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The Footman's New Clothes

By Diran Adebayo

I've had a tilt towards continental Europe from a young age. Like many writers, I think, my primary relationship was not with story but with words. As a six year-old, I was sensitive to names. I preferred Judah over Israel and Illinois among the fifty states. Anything mischievous or mysterious or evocative. The Yoruba of my parents was not passed down to those younger children who were born in Britain – no doubt because my father, who was very success-in-education-oriented, thought that that would waste valuable time better spent studying the subjects in which British schools gave qualifications, and in any case this sound of the seniors around us, the sound of our history and part of our culture, was not without baggage, and the upshot was that French became my route to a sort-of free exotic.

I was, am a devotee of various sports and there was this England cricketer at the time, Phillippe Edmonds, of Belgian antecedents actually, who'd grown up in Lusaka, Zambia, and the name, his maverick tendency and the wider exotic package saw him quickly become one of my favourite players.

I only got to see him briefly, on the television, because, a few months later, my eight year-old self began his first term at a fee-paying preparatory school and I came back home that first day with an older brother to find that our electricity had been cut off. My parents couldn't afford to pay for both fees and utilities so for the next few years we had no TV and few visual images. The *International Herald Tribune* newspaper, which dropped through the letterbox, became our window on the world. The Tribune was an amalgamation of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* but, being

published from France, there was a European slant to their coverage and they paid a lot of attention to European sports. At the time – this was the later seventies – there was this French football team. St Etienne, that was riding high. They were contesting Bayern, Liverpool and the gloriously named Borussia Monchengladbach in the latter stages of European Cups and, according to the Tribune, they played in green. This was a delight to me. With few visuals, I was now extra sensitive to colour, and I'd never heard of a football team that played in green. And so, this imaginary football team through which I lived my speculative adult life, in my parents' bedroom by candlelight, played in green.

Not being an England patriot, and with the absence then of African teams from most global competitions, France became my team, in football, in rugby. Whereas the English rugby team seemed rather stilted, decent at moves that could be coached beforehand, the French embraced randomness and relished nothing more than those moments when the ball is bouncing around behind your lines, and people are running in all directions and no one's told you what to do. They were improvisatory freethinkers with this fluidity that gave you a 'This is how it should be done,' feeling when you watched them.

How they spoke too! There was Jean-Pierre Rives, France captain and amateur sculptor who, on the eve of a famous underdog victory against New Zealand in 1979, France's first against Rugby's superpower, in a game that was to be played on July 14, France's *Bastille Day*, compared his approach to that of the original rebels: '*it is the captain's job to keep people marching... A revolution calls for madmen.*' There was Scrum half Pierre Berbizier, on the eve of the 1987 World Cup semi-final, France vs Australia, after the Australians had held a rather boastful Press Conference. '*The Australians have killed the match. We have to recreate it.*' They seemed poets and philosophers all, with their metaphors. Few in English sport spoke like this.

By now I was reading France's proper poets and philosophers. It began with Jean Cocteau's kinky novel '*Les Enfants Terribles*', then Camus and the wider existential school, including Samuel Beckett

who said he wrote his early plays and novel trilogy in French because it was easier in French to write without style, which I could never understand because his writing, like Camus' essay, 'The Myth of Sisyphus,' felt very elegant to me. The matter they explored - alienation, what to dedicate oneself to if life was absurd, how to construct meaning on the field just like their sporting counterparts - seemed vital, especially compared to the rather arid terrain of English philosophy at that time. All this positivism: how do we know if a statement is true or false etc. Europe, in these formative writer years, was exerting a greater influence on me than any other zone.

