

Comment

The age of selfishness

Rampant individualism is corroding our personal lives, politics and popular culture

Martin Jacques
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I left for Hong Kong in late 1998, returning just over a year ago. It was the first time I had ever spent a chunk of time outside Britain. I recommend it. You will never see your own country in the same light again, especially if you choose to live outside the west. You will realise that "our world" is a small and declining fraction of humanity, a fact that we are largely unaware of in our post-imperial hubris. I had left these shores with a feeling of unease. Far from sharing the widespread euphoria for New Labour, I was deeply troubled by what seemed to me to be its transparent vacuity, its devotion to hyperbole rather than substance. My disquiet about my country, though, was not confined to the Blair "project": it also had something to do with the state of the culture, with the rise of celebrity, the coarsening of tone, a loss of meaning, though I found it difficult to give expression to these thoughts.

Upon my return, I found that much of what I had felt about New Labour was now widely shared. It is the nature of the wider cultural trends that I want to deal with here. I will divide these into two: post-imperial culture and popular culture. Returning to Britain, one observation struck me most forcibly. It has become fashionable to believe that empire and imperial pomp are now but a distant memory, that we laid the colonial ghost to rest at some indeterminate point in the last few decades. I beg to differ. Once an imperial nation, always an imperial nation, even when the substance of power has long since disappeared. It is a mentality, a way of being and thinking.

As a nation we still have a desperate need to believe that we still matter. The expressions of this are often quite benign. One example was the ridiculous hype about Cool Britannia: how we were the coolest nation on earth. A good friend of mine who has done some excellent work trying to civilise football fans announced on television that England had the friendliest fans at the World Cup. The friendliest? Buried deep in the national psyche, in a way that affects each and every one of us, is a desperate desire to believe that we are the best: it is part of our imperial genetic make-up, shared only by other imperial nations like the United States and France. Living in Hong Kong and travelling extensively in East Asia, the world's most dynamic region, where Britain barely registers, the absurdity of this world-view became ever more apparent.

Other symptoms of our post-imperial hangover are not so benign. Margaret Thatcher, still the defining figure of contemporary politics, remained utterly unrepentant about our history and dreamed of restoring it in chastened circumstances. Tony Blair believes that it is still Britain's historic role to be a major arbiter of global affairs. This, of course, is no longer possible except riding pillion to the United States. We thus now have the extraordinary sight of Britain acting as the mouthpiece of the United States in a far more servile manner than was the case even during the cold war. Our prime ministers, especially those who dream of a place in history, seem to find it impossible not to behave in an imperial fashion. Their pretensions, though, surely speak not only of themselves but also of the national psyche.

Of course, Tony Blair has a fondness for hyperbole, and not only of the imperial variety. The Third Way, abolition of left and right, new politics, end of ideology, ethical foreign policy and the abolition of the economic cycle have all been part of his repertoire. Hyperbole rather than substance has been New Labour's stock in trade. It is a movement in search of a cause and meaning. At its heart is a black hole, a numbing vacuity. Far from ushering in a new world of vision and meaning, New Labour has become synonymous with gesture, emptiness, ephemera and pastiche.

In this it perfectly mirrors, and complements, the state of popular culture. When I left these shores, the icon of the new flippant, irreverent, anything-goes, infantile, self-referential, self-absorbed celebrity culture was Chris Evans. Since my return he has been barely visible but no matter, the syndrome he represents has grown like Topsy. There is no longer one Chris Evans but a huge cast of them. Popular culture has become a feeding frenzy, its appetite for something different and more outrageous insatiable. Infatuation with the "new", for New Labour and popular culture alike, has become a substitute for meaning. Perhaps it is the destiny of old imperial nations to end

up like this: having lost an irrecoverable project, there remains the slippery slope to irrelevance, self-obsession and cultural bulimia.

Over the last decade or so, there has been a general trend in western societies towards mass populism, "rabble" democracy, and a "consumer is king" cultural mentality. Many programmes on television reflect this, from Big Brother to Jerry Springer, as does the rise of politicians like Silvio Berlusconi who, more than any other political figure, epitomises the new culture.

The roots of much of this lie, not least, in the extent to which the market has become all-pervasive. The ubiquity of market values came as quite a shock to me after nearly three years away: when you live with it all the time, somehow you become unaware of the extent to which it is progressively invading the culture. The market mentality has moved well beyond the original areas of contestation into health, education, old age, culture, relationships, morality, personal behaviour and childhood. The market as the measure of all worth is visibly on the march, seeping into every pore of society.

