

# Echoes of the Past: The Contemporary Apologism of the Petty Intelligentsia

by James Buckham (October 2015)

*"In a year or two, the older generation that still dreamed of empire must surely give way to new politicians...The blimps, still fighting the last war, still nostalgic for its discipline and privations – their time was up."*

In *On Chesil Beach*, Ian McKewan blends the three stories of two young newly-weds and the post-war 1960s British landscape they inhabit into a tale that is both a romantic tragedy and an astute social commentary. The main characters represent the hope for a new and better society rising from the ruins of post-war Europe; educated, conscientious, socially mobile and pacifistically anti-establishment, they embody, despite their fictitious nature, the swinging of a pendulum of values that took place around the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Of course, the values of tens of millions of British citizens did not neatly switch with the Labour landslide of 1945; however, it is as good a point as any to start from. For the seventy years or so prior to that point, social values had been dominated from above by the authority of and respect for Empire, the high church, hierarchy in race and class, traditional gender roles, nationalism, regionalism and traditionalism. To the future there lay the values which the vast majority of us have grown up with and have taken to be the values of "decency": de-colonisation, social mobility, increasing equality of race, class and gender (as an ideal, if not always as a reality), pacifism, anti-racism, individualism, cynicism towards tradition, and educational opportunity.

These were changes of inter-related changes of necessity. Life post-1945 could hardly have developed otherwise. Anti-authoritarianism and anti-racism were natural responses to the memories of Nazism, de-colonisation was inevitable in the face of Britain's declining world presence and military exhaustion, while economic pressures and the need to stay competitive resulted in the first waves

of immigration from the commonwealth. And at the heart of these changes, there was and continues to be the institutions of universities and tertiary education in general. Only these can be said to so comprehensively combine in idea and action those post-war values listed above.

Yet the social values of societies are not chosen and fixed forever but remain at the mercy of national and international social and economic change. Factors outside the control of the individual – the decline of the British Empire, the Wall Street Crash, the Kaiser, the railroad and the telegram, the rise of Japan, Russian Bolshevism – gradually altered beyond recognition what was deemed “decent” and “respectable” to the man in the British street throughout the middle of the last century. And there is every reason to suppose that the current international political/social/economic phenomena – ISIS, possibility of Grexit/Brexit, the current migrant crisis, massive wealth inequality, internet propaganda, Chinese stock bubble etc – could succeed in enacting a massive value swing away from the liberalism we have grown so used to in the past 60 years.

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None of this is particularly radical thinking to anyone with a basic knowledge of modern European history. However, it is necessary to bear this social-historical background in mind when considering the puzzling present day phenomenon of apologism for Islamism from those who would otherwise describe themselves “liberal” or “left wing.” When searching for the motivations why such people continually seek to play down the effects of and tacitly support a superstitious, anti-democratic, misogynist and authoritarian creed – in short a creed which is the antithesis of those ascendant post-war values – it is illuminating to look back to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to see what led previous generations to provide support and sympathy for violent fascism in complete disregard for their own ethics and interests.

Re-reading the second part of George Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier* after ten years brings fresh perspectives. Anyone who has ever doubted the cyclic nature of social history would do well to study the arguments of that great name of 20<sup>th</sup> century literature as he endeavored to persuade the middle classes of 1930s Britain that their interests would be better served by a reasonable, moderate form of socialism rather than drifting towards the fascism which was sweeping

through state after state in inter-war Europe.

Towards the conclusion of the book, Orwell focused on the crucial factor of class identity and the dilemma of how to convince those of petty gentility, those economically disadvantaged middle classes who nonetheless saw themselves as “gentlemen,” that a better future laid ahead if they could drop their class pretensions and make common cause with the working classes and share in their struggle. Orwell remained pessimistic that such a thing would be possible given the deeply ingrained social identities and the loss of real or perceived privileges such a change would entail.

Identity is the all-important factor. In fact, it is arguably the only factor. The person we consider ourselves to be is paramount in influencing virtually every conscious decision we make and action we take. For much of Orwell’s middle class, embracing fascism and rejecting socialism was the price of the entry and acceptance into a social order based on the receding values of hierarchy, tradition, physical power and crown and country. These were scared people, fearing the question of who they were as much as how much they would earn. And they were not alone in this. They had their counterparts in the Germanic *Mittelstand* of craft workers and small business owners who formed the backbone of Nazi party members and voters in the 1930s.

