Radicalism, antiracism, and nostalgia: the burden of loss in the search for convivial culture

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Abstract. Drawing on the example of British antiracism, I argue that nostalgia is an integral and constitutive force within the radical imagination. The first section of the paper is historical and contextual. It shows how attachments to the past and associated feelings of loss and regret (attachments and emotions which combine to form nostalgia) became marginalised and repressed within modern radicalism. The second section looks at how antinostalgia and nostalgia were mapped onto radical antiracism in Britain in the 1980s. It is suggested that the stereotype of the `black rebel' concealed and cohered the tensions between a declining socialist movement and the politics of loss. The third part of the paper explores the issue of nostalgia in the company of Gilroy's *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* My critique of *After Empire* is in two parts. First I look at the stereotyping and repression of themes of loss that sustain Gilroy's account. Second, I address *After Empire* as a nostalgic text, burdened with a yearning for lost political potency. The essay concludes with a call for radicals and antiracists to move beyond the a priori suspicion of nostalgia.

Introduction

Radicals have an uncomfortable relationship with the politics of loss. Yearning for the past has frequently been cast as inherently reactionary. However, nostalgia (defined as a sense of loss and anxiety in the face of change and a related attachment to the past) is currently undergoing a reappraisal (Blunt, 2003; Bonnett, 2006; 2009; Legg, 2005a; 2005b). Nostalgia is being rehabilitated and new questions asked about the purpose and consequences of the identification of radicalism as the `poetry of the future' (Situationist International, 1981, page 333).

This paper is premised on the idea that nostalgia is not epiphenomenal to modern life but integral and constitutive. More specifically, it draws on the example of radical antiracism to engage and develop the argument that the repression of nostalgia and the conflation of socialism with an antagonism to emotions of loss and regret represents an unreflexive theme within radical history. I will also be suggesting that in a postsocialist era this hostility to nostalgia comes to appear paradoxical. For today the left finds itself widely understood as a project of yesteryear and as a set of memories of uncertain relevance.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first is historical and contextual. Making use of European and American examples, it shows how nostalgia became marginalised by an avowedly modernist, rationalist, and cosmopolitan, radical imagination. I argue that, although 20th-century radicalism became characterised by an attitude of hostility to nostalgia, it could never entirely rid itself of this chronic facet of modernity. Although nostalgia has been widely condemned on the left for its conservative affective register, under conditions of rapid social change political resistance tends to be articulated through emotional attachments to a disappearing past. This argument is then brought to bear on a central constituent of contemporary radicalism - albeit one that is rarely scrutinised in historical or critical terms - antiracism. The second section looks at how both antinostalgia and nostalgia were mapped onto radical antiracism in Britain in around the 1980s. The radical version of antiracism developed in Britain during this period involved the representation of racialised minorities as harbingers of change. It is argued that one of the central tropes of British antiracism at this time,
the figure of the 'black rebel', was a cultural stereotype that carried and combined a
sense of loss (for class militancy) and a reassertion of radicalism as an antinostalgic
politics of the future.

Paul Gilroy is one of the most prominent intellectuals associated with British
radical antiracism. In the third section of the paper I explore the issue of loss in the
company of Gilroy's After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture? [(2004); published
in the USA as Postcolonial Melancholia (2005)]. The book is important both because of
its author's status [Colin MacCabe (2007) calls Gilroy ``the most influential intellectual
writing in Britain today''] and because it has been presented as the most sophisticated
antiracist assessment of British culture (Beckett, 2004; Ford, 2005; see also Knowles,
2007; Robotham, 2005). It also brings into focus the nature and limits of the antago-

nism to nostalgia that still marks the radical imagination (see also Baucom, 1996; Shaw
and Chase, 1989). For Gilroy (2004), Britain is in the grip of 'melancholia', a morbid
obsession with its own long-gone days of glory that creates a dismal culture of
regret and fear. This ``pathological formation'' is contrasted to the ``vibrant, ordinary
multiculture'' (page 107) emerging within the ``convivial metropolitan cultures of the
country's young people'' (page 131).