Market hegemony, however, is not the only reason for the trend towards individualism. It is also a consequence of a seemingly unstoppable movement towards personal freedom. In any trade-off between the social good and personal freedom, the latter has progressively won out. The old rules and boundaries marking personal behaviour have been eroded, sometimes even dissolved. Rules are to be made and remade, there are no absolutes. The old strictures governing sexual behaviour have been transformed. Marriage, not so long ago the institution which defined the sacred union of human beings, governed by a myriad of rights and responsibilities, has become for many a temporary arrangement and, for even more, a commitment to be postponed or even avoided.

It goes without saying that this has transformed us all. It has enormously expanded our personal freedom and opportunity. Much of it has been for the good. It has brought a new sense of openness and tolerance. It is also totally out of control. Every society depends on rules, on constraint, on balance, on enduring values, on a sense of morality that cannot be reduced to the do-it-yourself and the contingent. All have suffered grievous harm in the face of the advancing army of personal freedom. We may live in the age of freedom, but it should more properly be described as the age of selfishness. The result is that the myriad ties that hold society together have been seriously weakened. We live in a world of increasing impermanence, transience and ephemerality, where little or nothing is forever, and individual gratification is the highest priority.

I must admit that I now view the balance between social good and personal freedom differently from before I left England. Broadly speaking, while appreciating the downside, I still felt that the trend was positive. Now I hold a different view. The combination of marketisation and unrestrained individualism are profoundly corrosive and are undermining the social ties that bind us together. Perhaps you think I exaggerate. We work the longest hours of any OECD country: longer hours at work mean less time for family and friends. Our public services are characterised by deprivation and squalor because for decades society has chosen personal consumption above investment in social goods. Public spaces have become increasingly scarred by anti-social behaviour.

There has been a general decline in manners and courtesy, the public demonstration of respect towards other members of society. Street crime has risen dramatically, bespeaking a lack of respect for others; anything goes in the pursuit of one's own avaricious needs. Old people have become increasingly marginalised as the extended family has declined, the wisdom of age less valued and society more youth-orientated. Britain's savings ratio is lower than at any time since 1963 and the lowest in western Europe: people prefer to consume in the present rather than save for the future. Britain, like the continent, has a weak sense of the future, which expresses itself in many ways, from a lack of commitment to children to our inability to organise a half-decent public transport system.

But perhaps the most telling examples lie in the realm of personal relations. There is a powerful trend towards the balkanisation of society into a myriad of peer groups, mainly based around work and profession, and the progressive erosion of permanent and enduring relationships as expressed in the family. Peer group relationships, by their very nature, are more functional, transient, and generationally-specific. The "peer group society" resembles the market in its characteristics: friendships are more short-lived and contractual in nature. By contrast, family relationships are permanent, unconditional, utterly unequal and non-contractual in nature. It is impossible for a person ever to reciprocate the love they receive from their parents (especially the mother): the only reciprocation is through the love they give and sacrifice they make for their own children.

The most dramatic expression of the erosion of social ties and the emphasis on the present and self-gratification

is the attitude towards children. The birth rate has been steadily falling and is now below 1.7, far short of the level at which a society naturally replenishes itself. Declining societies are those that cannot reproduce their own populations. The future is sacrificed for the present. Mothers are having children at an ever-later age. More women are choosing not to have children. More mothers are electing to carry on working after they have given birth: and there is no sign that fathers are compensating for this by deciding not to work, or work less. The result is that parenting time has declined significantly, and society en masse now pays others to care for their children. The human cost of this failure to give parenting its due priority lies sometime in the future, in the impoverishment of human relationships, the decline of intimacy, behavioural problems and the like.

These are deeply rooted cultural trends that have been under way for some four decades. It would be fanciful to think that politicians have a great deal of control over them. But it would also be wrong to suggest that society is powerless to influence or mould these trends. Thatcherism was responsible for articulating a new philosophy that has shaped the behaviour and attitude of each and every one of us: the market as a universal logic, the "selfish" individual, the iconic status of business and businessmen, money as the ultimate measure. Without Thatcherism, these trends would not have had the same inflexion or reach. They have continued unabated under New Labour for one simple reason: New Labour subscribes to virtually the same lexicon of beliefs as Thatcherism. Even now, when belatedly it has accepted that the public services desperately require a huge injection of cash, it has utterly failed to make the case for the sanctity and singularity of the public realm.

When I left Britain, I had a sense that somehow New Labour would end in tears. A strong part of me thought that New Labour might even implode, given the shallowness of its support and the contrived and superficial nature of its philosophy. But I completely under-estimated the scale of the crisis of the Tory party. People have nowhere else to go. But upon my return I feel no less uneasy about where my country is headed, indeed my disquiet is even greater. I make no excuses for thinking apocalyptically. Consider the brew: a vapid, vacuous political project, which has surfed the fashions of the time with little substance and few roots; a decline in politics, first widely discussed 10 years ago, but a process which has since gone very much further; and a hollowed-out, atomised popular culture, increasingly devoid of meaning. This is a recipe for dark times ahead.

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