Today their *doppelganger* exists as the petty intelligentsia, the middle class, higher-educated, liberally inclined products of higher education who as a group have swollen to an extent which economically endangers a sizeable chunk of them. Many of these find themselves in 2015 to be in a precarious situation. With not enough jobs in media, academia, journalism and NGOs to go around, we can find across the length and breadth of Britain call-centres staffed with literature graduates, council offices having their administrative data input by would-be anthropologists, and teaching assistants still clinging to dreams of becoming independent filmmakers. All being squeezed to the margins of society, accruing more debt, and no doubt, many being acutely aware of the fact that they have not been admitted into the club of decent gentlefolk as they had hoped.

These people have their own version of Orwell’s old school tie and class snobbery in the shape of a university degree and a pressing need to draw a line between themselves and those whom they feel are below them on the scale of respectability, which in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is urban,

cosmopolitan, internationalist respectability. They did not spend three years at university and thousands of pounds paying for it to see eye-to-eye with the manual worker, the straight from school entrepreneur, the elderly middle-Englander or the young armed forces recruit, in other words, those who more likely than not harken back to the values of nationalism, traditional gender roles, regional pride over the intellectualism of the post-war period.

A triangular relationship of ideology emerges whereby the petty intelligentsia express direct or indirect sympathy for Islamism as a means of confirming their anti-war/anti-racist credentials while simultaneously differentiating themselves from the nationalist/anti-immigrant/traditionalist narratives more representative of the working and lower-middle classes and their political and media organisations. This is the current socio-political landscape of Britain and no doubt many other Western nations in 2015.

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It would be easy to respond to the petty intelligentsia with a mixture of bemusement and ridicule. Perhaps though, pity is a more reasonable response. No person likes to be proved wrong publicly. It is embarrassing, shameful even. Furthermore, this shame and embarrassment is compounded several fold if said person has spent his entire adult life cultivating a persona based on his supposed intellectualism and insight into social relations. But it becomes excruciating to the point of being unbearable should this self-styled social seer be proved wrong by the very classes, media outlets and political organisations which he or she relentlessly mocked for years for their lack of intelligence, education and sophistication.

Yet this is what has been happening for the past ten to fifteen years in the UK. In virtually all major controversial issues pertaining to Islamic extremism or wider Muslim/non-Muslim relations or hostilities, the political and social discourses of what might be broadly considered the progressive/liberal/left have been hopelessly playing catch up with their ideological opposition.

It is very difficult to claim that there is no Islamic fifth column in the UK when more British born Muslims are known to be fighting with IS than with the British armed forces. It is very hard to claim that nationalist parties and their supporters are inherently immoral when it was the nationalist fringe

parties who were campaigning against mass child rape in Rotherham while Labour were silent on the issue. And it is very hard to claim that we are moving as a society towards unstoppable integration and shared values when teachers in Birmingham have to be escorted from the schools for their own safety after certain parents try to attack them for teaching a non-traditional, non-Islamic curriculum.

This continued glossing over of crimes and deflecting of arguments is not an indication of petty intelligentsia sympathy for Islamic values and anti-western behaviour, but rather their need to suppress their uneasiness that those below them in the ladder of respectability have been one step ahead of them for some time. The creeping terror that not only does white-van-man earn more than they do, but that he has also been making more accurate assessments of social relations, and all without having spent three years at university and acquiring a massive debt.

This obfuscation cannot last, however. Domestic, continental and international events are rapidly reshaping European politics. The rise of nationalist sentiment is an entirely predictable reaction to the wider dynamics of Western/Islamic relations. Those who try to deny this or wish it away show themselves to be the blimps of the present day; the future does not belong to them. The liberal values of the post-war era may not become completely redundant, but they are certainly about to experience some thorough updating. And the first amendment must be a frank acceptance of the dangers posed by the growth of Islam in Europe and an honest dialogue on how to respond to it.

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