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Paul Gilroy - in conversation

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An interview with Professor Paul Gilroy (London School of Economics, UK) by Max Farrar (Leeds Metropolitan University, UK)[1](#)

Max Farrar: Question one, what would you say are the most important, what's influenced you most (books, people)?

Paul Gilroy: That's a good one to try and answer. When I went to university in the beginning I wasn't really sure that I wanted to be there. I'd been there a week and my dad dropped dead, I had a crisis of my own motivation. I'd always had a funny relationship with schooling and had in a way battled through school and looked at university, it didn't immediately seem to me to be continuous with the pleasures of educating oneself which I had discovered before I got there. Anyway, I was quite unhappy and one of my teachers was a man called Donald Wood who was an historian of the Caribbean (*Trinidad in Transition*). In my second term I was really thinking I might leave and went to see him.

MF: You did American Studies?

PG: I did American Studies - it was one of the only ways at that time to study anything black-related.

MF: Ah right

PG: So I went to see Donald and he told me that I should go away and read *The Black Jacobins* and *Wretched of the Earth* which I did and that set me on my way.

MF: You couldn't start with much better than that could you?

PG: Actually he also told me to go and read Raymond Williams. My parents had Raymond Williams' books around the house and I'm trying to think if they had *Culture and Society*. They certainly had *The Long Revolution* around the house, so in a way I discovered Raymond Williams via Donald as well, so I'm really grateful to him for orienting me that way. The other thing that happened to me occurred when I was leaving University a few years later. I was thinking about what to do with my life and I went to the bookshop and I found a copy of *Resistance through Rituals* from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, and I thought "Well if you can write about these things there, then that's where I want to go." It hadn't figured in my course, but it made me decide that Birmingham was where I had to be. There was that discovery and it sort of sent me off to find Stuart Hall in particular, who has influenced me greatly. The other teachers I should mention were those who had an interesting relationship with sociology. My teachers at the time were George Rehin and Cora Kaplan, who were historians really of America, who had interests in literature. Sussex at that time had a strongly interdisciplinary outlook and of course Gillian Rose taught me too. From her, I learned that sociology might be an interesting thing to explore. I hadn't discovered it for myself until the point that she taught me. Of course, her version of what sociology might be and how it developed and so on were rather particular, if not eccentric, and it was really through her that I became acquainted with Lukacs, Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse and of course with Marx, Nietzsche and Weber. That's my sequence really. There were lots of things subsequently in my

own formation, but my interest in doing serious scholarship derived from my experience of what those people taught me.

MF: . . . events, socio-political events in your life?

PG: I'm not old enough to be a 1968 person. You know I don't think of 68 in quite that way, although you know obviously around where I live there was The Black House and there was a presence of Black Panthers on the street, things like that, I used to walk past the black house every day on my way to work actually which was on Holloway Road.

MF: Is that John Berger gave them money too, is that . . .

PG: Yeh that's right, the *Sunday Times* Black Power special which I stole from you, which I must return it to you actually is where those photographs were taken.

MF: Oh right

PG: And one of the reasons I hung on to it so tightly was because I used to walk past there every single day on my way to work and I used to see Michael X and got to know Brother Herman peripherally really. I used to observe the life of that institution, so yes that was part of it too.

MF: And in your 20's, 30's?

PG: Well, I was about to say, I'm going onto that, I'm going to say two things: I think the anti fascist demonstrations of the early 70's and the carnival riots particularly of 1976,77,78. That whole sequence of rioting through into the early 80's I know very well. It was really those disturbances that opened up the doors of the academy to me professionally and it's clear that without any of those disorders I'd have never got a job.

Perhaps if we don't want London Metropolitan University to be the only place where black Britons are educated, we'll need a few more riots to ensure the doors of more august institutions are prised open. Leeds Met also does its fair share by the look of it.

MF: Leeds has of course got an illustrious history of riots as well so (muffled). OK, that's great, that's a very good set of references. The second sort of theme I was going to touch on is just, well, for you just to say if you can in a para or two what your work has been driving at, formed in those, by those people, those events, what's it driving at?