Gilroy's affirmation of one affective arena (of the convivial) and refusal of another
(the melancholic and the nostalgic) is symptomatic of a wider attempt being made
by progressive intellectuals to demarcate politically attractive and unattractive forms
of emotional and prediscursive life (see Thrift, 2005). However, nostalgia provides
us with an illustration of the difficulty of creating (and sustaining) such divisions.
For, as we shall see, After Empire is shot through with nostalgia, both for authentic,
spontaneous identities and for the socialist project (cf Robotham, 2005). Even when
refused and stereotyped as a malign force, a sense of loss reemerges, unwanted but ever
present. The tensions I explore within After Empire provide us with an illustration of
the crises that flock around a political project that tries to define itself by the future
in an era that wants to assign it to the past.

As this judgment implies, this paper will not be providing a guide through nostal-
gia's politically or psychologically `good' and `bad' forms. Nostalgia is offered not as an
optional asset but as a site of historical acknowledgement, experience, and exploration.
To conclude the paper I argue for the merits of a politics that has moved beyond the
a priori refusal and dismissal of emotions of loss and regret. This reorientation
challenges some of the most cemented prejudices in modern life, including the
dismissal of the old and the traditional and the privileging of the young and the new,
as well as the conflation of progress with change.

Radicals and nostalgia: denial, disgust, and new departures

``To make the past irrelevant to the present and to the future is the task of
modernity."
Dipankar Gupta (2005, page 15)

``the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead."
Karl Marx (1998 [1852], page 11)

The message could hardly be clearer. The dominant voices of the radical imagination
do not merely express dislike for nostalgia. They regard it as the enemy. It is portrayed
as the antithesis of the radical project. Nostalgia has been routinely cast as a form of
immature sentimentalism that threatens to drag the working class back to `medieval
The intellectual heritage of the word `nostalgia' does not endear it to a political movement seeking to forge a rational society. The term was coined in 1688 by the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer, by combining the Greek `nostos' (return home) and `algos' (pain). It referred to a medical disorder, an extreme longing for home. The earliest citation in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) is from 1770 and derives from the notebooks of Joseph Banks, botanist on James Cook's Endeavour: ``[T]he greatest part' of the crew, wrote Banks, ``were now pretty far gone in the longing for home which the Physicians have gone so far as to esteem a disease under the name of Nostalgia."

The association with bodily malfunction faded in the 19th century as nostalgia began to be seen as a superficial emotional disposition. However, for radicals the pathological undertones of the word appear to have assisted in confirming the suspicion that ideologies that offer "resistance to progress hardly deserve the name of systems of thought" (Hobsbawn, 1962, page 290).(1) The past was increasingly cast as local, idiotic, and filthy: a place to escape from. "The revolution", Trotsky wrote in 1923, "means the final break of the people with Asianism, with the 17th century, with holy Russia, with ikons and cockroaches" (quoted by Carr, 1958, page 144). Attachments to the past were cast as a kind of self-burial: a refusal of hope and life. However, today the spectre of loss is haunting the left. The stage is set for a reappraisal of nostalgia. Contemporary Marxism is awash with wistful recollection for a time when Marxism mattered (Scribner, 2005; for discussion Kubik, 2007). The narration of socialism and communism in the West has become dominated by acts of historical retrieval (Samuel, 1985; 1986; 1987; Segal, 2003; 2004). At the same time, the `affective turn' witnessed within a number of academic disciplines (Agnew, 2007; Thrift, 2004) is providing a conducive environment for a new openness to themes of yearning and loss: themes that have long been objects of censure in the rationalist paradigm that dominated 20th-century socialism. Indeed, Alison Blunt's (2003) studies of the search for a home (or homeland) for Anglo-Indians evoke the `liberatory potential' of nostalgia. Blunt also exposes the gendered nature of "an antipathy towards nostalgia", an antipathy which she argues "reflects a more pervasive and long-established 'suppression of home' " (page 721). Emphasising the materiality of affective politics, Blunt identifies the Anglo-Indian desire for `home' as `productive nostalgia': a term she uses "to represent a longing for home that was embodied and enacted in practice rather than solely in narrative or imagination" (page 722). This emphasis is taken up in other recent reassessments of nostalgia, which assert the corporeal and lived qualities of nostalgia (and hence take issue with the claim, identified by Stephen Legg with Susan Stewart, that nostalgia `is only 'behind and before experience', not taking part in `lived experience' " (Legg, 2005a, page 486).