Most strong phenomena – religious feeling, love of the personal or patriotic kind – depend upon a feasible mix of the romantic and the real to sustain and, at the height of my romance, came the facts of it. In France, on a school exchange, my fourteen year old self's first trip abroad, my first hour in Paris, I was pulled out of a crowd by a couple of policemen and accused, wrongly, of being a pickpocket. My first trip to Germany, staying with schoolfriends in Hamburg when I was 18, was uneventful but my second was not. I was 22 and working as a reporter on black-British newspaper 'The Voice'. Britain's Ministry of Defence wanted to encourage more ethnic minority people to join the armed forces and so I was sent to Germany to interview black servicemen and women in various N.A.T.O. bases. I remember there had been this terrible attack on a hostel for asylum seekers in Hoyerswerda not long before, and I called up my German friend whose family I'd stayed with to ask what was going on out there. He downplayed it rather; just a few fools on the margins, he said. He came to meet me and my black photographer colleague for a drink in Gutersloh one evening in a pub that we hurried to leave after being racially taunted by a group of skinhead types, mixed but mainly guys in 'Lonsdale' and 'Wrangler of London' sweat shirts and boots and those signature darkwashed jeans. The cries of "Niggerlover" etc continued as they followed us down the street before jumping us at a traffic light. My six-foot something friend, who had turned to *reason* with them – reason, that European Enlightenment weapon – was kicked to the ground, smashed with beer bottles, and had to be treated in hospital with internal injuries. I remember running into a couple of establishments for help but getting shooed away. Luckily, the police had a couple of patrol

cars in the neighbourhood because, as it turned out, this Wednesday night was a well known meeting time for this gang.

That same year, 1992, the year of the Maastricht accord, the deepening of bonds between European Community members, I travelled to Barcelona, to Spain for the first time, with my then girlfriend, who was white, on holiday. Walking along its streets, we were sometimes shadowed by police cars driving slowly alongside us. From time to time an officer would get out and ask to see my passport. On the streets around the Ramblas, the main thoroughfare, various locals accosted me, calling me over then opening their jackets to reveal a heap of Drivers Licenses, passports and similar documents on the inside, and ask if I was interested in doing business, or else point to my girlfriend and ask, 'Cuanta? - How much?' – thinking me a pimp and she my sex worker. Some of these were not Barcelona's best streets, admittedly, but all round there seemed little understanding that I might just be a European trying to enjoy my European rights. Where I was treated with more respect, it was usually on the assumption that I was African-American. "Where are you from? America?" – the only country they felt could have given me the wherewithal to be among them as a tourist.

Had I spent less of my teenage time on the European thinkers of the mid twentieth century and more on their forbears, three centuries before, I would have been better prepared. It is the fairly curious paradox of the Enlightenment period, that intellectual wind of change that ushered Europe into modernity, with its notions of universalism and the ideals of freedom and equality for all that helped underpin the French, American and Haiti revolutions of the 1780s and 1790s, and its emphasis on reason and scientific rigour and enquiry and classification, that it also coincided with the entrenching of modern race thinking. Only fairly curious, I think, given the easy journey between classification and the human divisions of racialism, racism's more neutral relative, while the Atlantic Slave trade and European colonialism that deepened during this period needed an ideology to sustain it.

What I want to ask here is whether we can use the best face of the Enlightenment, particularly its “belief in a common human nature and the plasticity of human varieties” * (the notion that even a lower one like the eighteenth century slave turned writer Olaudah Equiano would show themselves as smart as any given the right ‘climate’) to help move the Europe that is being contested around us into more progressive directions. I also want to ask what the consequences might be, should we invoke those ideas, amongst others, for the kinds of black and minority-inflected culture and activism we make in Europe and the ways we disseminate and position it. Can we test those values freshly, in ways that might invigorate, at least, a black British project that is currently lacking some propulsive force, some charisma?