PG: I can remember the Lewisham riot of 1977 I think that one was, when the National Front protected by their police, when the police horses came down Lewisham Road, charging into the crowd that was blocking the road (I've written about this somewhere I can't remember where). There were people in the houses on the corner, just by where Goldsmiths College is funnily enough, although there's no blue plaque to commemorate that moment. Someone hung some speakers out of the window and they were playing *Police and Thieves* out of the window and in a way I suppose my own sense of power and how it is challenged, and of the limits of resistance, and the balance between resistance and accommodation, all those things might be traceable back to my experience of that moment, and to the militancy and impotence of it all. So the kind of insubstantiality of that music drifting over me, you know drifting on the wind down to where the police horses were riding into the crowd. I think that these events were not in a sense discreet phenomena. They generated through my experience of them, a particular sense of the political, cultural and historical problems that I chewed over for a long time. A lot of what bothers me about Nationalism in all its forms - and that's something I think which touches all the work that I've done - it's possible to trace it all back to a sense of the relationship between Racism and Nationalism which was revealed in those encounters both with white fascists and with other nationalist forces that sometimes mimicked certain features

of fascist solidarity in order to generate political responses to the forms of risk and fear that those fascists traded in. In other words, to be strong, to answer the way that fascists at street level circumscribed people's lives and experiences sometimes meant that they opted for more militarised ways of understanding political solidarity than they should have done.

MF: In the resistance movement?

PG: Resistance movement, yeh, I think in that sense my interest in the pathologies of Nationalism, in some ways can be traced back to that ambivalence.

MF: We're making great progress on this, we can do this in about half an hour, so that does link into the issue of music, the fact that you're almost starting from music, working outwards, say something more specifically about music . . .

PG: I, you know, before I became an academic, I was a musician and when I wasn't sure I'd ever get a job as an academic I, well in fact I never gave up that hope, when I was a PhD student I was still you know flirting with music and moving in and out of musical, even when I worked at the GLC I was recording with Jah Wobble and people like that.

MF: Oh really?

PG: So my music is very important to me and remains so today. There are a number of ways in which I think sociology still has to answer some of the questions that are placed by music in people's social lives, the place of music in liberatory movements asks for a particular kind of analysis. The reason I became so interested in Adorno was because he was someone whose life and work was connected to these problems, I mean on the one hand in him you have somebody who welcomes the Nazi restrictions, the initial ban on jazz when it was first announced, someone who sees in jazz the militarisation of experience and for whom the marching of African American soldiers was the conduit for jazz into the life of Europe was part of a whole range of unfreedoms which were circulated when these things became mass culture. On the other hand, you have him as somebody who opens an amazing door, particularly in his writing with Hans Eisler, he opens the door to another way of thinking about the relationship between music and social and political life. So these things still worry me maybe because I'm in the process of writing a book about music at the moment. These were things which I was determined to fasten onto. They brought the world of sound into my academic interests and offered some sort of basic protocols for reconciling them. Showing that there had been other people who had struggled with these things. Another person who influenced me, someone who has influenced me very much in this particular area, was Edward Said who not only developed methodological processes which are derived from some of the things that are taken for granted in the way that music is organised and performed but also articulated a very subtle understanding of the relationship between modernism and musical form. These are problems I discovered when Gillian taught me, when she taught me and made me go and read *Doctor Faustus* by Thomas Mann, which is my favourite novel. In terms of trying to understand the Twentieth Century, to understand the relationship between modernism and socialism and fascism and the political, music was at the centre of that story.

MF: In the new books, the music books, you mentioned that you were going to try and subtly talk about politics, and obviously you have just given me the introduction to that conversation, that set of thoughts, can you encapsulate how you're trying to do that?

PG: The first book is very close to being finished. I'm just re-writing it over. It is about freedom and black politics in the 20th century - a kind of settling of my scores with six or seven years of living in the United States. It's really about what happens when music moves out of the position that it has occupied over a long period of time in the development of Black American and other Black Atlantic political movements, and the vacuum which is left there as people strive to reshape their 'musicing' (to borrow from Christopher Small) in light of a different set of technological possibilities, a different set of cultural habits and a culture which

is much more visually orientated, much less musically and sonically orientated. That book really is about the technological and political shape of that large shift in the way that people live with and through music.

