse society and a welfare state are any longer compatible. The decision by the Guardian to give a platform to such racist views is a deliberate attempt by its editors to shift the political debate amongst its readers to the right.

This is the conclusion of a three-part comment. Part one was posted April 6; part two appeared April 7.

All the ideas that Edmund Burke expressed in his *Reflections on the French Revolution* can be seen in his earlier writings. He said nothing new. The difference lay not in Burke but in the times. During the American Revolution, it was still possible for his conservative brand of Whiggism to support the revolution, since many Americans thought of themselves as Englishmen fighting to preserve their rights under the ancient constitution dating back to Magna Carta and enshrined in common law. Burke stood for a set of historically defined political rights that were specific to a certain group of people, but the Declaration of Independence had set out an entirely different perspective—the universal rights of man. The two perspectives were incompatible, but that was not immediately evident. It only became evident to Burke under the impact of the French revolution and the emergence of the working class in Britain.

To Burke, the working people who set up political societies modelled on the Jacobins were “the swinish multitude.” They responded in kind. When 5,000 workers marched through Sheffield to celebrate the victory of the French army at Valmy in November 1792, they carried an effigy of Burke riding on a pig. One fifth of the electorate, he told parliament, and the majority of the unfranchised were “pure Jacobins; utterly incapable of amendment; objects of eternal vigilance.”[3]

Burke’s agitation set in motion a sequence of repression—newspapers were banned, meetings outlawed, organisations proscribed, political activists arrested, deported and executed—that culminated in the Peterloo Massacre of August 1819.

When compared to the French political theorists of his day, Burke does not rank highly, but *Reflections* had a global impact because he had sufficient prescience to recognise that he and his class stood on the brink of an abyss and that the old political forms would no longer do. Above all, he recognised that they had to explicitly reject universal rights and equality.

Whereas Burke spoke for the City merchants and landed aristocrats, Goodhart speaks for finance capital and the corporate CEOs.

Like Burke, Goodhart can smell the “swinish multitude” of poor demanding equality. Like Burke, he knows that he must attack and ridicule universal rights and equality if he is to make any headway with his divisive arguments.

He contends, “[I]f you deny the assumption that humans are social, group-based primates with constraints, however imprecise, on their willingness to share, you find yourself having to defend some implausible positions: for example, that we should spend as much on development aid as on the NHS, or that Britain should have no immigration controls at all.”

The dichotomy Goodhart draws between the National Health Service and development is entirely bogus. He presents the matter in personal moral terms, attempting to implicate his readers in his own pernicious arithmetic. A well-off liberal-minded Briton would, he argues, spend £200 on his or her own child’s birthday party rather than give the money to save the life of a third-world child. But the condition of the third world is not the result of a lack of individual acts of charity, of which there are many; it is the result of systematic plunder over centuries. Most third-world countries pay more in debt repayments than they receive in aid.

Goodhart assumes that his readers will automatically agree with him because these are “implausible positions.” But what is implausible about abolishing immigration controls? They are simply a way of dividing the working class and setting one section of it against another. Immigration restrictions create a mass of illegal workers who are forced to work for less money and endure worse conditions than indigenous workers. To support immigration controls in a globalised economy where capital moves freely about the world is really to say that workers in every country should be forced to remain at the mercy of mobile capital. Immigration controls degrade the conditions of all workers wherever they live.

At the time of the First World War, only a minority of socialists maintained internationalist principles. Workers marched off to war full of patriotic fervour, and socialist parties enthusiastically voted the money to finance the slaughter of workers in other countries. It took the experience of the trenches to confirm to millions of workers that what the minority had said was right, and a powerful revolutionary movement emerged that produced the Russian revolution of 1917. The American revolution and the French revolution could formulate universal principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, but they could not, under conditions of a society divided by class, put them into practice. The Russian revolution, despite its subsequent tragic fate, began to do that because it was based on the working class and removed all class distinctions.

Goodhart would no doubt sneer at the universalist ideals of that generation, but they informed the class struggles of the inter-war period. And when revolutionary struggles again broke out after the Second World War, British politicians of every party knew they had to either create a welfare state that was sufficiently consistent with those ideals, or face a revolution. It is this connection—albeit an indirect one—between welfare states and social movements based on the highest ideals of social equality

and universal rights that makes Goodhart's attack on universalism particularly significant. The British welfare state imbibed a tincture of universalism, despite the intentions of its architects, because its origins and motive force must be traced back to the revolutionary struggles of the twentieth century, not to some mythical ethnic or cultural homogeneity of the post-war period.

Goodhart pretends that welfare states originate in some kind of contract between the individual citizen and the state, and that this contract is only possible if all the individual citizens are sufficiently similar to want to share their resources with one another. This is fantasy. When we look at welfare states historically and concretely, we can see very clearly that they are a byproduct of the class struggle.

The first modern welfare state measures were introduced in Germany as Chancellor Bismarck attempted to counteract the expanding influence of the Marxist Social Democratic Party among the rapidly growing working class. The 1905 revolution in Russia and the strikes that preceded the First World War produced a wave of social welfare measures across Europe, as governments sought to avoid similar revolutionary upheavals. In Britain and France, old-age pensions and unemployment benefits were introduced in this period.