Before I go further into that I need to say a little about where I think we are now in the black cultural ecology in the UK. It won’t surprise you to hear that, between the grief I came across in the Europe of the nineties and a distance I felt from the American spirit (a certain earnestness in the culture, its ethnic and racial separatenesses, the alienness of their urban and suburban spaces, so many of which seemed built for the driver rather than the walker, the *flaneur*) I wondered whether Britain might just all round be as good as it got for me in the west. Of course, Britain too had its grim racial moments during this period: numerous deaths in custody, the murders of Rolan Adams, Stephen Lawrence and others, but the problems seemed increasingly second rather than first order with “diversity” and “representation” now the battlecry. If not yet full ease of being there was some certainty around belonging and a level of visibility and maturity that I know many AfroEuropeans elsewhere envied.

What was most striking about the ecology, as we turned the millennium, and it is even more true now, was the tremendous currency that developed around racism. It became ‘a thing’. At some early point after the 1996 Macpherson Report into the Stephen Lawrence murder, and the widespread coverage the case received in a powerful right-wing newspaper, racism raced up the mainstream

charts, second only to paedophilia in the worst sins one could be accused of. It spread its wings, in ways that seemed to cheapen it rather, to the intra continentals (a white Briton who discriminated against a white Pole could now be 'racist'), and, if some of my younger students are anything to go by, to most any racially or ethnically-inflected comment in literature. This was partly to do with the way in which appeals for cultural diversity in bodies and companies were habitually framed post-Macpherson as being in response to racism, be it personal, institutional, or structural. More critically, racism, in its noisiness and its seemingly easy to get elements of victims and villains, sat well in an accusatory, click-baity, tabloidized media age. It became a celebrity, with all the fandom and the privilege, the 'there can be only one-'ness that that status brings with it.

To give one example: I was rung, some years ago now, by a reporter from a liberal organ that was writing a feature about "Racism in publishing". We spoke at some length and most of my comments were class-related, albeit class with race and diversity consequences. I was talking about that old someway posh traditions that were still apparent in publishing, and how you saw it in the typical class of the staff: "You know how some people can have trouble pronouncing African names? They might call you Adebango or Adebongo or whatever? Well, I have trouble remembering *their* names – it's all Pippa, Antonia, Hermione..." became, in their published version, "When I walk into publishers' offices, they call me Adebango or Adebongo..." - not what I had said at all.

There were good reasons, beyond the obvious, for black-Britain's post-war immigrants to highlight racism. For a black 'community' that was theoretically quite weak, with its people from different countries and cultures and classes, and differences in the length and type of relationship with their colonial forbear, racism made sense as a unifying force. That focus also helped to forge easy coalition with the left, given its traditional concern for social justice. But for some of us now there is a worry about racism's tendency to suck all the other air out of the room;

about whether it's too blunt a frame to help us grapple with the second order complexities, not least within sections of society – the media, the arts, academia - that are, in terms of personnel as liberal as any. There's the knowledge too that, for any 'community', feeling good about itself is a lot to do with its sense of moving forward, and the worry, in a racism-powered vehicle, about where the signposts might truly be for this, an unclarity that has surely contributed to the sense of stasis that some of experienced cultural voices have expressed in recent years*. We also worry about the self-control of the car and its charisma going forward (our struggles in 21st century Britain largely lack the basic dignity-stakes of civil rights era America, apartheid South Africa or even 50s/ 60s England). Most of all, perhaps, the concern, if our activist agenda is perceived to be dominated by this issue, around coalition-building with that growing number of black and mixed-race people who by dint of class, profession or region, do not feel that racism has been a significant factor in their lives, but who nevertheless do have 'patriotic' potential.

The tactical dubiousness of this approach when it comes to fostering the receptivity that we seek can be found in the racial fatigue or irritation that has been discernible in parts of the country for a while now, most notably in the Brexit referendum. In Britain we are dealing with a nation with a deep self-story of decency. An autobiography, if you like, with an unreliable narrator and no sense of original sin. It is a country whose majority feels they ended the slave trade, they fought fascism, alone for a while, yes, they've done bad things but never at the level of savagery or intolerance that others have done theirs, and now they give all this aid and they've tried to do a lot for minorities in laws, what more do you want? A lot of its history, as has been noted before, happened elsewhere and the nation has never really interrogated itself in the way that, say, Germany has had to, or looked to rebrand itself in the way that official Germany perhaps now is, evidenced in the recent generosity its government displayed to Syrian migrants. Given this, we were always likely to encounter a limit with our often race-based appeals, and the fact we've reached this territory more quickly than we might have done speaks in part to a certain disconnect in the coalitions we've forged here.