MF: And your conclusion is that African American communities depleted by this, or that it's taking a new direction?

PG: I think there is a loss there and it is a loss that asks some tough questions about the way in which African American cultures supplies the sound track to globalisation. What counts as American culture in the world is very often, if not always, derived from African American forms and styles. My book asks questions about that and then says, well, "What comes after that?" If that development is something that DuBois had foreseen, something that DuBois had imagined when he realised that the idea of freedom that African Americans offered the world, something that was going to succeed in a teleological sequence, all the other conceptions of freedom that human beings had developed on our planet.

Let's assume that he was right and that's what actually happened. That is the freedom story and the freedom sound which draws people into a world of mediated experience. Where is black particularity after that development, after you win the game and you didn't even realise you were playing? My book is sort of about that and it becomes a book that's quarrelling most decisively with the limits of DuBois' political imagination particularly around the problematic of double consciousness, which might be thought of as terminating in the figure of Condoleezza Rice.

MF: Are you abandoning that insight? I mean do you think that insight is just no longer relevant?

PG: I think it's no longer powerful anymore. Think of the British case when Parekh wrote *The Future of Multi Ethnic Britain*, he used a lot of formulations, which are akin to those of DuBois: the community of communities etcetera. You resolve a kind of dialectical relationship between your ethnic self and your national self in the interests of a higher and better self, which is also of course for both Parekh and for DuBois, the citizen.

So I'm really trying to say "Well that's fine as an historical point, but in terms of where we are now, you know that's not really going to take us where we need to go." A lot of banality is invested in the idea that we all have multiple identities - everyone says this now. It is self-evident and it certainly didn't used to be. I would like the idea of multiple identities to recover its ability to shock and disturb, so I think doubleness isn't any longer adequate for that conversation.

MF: And in place of citizen your vision of a kind of planetary humanism that . . .

PG: I mean DuBois, let's stick with him for a moment, there was a tension between his desire to ensure that American citizenship would be opened up to Black Americans and in a sense I think he brought this from Germany. He espouses the idea of being a world citizen. He is someone whose conception of world citizenship was derived from the study of world history. In some ways I am playing certain features of DuBois off against other features of DuBois and all the time I am asking not just African Americans, let me be clear about this, but all black people who live within the citadels of overdevelopment whether they want to join the world or not? What are the terms of that encounter to be? In that shift away from a black politics that was thought on an East/West axis towards an emergent form of politics that works on a North/South axis.

MF: And would you go as far as to say you could make the same call to all progressive people whatever their skin colour and ethnic history and etcetera that there might well be a reformulation of how we constitute our identities?

PG: Of course that's why I dedicated my last book to Thomas Hurndall and Rachel Corrie. I was interested in how the form of solidarity which is practised by the human shields and other people who put their own more valuable bodies at risk in situations where there are colonial economies operating; I was interested in their motivations and in what they told us about forms of accountability and responsibility that we face in the light of other calls. Those situations are going to proliferate, I don't just mean ones which are going to require human shields, I mean ones where national attachments are in some sort of disjunctive relationship with more humane, more civilised, more worldly ways of being in the world. Universities are going to come into the front line in the new civilisationism. Apparently we're all going to be spying on our veiled students and all the rest of it. These things may even be relevant in that kind of institutional setting.

MF: True, true, true and the other book the one that's a sort of your encounters with musicians - say a couple of things about that . . .

PG: Well I'm trying to write a book, which is a bit like *Minima Moralia*, in a way *Black Atlantic* was modelled on *Orientalism* and *Between Camps* is modelled on *Origins of Totalitarianism*. I'm trying to, I always work with a template of a kind of book that I would want to read you know the kind of book I wanted to read and this book is really, I wanted to read a book that was like *Minima Moralia* which was driven more explicitly by a kind of historical process. Obviously *Minima Moralia* I'm think I'm right in saying it was written while Adorno was living in California and looking at Hollywood out of one corner of this eye and interacting with Thomas Mann and other people in exile. I want it to be patterned on that and to use a kind of as I say a brokenness to make a different kind of argument, more poetic perhaps argument about technology, presence, intersubjective relations and the development of, I don't know, structures of feeling over a long, a long period of time.

