



European Civil Liberties Network

Essays for civil liberties and democracy in Europe

“The Rules of the Game”?

A Sivanandan

We live in such a vortex of change that no sooner have we seized the time than it has passed us by. But that is the very reason why we must be more vigilant than ever about constraining power and invigilating the insidious ways of government as it changes 'the rules of the game'. To do that, however, we need the courage to abandon old ideologies which bear us down, the honesty to turn our faces against intellectual fads and fetishes which turn us away from engagement and the commitment to fight injustice wherever we find it. We need, too, the type of political analysis that Owen and Godwin, Saint-Simon and Fourier, Marx and Engels did for their time in the maelstrom of the industrial revolution - an analysis immanent in which were the strategies that would inform the working-class struggles against capital - and out of that conflict elicit, if not socialism, at least the democratic rights and freedoms that have come down to us.

And it is those rights and freedoms that we are in danger of losing today. The working-class forces that won them for us have been disaggregated and dispersed by the technological revolution - even as that revolution concentrates wealth in the hands of giant corporations and sets them free to roam the world, with the nation-states of the West clearing capital's imperial way by setting up stooge governments for consenting Third World countries, and regime change for those who refuse to play imperial ball. National governments, which under industrial capitalism worked in the interests of their people, under electronic capitalism work in

the interests of multinational corporations - and the welfare state cedes to the market state, where those who own the media 'own' the votes that elect the government, where the social fall-out is mediated through welfare sops and controlled through draconian legislation which corrodes the whole fabric of civil society.

Some of these processes were already there in the very nature of globalisation. The fall of Communism hastened them and made them universal. 11 September entrenched them, and the ensuing war on terror added a *military* dimension to the *economic* project, justified through a *politics* of prejudice and fear to create a *culture* of xeno-racism and Islamaphobia: the asylum seeker at the gate and the shadow Muslim within.

It is that symbiosis between racism and imperialism, and imperialism and globalisation that now frames our times. We cannot combat the one without combating the others. Imperialism is the project, globalisation the process, culture the vehicle, and the nation-state the political and military agent. To look at racism as an isolate without considering its relationship to globalisation, and therefore imperialism, is not only to descend into culturalism and ethnicism but to overlook the state racism that embeds institutional racism and gives a fillip to popular racism in the form of laws and edicts that starve and dehumanise asylum seekers whom globalisation has displaced and thrown up on the shores of Europe.

To look at globalisation without relating it to imperialism and therefore racism is not only to regard its penetration into Third World countries as an inevitable extension of trade and not as a precursor to the regime change that follows in its wake, but to overlook the racist discourse that accompanies it and in turn feeds into popular racism.

To look at imperialism without relating it to globalisation and racism is not just to accept the notion that regime change and pre-emptive strikes have no underlying economic motive but are a defensive strategy against 'the axis of evil' and the terrorists they breed - ('post-modern imperialism', Robert Cooper, one-time adviser to our PM and the EU, calls it). It is also to accept the hoary old myth of the white man's burden of bringing civilisation and enlightenment to the lesser breeds, of freeing them from tyranny, forcing them to be free, bombing them into freedom and democracy. Except that the underlying theme this time is not that of a superior race but of a superior civilisation. Hence the real war, not the phoney war, is not between civilisations, as Huntington would have it, but against the enforced hegemony of western civilisation.

To put it another way - under global capitalism, the relationship between the economic, political, cultural etc., is so organic that we can no longer think of society in terms of superstructure and base, with the economic base determining the political and cultural superstructure. That would have done for industrial capitalism. But electronic capitalism requires us to think in terms of circuits, not hierarchies. And the dynamo that drives those circuits is the free-market system.

The market, in its turn, dismantles the public sector, privatises the infrastructure and determines social need. It violates the earth, contaminates the air and silts up the rivers. It creates a two-thirds, one-third society of the have-everythings and the have-nothings, and keeps poverty from the public gaze. It reduces personal relationships to a cash nexus (conducted in the language of the bazaar) even as it elevates consumerism to the heights of Cartesian philosophy: I consume, therefore

I am.

The irony is that when our rulers ask us *sub-homines* to live up to their values, it is not the values they exhibit that they refer to, but those of the Enlightenment which they have betrayed. Whereas we, the *sub-homines* that is, in our very struggle for basic human rights not only hold up human values, but challenge Europe to return to them. We are the litmus test of western values. The Enlightenment project is incomplete till its remit of liberty, equality and fraternity is extended to the non-white peoples of the world. That is the challenge that our presence in Europe signifies.

Nor is the task of the Reformation over - so long as there is a connection between Church and State (as in Britain) - which in practice privileges the state religion over all others. That, again, is the challenge that Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism etc present.

On the other hand, states that pretend to secularism, like France, are still to distinguish between rites and rights. The religious symbols that people exhibit (like the cross and the hijab) may in their view be a rite but from the view of the secularist state it is a right. For what, in the final analysis defines a secular state is the paramountcy of individual liberty: my freedom is only limited by yours.

11 September and the war on terror have given the British government the excuse to develop a new virulent strain of anti-Muslim racism to go hand in hand with the punitive laws against asylum seekers - till all of us 'Others' are, at first sight, terrorists or illegals. We wear our passports on our faces or, lacking them, we are faceless.

Since 7 July and the London bombings, however, anyone whose face is not quite the right shade, who does not walk in exactly the right way, who does not wear the right clothes for the season, can be taken as a potential suicide bomber - as law-abiding Brazilian electrician Jean Charles de Menezes learnt to his cost. And, if you're recognisably Muslim (or just believed to be Muslim), you will be

subject to official stops and searches by the police and to unofficial racial attacks and harassment in the community.

7 July has also signalled a more dangerous tendency on the part of the executive to make incursions into the preserve of the legislature. A case in point is the administrative powers the Home Secretary has arrogated to himself through changes in existing immigration laws to deport anyone suspected of 'unacceptable behaviour', even to countries that accept torture - on the basis of 'memoranda of understanding' that these particular deportees will not be tortured! These are powers that, in effect, complement and reinforce anti-terrorist legislation - but by side-lining parliament and public debate. And the more the executive arrogates more and more power to itself (it is after all the Home Secretary and not the courts who decides who will be detained, who will be subject to control orders and who will be returned to face torture) and expects the judiciary merely to rubber-stamp its decisions, the more is the role of the judiciary and the respect in which it is held

undermined. Besides, the separation of powers, which silently characterises Britain's unwritten constitution, and is therefore the more to be cherished and safe-guarded, is being systematically undone.

Blair's reasoning behind all this is that 7 July has changed 'the rules of the game'. But the game is democracy and not one part of it can be changed without starting a chain reaction that unravels the whole.

A Sivanandan is Director of the Institute of Race Relations and Co-editor of "Race and Class"

European Civil Liberties Network (ECLN)

contact: info@ecln.org

website: <http://www.ecln.org>

© ECLN 2005