

Multicultural Britain: a very brief history

By Panikos Panayi

In some contemporary British political discourse multiculturalism has come to symbolise the negative consequences of mass immigration. In such a situation hostile politicians believe ethnic minority communities develop lives of their own and separate themselves off from "mainstream" society with which they have no desire to integrate.

While multiculturalism may seem a new development in Britain to those whose knowledge of modern British history encompasses little other than the Victorians and the two World Wars, Britain's relationship with immigration has demonstrated common patterns over the past two hundred years with both positive and negative reactions towards newcomers repeating themselves.

In the first place, if we take the period since c1800 we need to recognise that immigration has characterised Britain. During the last two centuries over 9 million people have made their way to the country, of whom about 2.4 million arrived before 1945. Until the Second World War the overwhelming majority of newcomers came from Europe, especially Ireland but also Germany, France, Italy and Poland. Since 1945 migration towards Britain has become increasingly international, especially from former British imperial possessions in South Asia, the Caribbean, Africa and Hong Kong but also from other locations in recent decades including Africa as a whole and South America.

Nevertheless, movement from Europe has also continued, not simply as a result of Britain's membership of the EU but also because of the proximity to the European continent and the sources of labour available in a series of states before EU membership including Ireland, Italy and Poland.

British politicians and media enjoy pointing to the previous apparently smooth integration of



Panikos Panayi is Professor of European History at De Montfort University. His most recent of sixteen books are: *Life and Death in a German Town: Osnabrück from the Weimar Republic to World War Two and Beyond* (London, 2007); *Spicing Up Britain: The Multicultural History of British Food* (London, 2008, 2010); and *An Immigration History of Britain: Multicultural Racism Since c1800* (London, 2010).

migrants and contrast this with the problems thrown up by contemporary newcomers. In reality, all immigrants to Britain have faced an initial hostile reaction before integrating, as a brief history of British xenophobia since c1800 will illustrate. Although a general hostility towards immigrants may develop, parliamentarians and the press tend to focus upon one particular group at any one particular time, whose identity has changed over the past 200 years. Perceived economic threat, religion and treachery have formed the main themes in British xenophobic discourse.

For much of the nineteenth century the Irish remained the main focus of animosity. Streaming into British cities, especially after the Potato Famine in the mid and late 1840s, they found themselves living cheek by jowl with native Britons who already experienced the wretched living conditions of the early stages of industrialization. While the regular fighting which broke out in Liverpool, Glasgow and Manchester may have had social and economic causes, the anti-Catholicism which had characterised post-Reformation Britain, and immigrant Irish reactions towards it, fuelled the violence.

By the end of the nineteenth century anti-Catholicism had declined in Britain, replaced by the ideology which would come to dominate European racism until the end of the Second World War in the form of antisemitism. Both in Britain and Western Europe as a whole, part of the driving force consisted of the arrival of poor Jewish refugees fleeing Tsarist persecution from the 1880s. Like anti-Catholicism, Judeophobia could draw upon centuries and, in this case, even millennia of negative stereotypes and images. Hostility towards Jewish immigrants constructed a community of an alien nature,

which threatened jobs and housing, had unsanitary habits and counted large numbers of people, who would threaten British values. Jews also became racialized from the 1870s, following the European pattern, with calls for extermination surfacing in the most extreme circles. Antisemitism also focused upon Jews as traitors, with no allegiance to Britain, working for themselves, for a foreign power or a foreign ideology, especially during the First World War, but also in the Second.

Nevertheless, the group which has experienced the most intense hostility in Britain over the past two centuries has consisted of Germans during the First World War. This may seem surprising because they had become well integrated by 1914. But the outbreak of War made them instantly visible and essentially led to the ethnic cleansing of traces of Germany from British society through rioting, internment and deportation.

After the Second World War attention turned towards newcomers from the Empire and Commonwealth. Once again, the animosity which would emerge could draw upon centuries of negative images rooted in slavery and the ruling and middle class imperial encounter which had racialized black and Asian people. Much of the initial post-War hostility focused upon West Indian immigrants culminating in the Nottingham and Notting Hill riots in 1958 and the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962. Anti-Black racism remained during the 1960s and 1970s. In the latter decade and into the 1980s it focused upon Black youth as a threat. However, attention increasingly turned towards immigrants from South Asia and by the 1970s everyone from this part of the world became labelled as a Pakistani.



Port of call. The city centre of Liverpool, with St. George's Hall on the left, portrayed in the 1890s. For centuries, Liverpool was a primary inlet for Irish migration to Britain.

During the late 1980s and 1990s a new threat emerged in Britain in the form of the asylum seeker, again reflecting European patterns. The source of the hostility towards this group essentially lay in the fact that they did not become subject to normal immigration controls because refugees could claim asylum due to the fact that Britain had signed up to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Turning them into asylum seekers denied such people refugee status before courts had adjudicated upon their cases.

Multicultural Britain: a very brief history (cont.)

