

Another British Value

There used to be phrases current—often symptoms of war-time paranoia or totalitarian propaganda—like “fifth column”, “the enemy within” and “enemy of the people”. What they denoted, no matter quite who used them or for quite what purpose or with quite what justification, was *enemies*—enemies of the state and the people, working, from within, to bring about your downfall or defeat by some clearly identifiable enemy without: if you were British, in 1914 or 1939, German; if you were German, throughout the thirties, International Jewry; if you were American or British, during the Cold War, Soviet; if you were Soviet, from 1917 to 1989, all the various forces of international capitalism.

Such phrases no longer have any life in them, scarcely the life even of jokes (except perhaps in Ukraine?). But new phrases, wonderfully current and full of life—or use at least—have taken their place, phrases like “extremist”, “divisive” and “undermining British values”.

But these new phrases aren’t quite the same as those they have replaced. What the old spoke of as threatened was a discrete and identifiable *something*, an *us*, a Britain or Germany or Soviet Union, a people and the state identified with it, the threat to which was similarly discrete and identifiable, a *them*, the enemy, another hostile country or ideology.

But these “British values” (usually said to be or include such things as tolerance, fair-mindedness, democracy, equality, equal rights, the rule of law, free speech, acceptance of different faiths and so on) might be found, or not, anywhere and everywhere. No one pretends—do they?—that such “values” are more British than, say, Swedish or, nowadays, German? (The Germans evidently cite “tolerance” as a “German value” and seem to be exercising it in favour of African migrants very much more enthusiastically than—immediately after our 2015 election—we are ourselves.)

And, appropriately, the threat to “British values” need not have any connection with an external enemy either: it comes from “extremists” of every kind, including those who, by any measure, undeniably belong to *us* and wish us well. It includes, of course, British jihadists who want to shoot us, bomb us, behead us, absorb us into a Caliphate and impose Sharia Law on us and who are connected with an external enemy, fellow-jihadists in ISIL and Al-Qaeda and so on. But (according to Theresa May) it also includes “neo-Nazis”, not *German* neo-Nazis wanting to refight the Second World War, our own neo-Nazis, belonging, presumably, to such organisations as the British National Party and the English Defence League, which not only fight local council elections but whose names declare their patriotism. They may want the jihadists bombed or beheaded but they not only have no wish to bomb or behead any of the rest of us, they don’t seem to advocate doing so even to the jihadists. Nevertheless, in the new lexicon, in the interest of even-handedness, they, just as much as the jihadists themselves, are part of what in the old lexicon would have been called “the enemy within”. *This* enemy, it seems, may be someone who is too enthusiastically, or in the wrong way, a friend.

To complicate matters a bit more, both sets of extremists are, from the perspective of the new lexicon, part of *us* too, because what they have in common—both those anxious to bomb us and those not—is that they *divide* us, divide the larger Muslim community which the jihadists belong to from the larger still Christian and post-Christian society which the neo-Nazis do. Both are part of the threat and both are part of the threatened, so much so that *young* would-be jihadists are what is known as “vulnerable young people”—young people “vulnerable”, that is, not to being beheaded or bombed themselves but to be in danger of bombing and beheading other people!

Talk of “fifth columns” may have been, for the most part, a symptom of paranoia, but at least you knew where you were with it. This new way of talking is nonsense squared, it’s Big Brother through the Looking Glass, Humpty Dumpty talking Newspeak. (And, now, there, perhaps, *is* a British value.)

Duke Maskell