The evocation of a prediscursive affective realm suggests an interest in the neurological storage of memory (Antze, 2003). At the same time, the desire to locate and, in some way, affirm a realm beyond or outside of rational symbolic representation offers less analytical pleasures, of escape from authority into "wild new imaginar
dies" (Thrift, 2003, page 2019), and regress into the "purposefully immature" (Thrift, 2004, page 84). Inasmuch as these hopes echo traditional romantic aspirations to open oneself to 'real life', the affective turn is recognisable not merely as opening up discussion of nostalgia but as shaped by nostalgia. Nostalgia has an awkward but potentially creative role within the affective turn. It carries questions not just about the repression of affect but also about the attraction to affect. Moreover, by its very nature, the study of nostalgia makes problematic and visible any attempt to remove politics, history, or geography from contemporary scholarship. Indeed, in part because of its difficult relationship with progressive politics, the study of nostalgia tends to suffer not from an absence but
rather from a surfeit of political anxiety. Thus analysts of nostalgia share a proclivity towards dividing the category up into acceptable, progressive forms and unacceptable, conservative forms (Boym, 2001; Davis, 1979; Legg, 2005a).

The attempt to separate out the "negative and positive potential" of nostalgia (Legg, 2005a, page 500) suggests it can be absorbed within an instrumental and authoritative politics of liberation. Yet as Karen Till (2006) observes,

``the affective materialities of a place or even an object’s unique quality resulting from particular social histories, interconnections to other places, and lasting human imprints may surpass instrumental efforts to make selective pasts speak through them" (page 330).

In contrast to such 'instrumental efforts', I approach nostalgia as a sprawling, inevitable, and constitutive presence within modernity. I offer nostalgia as a realm of acknowledgement, experience, and exploration (and not as a potentially useful tool to be strapped onto the left's political utility belt). In the rest of this section I explain how and why this kind of reappraisal has become possible. In order to do this I identify two main trends in the relationship between radicalism and nostalgia:

(1) The retreat of nostalgia and the shock of the new: nostalgia was once an explicit part of the radical project. The dominant position of antinostalgia in radicalism in the 20th century represents the hegemony of a technocratic and scientific radical paradigm.

(2) The critique of antinostalgia: in the aftermath of this hegemony a new appraisal is possible of the social damage inflicted by the erasure of memory and tradition; nostalgia can be understood as a chronic aspect of modernity and a repressed and disruptive aspect of conventional, antinostalgic, radicalism.

The retreat of nostalgia and the shock of the new

In Britain the identification of radicalism with modernisation was an achievement of the mid-late 19th century. In the early part of the century, for the main radical groups, the Spenceans and Chartists, the past was an obvious resource for the critique of unwelcome social and technological changes and for models of a better society (Bonnett, 2007; see also Stafford, 1987). Thus although the cause of progress was championed - as Gerald Massey (1850, page 113) wrote, "the young intelligence of the People is a century in advance of their's who pretend to govern" - it tended to be understood as emerging from popular tradition and popular memory. The relationship between radicalism and nostalgia was not premised on, or limited to, an understanding of the past as containing politically useful histories of resistance and struggle. Indeed, the attraction of the past was, in part, that it exceeded instrumental and strategic manipulations of this kind. At the centre of the Spencean and Chartist imagination was the conviction that a settled and close relationship between people and place was a prerequisite for popular democracy. Memory, tradition, and the nation itself were understood to be reflections of the solidarity and agency of 'the people' and set in opposition to modern trends towards rationalist authority, deracination, and individualisation (see also Barrell, 1972; Burchardt, 2002).

Revisionist historians, such as Craig Calhoun (1982), have argued that, in 19th-century Britain, "Workers were not fighting for control of the industrial revolution as much as against that revolution itself" (page 55). Indeed, Calhoun goes onto claim that the "most potentially revolutionary claims were those which demanded that
industrial capitalism be resisted in order to protect craft communities and traditional values” (page 55). Such contemporary edicts on revolutionary authenticity need to be taken with a pinch of salt. They overextend the key point, which is that early radicalism relied upon nostalgia as a source of comfort and solidarity and as an emotional and political challenge to capitalist transformation. Indeed, the self-consciously provocative nature of Calhoun’s intervention serves to remind us of how thoroughly the idea that there could be an alliance between nostalgia and radicalism has been marginalised.