MF: Around certain key musical encounters?

PG: In a way musical encounters is almost too specific I think, I'd say most of those encounters although not all of them are kind of London encounters or English encounters with sound or soundings and I wanted to sort draw that out and ask what kind of place hosts these possibilities, promotes these, these random happenings you know, and perhaps deduce from it not only its technological shape or its cultural architecture but an argument about you know about how, I mean this sounds like a funny way of putting it I suppose a more kind of [muffled] cosmopolitan emerges in every day life.

MF: I think this is one of your big and profitable themes, this sort of street level every day encounter between blacks and whites and people of other pigmentations and cultural backgrounds and what often beautiful things come out of those experiences and interactions which I think is behind your argument about conviviality in a way, it's this vernacular cosmopolitanism which - we know about the violent racist encounters at the backdrop of it all but surprisingly and wonderfully these convivial and pleasurable moments arise.

PG: Well yes I mean in a way it's not a matter of balancing a positive and negative in this. I suppose what I've tried to argue for a long time is that you know racial and ethnic differences ought to be allowed to become ordinary, that they shouldn't really be burdened either with risk and fear and anxiety or with exoticism and opportunity and play and desire, actually they most of the time melt down into you know just the sort of routine substance of social and economic life and I'm quite interested in that breakdown process and what it teaches you know about the sort of you know I suppose what Yeats called the bestial floor of human life, existence, that sort of I mean not exactly the bare life of Giorgio Agamben but something close to it, and I think those routine experiences you know, the ordinary human encounters which are you know not exciting or transgressive or fearful, are things that in this area anyway you're not inclined to place a value on, whereas I think for me that's a kind of curious situation to arrive at, particularly as this country sort of has you know wandered backwards

really into what many of us feel is a you know pretty sort of successful version of multicultural interaction that we ought to be not just celebrating blindly you know which we ought / might want to draw attention to and talk about, and - particularly in the context of European politics - might have something to teach other places you know.

MF: Instead of which our political masters are back peddling as fast as they possibly can

PG: Yes and in doing so summoning up precisely the problem that they claim to be wanting to get away from, go figure.

MF: Well I hope you'll go figure for me actually because it is, to be frank I'm baffled by it, just at the moment when we might have had something good to say

PG: We blew it, you can't be surprised that they, they've sort of clung to their own colonial history, I think that's one thing that you have to say, one of the reasons that I've tried to suggest that you know a different kind of encounter with colonial history is essential to the workings of kind of successful multi culture is precisely because they look at what the people in Iran or Afghanistan have to say and think that they're getting it wrong getting it out of proportion because they remember what was going on there. Look at the coup against Mossadeh for example - they think the Iranians are crazy. However, the Iranians know what the CIA and the Brits did and they remember those things and they act on that political memory. People in Afghanistan remember what happened there a hundred and fifty years ago and people in this country have no clue about that. It's certainly the case that our political leaders are way behind that game and that's evident in the fact that someone like Gordon Brown with so much political capital to spend starts coming out with facile statements we don't really need like "It's time to stop apologising for what went on with the British Empire" - well you know obviously that process hasn't begun and it can't begin until people here are prepared to take possession of their imperial history. Of course there are other arguments about where history is in the national curriculum which will help to promote that awareness. I don't want to make people feel guilty. I want them to cultivate a responsible relationship with the past. It's about saying "Well of course you aren't the people who did those things but our national identity is such that actually there is a connection between the past and the present." You have to be able to live with that, so I'm up for that argument really, I'm all for giving people a habitable relationship with that past that doesn't paralyse them or make them unproductively guilty. It might make them feel intermittently ashamed, but then in their shame they might actually leave that history behind.

MF: Just as an aside, one of the kind of day-to-day encounters, the person who alerted me to the whole Afghanistan history was the guy who ran the corner shop, who turns out not to be as I thought he was a Pakistani but an Afghani, from the Pakistan side but very quick to tell me he's a Pathan, he told me his father was really proud to have fought against the British, against the Pakistanis, and maybe the Russians, I can't remember, but you know, the shop keeper and his family had a complete knowledge of the North West frontier and me with my university education hadn't got the slightest idea.