The successful Russian revolution of 1917 produced in the Soviet Union itself the most complete system of welfare that had ever existed, and it remained substantial even after decades of erosion under Stalinism, until it was finally destroyed by the reintroduction of capitalism. There was certainly no ethnic homogeneity in the Soviet Union.

By the end of the Second World War, when a wave of revolutionary movements swept Europe, it was clear to the ruling elite that nothing less than a comprehensive welfare system could prevent revolution. In the post-war period, all western European governments set up welfare states of one kind or another. In the British case, it emphasised free medical care; in other cases, greater emphasis was placed on insurance-based benefits—but these were relatively minor differences.

Goodhart thinks he can play on a certain visceral anti-Americanism that is characteristic of the British left. "The welfare state," he asserts, "has always been weaker in the individualistic, ethnically divided US, compared with more homogeneous Europe." He hopes to draw on national stereotypes of an America in which self-interest and a brash pursuit of wealth dominate, while in Europe, social democratic and liberal values have created a more caring, cultured society. But far from these European welfare states being diametrically opposed to American notions, they would have been impossible without American loans or the Keynesian economics that America sponsored worldwide.

Even a brief examination of US history shows that Goodhart's bigoted conception of America is wrong. For a brief period between 1933 and 1945, the Roosevelt administration implemented reforms under the New Deal that were in certain respects more innovative than anything that existed in Britain at the time. Anyone who had compared the UK and the USA under the New Deal would have thought America was the land of welfare reform, not Britain. The very phrase "from cradle to grave" that in Britain is often associated with Sir William Beveridge, who designed the post-war welfare state, was coined by Roosevelt.

The New Deal produced a quantum leap in welfare spending. In 1932, \$208 million was spent on welfare in the US; in 1935, \$3 billion.[4] If the gains of the New Deal remained limited—most obviously in that it never provided free health care—and were almost immediately eroded, it was not because the US was an ethnically mixed society. When Roosevelt came to power, the American ruling class believed they were on the brink of revolution. General Douglas MacArthur, who dispersed at bayonet point war veterans camped in Washington, concluded that they were a mob animated by "the essence of revolution." [5] Nothing less than the fear of revolution would have persuaded corporate America to make such concessions as they did. And it was the receding of the perceived

revolutionary political threat posed to capital that has encouraged the subsequent gutting of welfare programmes.

Goodhart ridicules the notion that international solidarity can provide the basis for political and social life, and insists that only preserving national homogeneity will prevent the final erosion of Britain's existing—and eminently "civilised"—societal norms.

But the claim by any supporter of Blair's government that he is defending the welfare state rings hollow. What he is in fact defending is the privileged existence of his own social strata—the *haves*—who fear nothing more than the threat from below posed by the *have-nots*.

His argument is strongly reminiscent of the appeal to cultural nationalism made by the murdered right-wing Dutch demagogue Pim Fortuyn. A wealthy man, Fortuyn also insisted that he did not oppose immigration from the standpoint of a Nazi-style "blood and soil" racism, but because the Dutch people must take care of themselves and not have their taxes spent on an ever-growing Muslim population who did not share the enlightened values of the Netherlands and did not even speak Dutch.

For Goodhart too, a defence of the welfare state alongside a supposedly shared culture is little more than a nationalist rallying point. He calculates that it is the surest way of inducing in a section of the British population a strong emotional sense of national exclusivity.

His approach is entirely consistent with support for the aggressive militarist foreign policy of the government. Blair has launched several wars against unarmed countries and has threatened to do the same again. And a government that engages in wars on the scale and of the character that Blair has done cannot afford, either politically or economically, to maintain universal welfare measures at home. Goodhart's article reflects the need to provide political justification for this organised system of inhumanity.

Here again, the comparisons between Goodhart's theories of welfare and the policies of Nazi Germany are not superficial. There is a certain grim logic involved in the use of militarist aggression abroad and repression at home. Immigrants and asylum seekers are being singled out as scapegoats now, but the treatment that is being meted out to them today will be turned on other members of society who are suddenly found to be not "our own kind" in the future. Either rights are universal or they are not truly rights at all.

But as Bush and Blair found when confronted by the mass international demonstrations against the Iraq war, it is not so easy to mobilise national sentiment, precisely because social divisions have become so acute and are no longer ameliorated by any substantial welfare measures. Indeed, the internationalist outlook that Goodhart dismisses as irrelevant and unreal confronts the working class today as the only realistic basis for defending any of its past social gains.

Globally and nationally, the great division is between the vast majority of the population and a tiny, obscenely wealthy layer whose interests are fundamentally opposed. The rich get rich at the direct expense of the masses of the working class, regardless of their country of origin, skin colour, language or religion. And it is only through unity based on the reality of a common class interest, rather than the chimera of a shared national identity, that the social gains embodied in the welfare state can be defended and anything progressive accomplished.

Concluded

References:

1. *Parliamentary History*, XXIX, p 426.
2. Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Revolution*, Mentor, 1962.
3. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin Books, 1980.
4. Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal*, Hill and Wang, 1989.
5. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt*, Heinemann, 1957, p 272.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact