

# Remembering Brian Barry

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For anyone with hands-on experience of the current political discourse of 'equality' in the UK, and who finds in it evidence of liberal guilt, the death a year ago (March 10th 2009) of the political philosopher Brian Barry (born in 1936) must have been a colossal loss. Barry was one of a handful of British academics and public intellectuals who, sometimes belatedly, sought to rescue the public understanding of 'equality' from bureaucratic activism and intellectual game playing.

While it would be grossly unfair to suggest that the idea of 'equality' is still largely a matter of institutions publishing empty statements outlining their commitments to the promotion of equal opportunities, diversity, and social inclusion, it is still largely true that there are no acceptable minimum standards of what should constitute measurable equality in practice.

It seems that large sections of the British public are eager to accept that there may be a connection between the lack of presence of disabled or non-white artists in major cultural venues and prejudices among the elite of the arts professions. Nonetheless, this same public is less inclined to defend its own right of access, when for example, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play *Behzti*, critical of her own religion, was suddenly made the cause of a potential public disorder by Bhatti's co-religionists. This begs the question, what constitutes the secular public interest versus sectarian communal/private interests? Equality cannot be defended without addressing this faultline. It's clear that arriving at such an understanding is always going to be very difficult.

As far as one can gauge from opinions in the popular press, admittedly not a reliable source, the British public is all in support of an egalitarian society and often blames its politicians for their less than honest defence of it. If so, what is difficult to gauge is whether the public is reconciling itself fast, or well enough, to the underlying logic of equality, especially that aspect that seeks to address racial discrimination. For, in the final analysis, this is the central issue at the heart of multiculturalism, which is the most controversial among all the headings that now frame equality in the British context. There is a general appearance of belief that the only way to address racial discrimination is to encourage the non-white orders to pursue their own whims – as long as they are not an economic bother to anyone. By encouraging such beliefs, even if unintentionally, bureaucrats have become complicit in promoting a kind of sectarianism. This unfortunate reality is high among the reasons for recalling the work of Brian Barry.

It is not only that Barry goes further than most other intellectuals or recent writers on equality, but that he instructively historicises the idea of equality, while also showing how constructive changes were achieved. Barry's argument is always that any claim for equality ought not to ignore universal principles, not least those that have framed the incomplete meaning of citizenship in liberal democracy. In this sense Barry should be to Britain what Habermas is to Germany. The neglect of Barry's work by politicians, bureaucrats and anti-racists in the UK is a sign of an impoverished public discourse, and, perhaps too, a sign of the rather brittle nature of the British status quo.

A passage in *Why Social Justice Matters* (2005)<sup>1</sup> reads:

"In every society, the prevailing belief system has been largely created by those with the most power – typically elderly males belonging to the majority ethnic and religious groups, who also run the dominant institutions of the society. It is notable, for example, that almost all religions rationalize a subordinate position for women and explain that inequalities of fortune are to be accepted as part of God's great (if mysterious) plan. Although those who lose out may not fully accept these ideas, because they too obviously conflict with their own experience, few societies in history have ever

offered a fully articulated alternative belief system. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries produced two important bases for a systematic critique of the status quo (p.27)."

Exploring equality through the existing condition of social justice or the field of culture thus raises the question of the ambition of the state and ability of politicians to confront the forces that threaten our understanding of the public good. In this connection, one can talk of a hierarchy of need if genuine equality is to be achieved. The first need is the protection of social democracy, with all its inbuilt mechanisms for safeguarding the common good. As Barry argues: "Social democracy...challenges the assumption that whatever distribution of opportunities and resources arises within a framework of liberal rights is necessarily just and its implications that any departure from the inequalities thus generated must depend on the good will of the beneficiaries. One way in which social justice can be seen as an extension of liberal justice is quite simple. Liberal justice rests on the presupposition that all citizens are equal before the law (*Why Social Justice Matters*, p.25)."

Barry saw clearly, and often demonstrated, that the language of 'equality' as employed in the UK since 1999 is used to justify the erosion of the same principles of equality which are enshrined in the original mandate of public institutions to promote the common good. Any idea of 'individual responsibility' or 'self-empowerment' was for him both vacuous and meaningless given that the real danger to equality lies in the obsequiousness of politicians in government to ideology that only erodes the powers of the State as a moral arbiter. Barry's thinking and exposition are built around the vision of the State as an expression of authority capable of promoting and defending an un-fragmented form of public well-being. This is what is expressed in *Culture and Equality* (2001) and *Why Social Justice Matters* (2005), which were his last two books. For example, in one of the chapters in the former book, appropriately titled 'The Strategy of Privatization', Barry confronts the dogma of multiculturalism and identity politics by highlighting how the promotion of *difference* has also become a technique for achieving market secularisation on one hand and deepening social sectarianism on the other hand. He writes:

"The fact of difference is universal and so is its social recognition. As far as that goes, there is nothing different about contemporary western societies. What is, however, true is that in these societies, differentiation tends to be more complex and to have a larger optional components than is characteristic of traditional societies. The whole concept of a 'lifestyle', as something that can be deliberately adopted and may demand some sort of recognition from others is indicative of a society in which the *consumer ethic* has spread beyond its original home.<sup>2</sup> (p.19)." Elsewhere in the same chapter, Barry also writes that:

"...the 'politics of difference' is a formula for manufacturing conflict, because it rewards the groups that can most effectively mobilize to make claims on the polity, or at any rate it rewards ethnocultural political entrepreneurs who can exploit its potential for their own ends by mobilizing a constituency around a set of sectional demands (p.21)."

In *Why Social Justice Matters*, Barry offers an empirical analysis of how market secularism and the ideology behind it have become a source of embarrassment to governments all over the world, and especially to mature democracies such as the UK under New Labour or the US, irrespective of which of the two dominant parties is in power in these countries. Here Barry sees the gradual substitution of any idea of social justice through the workings of "causal chains which run back into and from the basic structures of society".

It is worth restating that Barry's concern is always about the first principles. What is absent in his writings on equality is a reflection on the

persistence of 'blood theory' when it comes to citizenship is many Western societies that officially subscribe to universal principles. There is scope for dealing with the ambiguities of theory and legal citizenship within the various frameworks proposed by Barry, nonetheless a greater acknowledgment of the existence of the predicament would have been in order. In some ways this is the terrain which other philosophers, such as Giorgio Agamben, have explored in looking back upon the historic, and now 'extreme', separation of the 'rights of man' from the 'rights of the citizen'.

While the UK has a progressive legal attitude to citizenship, which is understood to date back to the judgement in 1772 by Lord Justice Mansfield in the James Somerset Case, it is still the case that the idea of a multi-racial society may still be regarded with suspicion or cynical ambivalence. The intellectuals of multiculturalism have always drawn their ammunition from the prevalence of such cynicism. As far as the UK goes, the combative self-righteousness of multiculturalists in this country is of course to be derided for what it is – blindness to the connection between reformation of citizenship and the haunting legacy of imperialism and empire. In any critical debate on culture, one must never ignore that there are three constellations worth considering: history, economics, and culture. Multiculturalists, however, tend to believe that only history and culture matter.

The absence of a more economic approach to the issues of racism is a great weakness (which the far right easily exploits) and must reflect the entrepreneurial basis of a great many immigrant communities in Britain. How else are we to explain why the evidence often relied upon by multiculturalists is based on dubious anthropology? The more they rely on such evidence, the more they segregate their so-called public – the non-white immigrants – from citizenship. There are too numerous examples of how the multiculturalists have become tongue-tied on genuine issues of equality affecting the non-white immigrants in today's Britain. Every episode merely reinforces the obvious – that it is impossible to defend any form of sectarian rights when there is a genuine threat to progressive politics.

Barry was an admirer of George Orwell. It is therefore a fitting tribute to him to conclude here with Orwell's withering attack on the liberals of the 1930s, written in 1939. It fits remarkably well with paradoxes of multicultural politics today, a political form more concerned with upward mobility than equality, and therefore increasingly difficult to disentangle from the arguments of the far right.

"In a prosperous country, above all in an imperialist country, left-wing politics are always partly humbug. There can be no real reconstruction that would not lead to at least a temporary drop in the English standard of life, which is another way of saying that the majority of leftwing politicians and publicists are people who earn their living by demanding something that they don't genuinely want. They are red-hot revolutionaries as long as all goes well, but every real emergency reveals instantly that they are shamming. One threat to the Suez Canal and 'anti-Fascism' and 'defence of British interests' are discovered to be identical."<sup>3</sup>

### Notes

1. *Why Social Justice Matters*, Brian Barry (2005) Polity Press.
2. *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism*, Brian Barry (2001), Polity Press.
3. See, George Orwell (1939) 'Not Counting Niggers', Accessed April 2010, [http://www.orwell.ru/library/articles/niggers/english/e\\_ncn](http://www.orwell.ru/library/articles/niggers/english/e_ncn)