For as much as the white left doesn't like racism one gains the impression that many there don't really care for race either – that they see the whole area as problematic. Whether it's because many white Britons don't feel that they're living race most of the time, or whether the intellectual and

emotional fallout from the centuries of western racial thinking means that when they are made aware of race it usually comes to embarrass them, or the trends in academia (the notion of choice in gender and race) and developments in modern science that have discredited the notion of race as a meaningful category, a useful medical shorthand in certain areas, no more – perhaps all these things. One sensed that fervent hope that race is a temporary category, on the road to post-racial times, during the excited commentary over Obama’s election in 2008, for instance, and one of its by-products is that frequent Black 22 for the minority artist or writer of feeling pushed to talk about race to come through, only, if you *do*, the powers won't totally rate you, because race is not quite that universal, eternal stuff that the Shakespeares and Tolstoys do.

That impatience with Race is also there among progressives of colour too. The scholar Paul Gilroy wrote in his 1999 ‘Joined Up Politics’ and Post-Colonial Melancholia essay, of his desire to be an “anti -anti-Racist” -, views he expanded on in his early 21st century work with his rejection of ‘raciology’ in favour of a ‘planetary humanism’, a position he adopts not least because he (and others) feel that a tactical shift may be needed since race and the racial appeals we have mounted may lack the ability to deliver real equality or, in his phrase, “to tackle the lore and relations of inequality that bring race to life.”**

Around this time, my own travels, mainly in Europe, was deepening my feeling that tribe, no matter how we construct it, was hardwired in us. I was encountering race less as problem now but as resource, and learning the applicability of Hegel's *apercu* that only the slave - the footman, shall we say, to update the idea - truly understands a freedom which the master simply enjoys.

By one of Lisbon’s main squares, I’d see a number of recently arrived Cape Verdeans gather daily for sustenance and the sharing of information. On a British council visit to Ljubljana, Slovenia, the one black local who had attended my first event spread the word so that fifteen came at the end of my short trip there to take me out and prick my brain about how the Council might be able to help them

in their business schemes, relieved to meet someone they felt would be sympathetic, to whom they could extend and receive family-like privileges. On a recent trip to France, my Guinea-descended hotel receptionist took me on a day long saunter through Paris' African quarters, to Stalingrad, Barbès and Chateau Rouge, and all through my adult life race has generated a welcome in most any black British space, high or low.

My own bugbear with 'raciology' has lain in its insufficiency in helping us to cross that final frontier (for which race is an unreliable signifier) and that is the discomfort with difference: this reluctance to allow that other ways have their legitimacies, their own reasons, their own value, and are not, in most cases, a threat. You hear the discomfort in the calls from populist continental politicians for an 'integration' that is more accurately characterized as assimilation, and it's there often in more covert, sanitised form in the UK: in, for example, the somehow enforced transition of the Notting Hill Carnival from a defiant countercultural statement to a family-friendly weekend or the type of black contestant favoured by public vote in television's Reality shows (the type who's grown up in predominantly white surroundings with no connection, seemingly, to any black network).

The British academic Pathik Pathak, in his book 'The Future of Multicultural Britain: Confronting the Progressive Dilemma', has identified a certain rethinking and backlash against minority 'appeasement' that has occurred this British century, as the political centre shifted rightwards after the attacks on 9/11 and the riots that had pitted whites against Asians - communities living separate, unmingled lives - in a number of northern English towns a few months earlier. You could detect it in the closure or running down of black and multicultural programming units at the BBC and Channel 4, and ever more prescriptive demands around citizenship by successive home and education ministers. Parthik writes of this sense of "a declining multiculturalism and an ascendant majoritarianism", of the "majoritarian reflex'.