By Panikos Panayi

In the past decade Muslims have become the main out group in British xenophobic discourse. The origins of their marginalization lies in the Iranian Revolution which began to impact upon immigration discourse following the Rushdie Affair when British Muslims burnt copies of the Satanic Verses following the issue of a fatwa by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. Pakistanis disappeared from public consciousness, replaced by Muslims. Wars against Afghanistan and Iraq increased their visibility further making their status similar to Roman Catholics, Germans and Jews as an enemy within.

However, while xenophobia has characterised Britain over the last two centuries, so has multiculturalism. Although this concept has become associated with post-1945 migrants in recent decades, multicultural Britain has existed since the early 19th century, as we can see by focusing upon a series of key themes.

First, although the legal basis of multiculturalism may appear to have emerged in the Race Relations Acts of the 1960s and 1970s, the incorporation of out groups in British society begins with Catholic Emancipation in 1829 whereby a minority campaigned for equal rights and achieved them. During the course of the nineteenth century, Jewish emancipation also followed.

Nationality laws play just as important a role in multicultural Britain. Despite changes at the end of the twentieth century, citizenship in Britain has essentially operated upon the concept of *jus solis*. Just as importantly, the migrants who moved from the Empire and Commonwealth in the early post-War decades already had British Citizenship as a result of the 1948 British Nationality Act. This has meant that, unlike in some other European states which have operated upon the basis of *jus solis*, Britain does not have a mass of disenfranchised ethnic minorities with little access to political power. In theory, they have equal political rights.

We also need to consider integration. The recent speeches by David Cameron simply reflect the concerns of previous British politicians about a mass of immigrants perceived as separate from mainstream society.

"Politicians focus upon the apparently distinct and foreign Muslim *other*, concentrated upon the inner city practicing an apparently non-European religion and dressed in a strange way, which simply takes us back to the Jewish East End before World War One."

The same sentiments focused upon the Jewish immigrants of the late nineteenth century. This group actually offers the perfect example of an integrating minority. Concentrating overwhelmingly upon the clothing trades in the East End of London before the outbreak of the First World War, by the interwar years this group had begun to experience social mobility which meant a move towards the London suburbs and a change in occupational patterns so that by the 1960s Anglo-Jewry revealed socio-economic indicators in advance of mainstream society.

This group may have undergone a model integration, but it involved much exclusion and pain on the way. Similarly, the nineteenth century Irish had also integrated by the beginning of the twentieth. Although, in both cases, the formal establishment of Roman Catholicism and Judaism set them apart from the mainstream, both of these sets of newcomers made the concept of Britons with religions previously regarded as alien, acceptable.

Those migrants moving here after 1945, especially from the West Indies and South Asia have not had the same amount of time to integrate as Irish Roman Catholics and East European Jews. Employment patterns of those people of African Caribbean origin show that they remain towards the bottom end of the economic and social scale. On the other hand this group demonstrates significant rates of intermarriage, another clear indicator of integration. South Asians demonstrate a variety of patterns. On the one hand, they have some of the best levels

of educational achievement, while also demonstrating higher unemployment rates than the norm.

Politicians focus upon the apparently distinct and foreign Muslim *other*, concentrated upon the inner city practicing an apparently non-European religion and dressed in a strange way, which simply takes us back to the Jewish East End before World War One. Yet to suggest that this represents the only type of Muslim identity in Britain remains blinkered, as people with origins in South Asia have entered the elites, especially in cultural terms as the examples of Salman Rushdie, Monica Ali and Hanif Qureshi would suggest. These authors may differ from poor working class immigrants, but point of the existence of a significant group of integrated British Muslims.

These writers also point to another way of measuring multicultural Britain in terms of impact, as the country would be inconceivable without migration. Apart from the importance of newcomers in the economy or sport and the development of new religions, for example, migration results in cultural transfer changing numerous aspects of the "British way of life".

In the nineteenth century, German musicians helped to establish British orchestras, while a post-1945 population of African Caribbean origins has helped to develop British popular music. While continental European waiters of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods helped the emergence of restaurant in Britain, post-War immigrants have completely transformed the eating habits of the country's population, by adapting their traditional foods to western tastes. In the case of curry, this had its origins in the experiences of the British population who settled in India.



Presence. Shah Jahan Mosque in Woking, Surrey. Built in 1889, it was the first mosque in Britain and an instructive example of the early multicultural Britain. Photograph: P.Haworth

Although some mainstream politicians have turned multiculturalism into a term of abuse which apparently signifies the ills of mass immigration and results in the undermining of British norms, immigration has created Britain, particularly since 1945, but also over the last two centuries as a whole. The Catholic Relief Act of 1829 and the existence of nationality laws based primarily upon *jus solis* has guaranteed this. At the same time, a dissection of virtually any aspect of British life whether economy, music or food, reveals the importance of immigration and the de facto existence of multiculturalism with deep historical roots.