



## Diaspora and the Democratic Imagination

by Bernard Rorke

When Brecht spoke of 'dark times', he was describing a period in which wisdom and goodness had come fatally apart, social conditions which he likened to a 'flood in which we have all gone under'. In *No Place Like Home*, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown powerfully evokes this feeling of having no place in the world recognised and guaranteed by others.

'It is hard to describe the atmosphere at that time. The sense of insecurity, of being despised, of losing respect and position, of watching the whole world that you had known and in part created dissolve into vapours of venom and nothingness.'

Her account is of the plight of the *wahindis*, Ugandan Asians whose expulsion by Idi Amin in the seventies marked another episode in the Indian diaspora, a diaspora described by Bhikhu Parekh as unique in that it is more widespread, more varied than any other. Diaspora, forced expulsions, mass displacements have proved to be frequent and persistent features of modernity. Such traumatic events have for vast numbers of people created a chasm between their pasts and futures. When tradition can no longer sustain a meaning of the past, narrative, the retelling of the past - its continued reintegration into the often contingent story of the present - becomes vital in preserving a sense of identity. Throughout the twentieth century, so many diverse populations, often under adverse conditions, have through such complex negotiation, both painful and exhilarating, reinterpreted,

adapted and revised their cultures to develop a sense of self and collective identity. Parekh insists that the diasporic Indian is not rootless; rather, like the banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life, he spreads out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up: 'Far from being homeless, he has several homes, and that is the only way he has increasingly come to feel at home in the world.'

The diasporic experience, the centrality of issues of cultural identity, and the rights of minority cultures today: all shed some light on the limitations of our inherited political traditions. Our traditional understanding of liberty, equality, democracy, and justice - the centre of gravity of which is occupied by an image of unproblematic value, bland presumptions of human progress, and an essentially domestic focus - is further constrained by what Sheldon Wolin describes as an ideology of national identity still hostage to an early modern myth that is 'tightly communitarian rather than hospitably pluralist'.

Liberal traditions rest on unstated assumptions about the homogeneity of the polity, assumptions no longer tenable in the context of multi-ethnic, multicultural or multinational states. The relentless individualism of the traditional liberal approach privileges dominant cultures and has, for so long, rendered the public sphere inhospitable to the group claims of minority cultures. For its part, the Left, or at least a disproportionately influential Left orthodoxy, has, for most of this century, also maintained a hostility to the claims of minority cultures. This hostility is often explained in terms of a *gauchiste* commitment to internationalism, what John Dunn has called 'the unacceptably indolent and superficial notion of the unity of the world proletariat'. The preoccupations of liberal individualism and socialist 'internationalism' have effectively led to a denial of the rights of minority cultures. In both

traditions, as Will Kymlicka argues in *The Rights of Minority Cultures*, this denial is exacerbated by an ethnocentric denigration of smaller cultures, and a belief that progress required their assimilation into larger cultures.

A degree of epistemological and ethical relativism is inescapable today. If our societies are to 'reverence diversity', an acceptance of the plurality of cultures and discourses is the only answer to either perpetual strife or the tyrannical imposition of one set of values. But a generalised relativism, an uncritical celebration of difference, is a dangerous accentuation of the differences we encounter. The political quest in our complex present should be to identify morally defensible and politically viable solutions to conflicts that arise between groups and cultures that are different, solutions characterised by exchanging and overlapping interactions that do not issue in community. For democracy to remain a benign political presence, 'an acknowledgement of shared fallibility and shared vulnerability', our polities urgently require a hospitably pluralist notion of membership, one that is centred without monopolising loyalties.

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