One of the peculiarities with this reflex, this preoccupation with national cohesiveness, is that it's

come along at time when so much points to minoritarianism. The internet, of course, with its myriad transnational groups clustered around different zones of interest is the most graphic reminder of this trend – we watch our sport and drama less on cohesive television and increasingly on diverse digital platforms, but you could also cite the growth of local currency unions such as bitcoin or the fact that governments are now elected in the UK and elsewhere with less than 40% support from the voting electorate, itself just a proportion of those entitled to vote.

On my first trip to India, in the nineties, I was refused a room by the staff of the first hotel I came to, in Delhi. They made me stand aside in the reception whilst they gave rooms to all the other arrivals, including many who had travelled on the plane from London with me. One of these, part of a crew of rather loud and possibly intoxicated white football shirt wearers that I'd made eyes with but avoided during the flight, piped up: 'what are you doing? He's with us, he's one of us,' and his protestations were key to them changing their minds. I was struck by how the protective embrace of tribe was extended as we, my white British helper and I, moved from majority to minority in this foreign land.

We live in multiple, intersected tribes and sets that are mainly minority or bare majority, some of which will have no significant racial aspect, and out of this lie seeds for optimism. If we take the Enlightenment's belief in the 'plasticity of peoples', the idea that people could be educated or conditioned to place new frames and contexts around their data seriously, then people's growing awareness of their own place in a jumble of minorities or near minorities may, as the Delhi anecdote indicates, contain the potential for them to view another's experience through a lens that is nearer to home than 'away', and thus enhance a personal connection to diversity.

We are a majority because we are all human beings, or because we are Britons in Britain or Germans in Germany. We have to agree too, as a *civis*, on a minimum of things – the most important of which, of course, is not to kill each other. But we are also minorities as human beings on this variously

populated planet, because many of the passions that animate us are actually minority interests, and because the commonness of human aspirations are particularized by the differences in human conditions and human experiences.

Maya Angelou got both sides of our coins rather neatly, in her poem 'Human Family' where she says:

'I note the obvious differences
between each sort and type,
but we are more alike, my friends,
than we are unlike.

I've sailed upon the seven seas
and stopped in every land,
I've seen the wonders of the world
not yet one common man.'

One of the unfortunate consequences of our Brexit result, over and above the likelihood that it will hinder black Britain's ability to bring its experience to bear on wider European discussion and movements around race, is that the European Union, with its citizen members a majority within their nation state but a minority within European decision-making, is, in theory, a powerful example of the minority- majority consciousness I am proposing.

Culturally, we are in a global and national moment where a level of power through reach is being distributed among many more groups than previously, and it behoves us to think of ways, in our creative lives, in our activism, in our marketing, to extract the promise in this with a more multi-pronged, strategic approach. Of course we must continue to 'call' racism where it needs to be called but we need as well to defamiliarise; to shake people out of their understandings and 'othering's', to disrupt the tariffs to better illumine; to disrupt majoritarianism by moving more dextrously around that majority-minority matrix.

ENDS

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Footnotes:

*(p5) <https://kenanmalik.com/2013/02/13/on-the-enlightenments-race-problem/>

** (p7) I'm thinking of the comments Mark Sealy, artistic director of the Black Photographers Collective Autograph, made during the 2014 protests against the Barbican's racially controversial ' *Exhibit b* exhibition: "Since the 1980s, it is progress zero. Our institutions have failed to bring about change – whether it is academia, the Macpherson Report or funding policies – [black] people feel absented from power, authoring and having a voice." And, in a 2015 interview, comedian Lenny Henry spoke of there having been 29 initiatives at the BBC alone in the last 15 years to achieve ethnic diversity in editorial staffing, "and the numbers are actually going down".

*** (p8) 'Against Race' (2000, Harvard University Press) by Paul Gilroy.