PG: I'm surprised you didn't pick it up from reading Marx's writings in the New York Daily Tribune because he did actually write quite a bit about

MF: Actually I've never read those, apparently he did the same on India as well, he was very good on India

PG: And on [muffled] too so yes

MF: Yes, journalism is another uncelebrated profession

PG: Indeed

MF: OK, well this is all very good just give me your (muffled) oh yes just give me your views about the role of the intellectual

PG: Well, obviously being an intellectual is one thing and being an academic is something else and what we have to do, I think we need to distinguish those things always, because I think we might be entering situations where the sorts of commitments and responsibilities and visions of one actually come away from the other. In other words they might be in some kind of conflict, whereas before you could mix and match and make a salad out of it, you now actually you might find it very conflicting one with another, and that's something to think about. Obviously the reason why I'm an advocate for a sort of active, open, intellectual engagement is because I believe this is now a society where ignorance is exhaustive and that's true in the collapse of its educational institutions and with the representation of education as either a private individual benefit or a collective corporate one without the obvious argument in which, you know, we see education as part what it means to make, you know, habitable civil society, some sort of, you know, civic and social asset for everybody, which means when you have a literate and educated public you have a better, more functional political system as a whole. So I think there's a whole layer of social value actually which has been abandoned by those who are quarrelling over the way we think about the politics of education and I would like to see that restored in some way. I mean if I sound like a Tory there then so be it, but I do believe in education as a value in itself, it's a good in itself. Education is a good in itself. It's not just about earning a few more pounds so that you can pay a bit more tax serving the needs of industries, it's good in itself. I would like to see, I was trying to open up of those questions again which don't belong you know naturally, inevitable and spontaneously to the right actually.

MF: And how easy is it to be such an advocate right now?

PG: Well of course it's impossibly difficult because you know you're swimming against the tide of ignorance, which is not just a contingent outcome, it's actually you know something that people have created. It's not just colonial history that people don't remember. I mean a little while ago you know it was thought that English students - those that were in school - studied the Nazis and the Tudors at the exclusion of everything else, that's probably not, it's probably overdoing it slightly, but I think there are some questions about how the past enters into our schools, how, you know, if we are talking about the collapse of English cultural Identity - what is the kind of historical and sociological and economic minimum that we want people to have to be functional citizens here and I think you know it would help me I think certainly if sociologists felt more able to enter into that conversation which has been very much dominated by historians up to this point you know and I think we do have some news about that so what was I saying, so I'm saying that for all these reasons it's something that we need to kind of return to, and we must return to it knowing that the goodies and the benefits of life as a professional academic might actually be to some degree in conflict with that.

MF: Can you do it more easily amongst postgrads, undergrads?

PG: Well no, I mean, who's going to spend six, seven years of their life writing a thesis now? What is a PhD now you know I mean it took me eight years to write mine and I know I can't compete with you

MF: Actually quite a lot of people say that, it took me twenty seven years!

PG: So if you can imagine that people had to write something in three or four years you know otherwise they would be struck off you know, it produces a generation of ignorant academics who only know their own project, who may be deep in their relationships of their own project but who are only about an inch wide - they don't know anything else at all, and that's the

condition of getting the work done in that way, so I think you know it's all very well you know training people you know with a capital T, but if you're producing people who are not only ignorant of the wider world, ignorant of how you know how disciplines are developed and how historical and social conditions arise and operate outside of their own particular slice of those things then you're compounding the problem.

So I don't think it's easier, I think it's probably harder, plus you know the professionalisation means that people are coming into the profession who want to be academics. I mean I certainly never wanted to be one; I fell into it like a lot of people do and I'm very grateful for honour and the privilege of having that opportunity to teach and to be you know to be allowed into it, as it were, vocationally speaking. A lot of people who come into it don't come with that in mind, they want to be you know modern academics, and that's sort of an end in itself and that's obviously very peculiar.

MF: Wonderful, thanks very much!

Notes

1. [↑1](#) The British Sociological Association's quarterly magazine *Network* (Spring 2007) contained an edited version of this interview. What follows is the verbatim transcript of the interview, which took place in the canteen at Leeds Met's Civic Quarter campus in October 2006. Photograph of Paul Gilroy by Max Farrar.

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