In Michael Kenny’s (2000, page 108) terms the plurality of socialism’s possible paths was comprehensively replaced, in the last century, by an ‘orthodox Marxist or social democratic’ utilitarianism in which radicalism and modernity were conflated and the primitive and chaotic ‘earlier phases’ of socialist development ‘transcended’. Thus sympathetic biographers of antimodern early socialists, such as William Morris, preferred to overlook their radical nostalgia on the basis that the concept is an oxymoron (Meier, 1978; Thompson, 1976) [though see Kenny (2000) on Thompson’s complex relationship to socialist ‘romanticism’].

By the early 20th century the admission of loss, of emotions of regret and fear, was largely limited to unorthodox thinkers on the left (cf Benjamin, 1994). Siegfried Kracauer’s attitude of ‘hesitant openness’ makes him an exemplary figure in this marginal history. It is an attitude that encouraged Kracauer to consider how the loss of historical memory unpicks social solidarity. Kracauer found the “unhistorical nature” and “the formless disquiet” of modern Berlin disturbing (cited by Frisby, 1985, page 139). In “Streets without memory” (Kracauer, 1964) he depicts the Kurfurstendamm as “empty flowing time in which nothing is allowed to last” (page 19). In “Screams of the street”, the ebb and flow of the modern street is associated with a barely concealed violence:

``buses roar through them, whose occupants during the journey to their distant destinations look down so indifferently upon the landscape of pavements, shop windows and balconies as if upon a river valley or a town in which they would never think of getting off; that a countless human crowd moves in them, constantly new people with unknown aims that intersect like the linear maze of a pattern sheet. In any case it sometimes seems to me as if an explosive lies ready in all possible hidden places that, in the very next moment, can indeed blow up” (pages 28-29).

The ‘new community’ Kracauer depicts is an unsettled, pliable agglomeration of solipsistic individuals: a social form that concedes not merely ultimate but daily and intimate power to the dominant political order. In this way Kracauer’s seemingly simple evocations of the street conjure a much wider landscape of powerlessness and displacement.

The critique of antinostalgia

The reappraisal of nostalgia may be said to be as old as modernity. The eradication and deracination associated with both capitalist and socialist versions of the modern project have often been met with forms of resistance that make an explicit appeal to the conservation of cultures and peoples. The most important examples of this trend from the first half of the last century emerged from anticolonial movements. The nostalgia of Mohatma Ghandi and Rabindranath Tagore for pastoral, premodern India was a reaction to colonial authority that was simultaneously conservative and radical (Tagore, 1922). The figure of the uprooted, inauthentic Westernised elite has since been employed in many different national contexts as a synonym for the ailments of modernity and national subjugation (Bonnett, 2004).
In the context of the destructive power of both colonialism and the Second World War, Simone Weil wrote *L'Enracinement* (1949), translated as *The Need for Roots* (2002). It represents perhaps the boldest European statement of the value of the past. Yet it is an awkward testament, struggling to express a horror at the upheavals of the modern world to an audience sceptical of elegy.

``The future brings us nothing, gives us nothing; it is we who in order to build it have to give it everything, our very life. But to be able to give, one has to possess; and we possess no other life, no other sap, than the treasures stored up from the past and digested, assimilated and created afresh by us. Of all the human soul's needs, none is more vital than this one for the past . . . For several centuries now, men of the white race have everywhere destroyed the past, stupidly, blindly, both at home and abroad . . . Today the preservation of what little of it remains ought to become almost an obsession. We must put an end to the terrible uprootedness which European colonial methods always produce'' (Weil, 2002, pages 51 - 52).

Weil's dramatic affirmation of the need for cultural preservation remains difficult to digest for modern intellectuals. More recently the connections between the anticcolonial imagination and nostalgia have been addressed in the cooler, more palatable, critical vocabulary of postcolonial studies. Jennifer Ladino's (2005) representation of the `counternostalgia' of native Americans places nostalgia as a form of resistance - a form that may be considered to echo Michel Foucault's (1977) concept of `countermemory', which "designated the residual or resistant strains that withstand official versions of historical continuity" (Davis and Starn, 1989, page 2). Ladino's counternostalgia certainly has overlaps with the insurgent countermemory Legg (2005b) identifies in colonial India or the `counternarratives' of melancholic longing Linda Tabar (2007) reports from Jenin refugee camp. However, it is worth recalling that, in the examples of early English radicalism mentioned above, nostalgia was not valued merely as a strategically useful heritage of resistance. The instrumental deployment of the past as oppositional, as a tool to wield against the present, demands that the past be reduced to a contribution to an overarching historical narrative of liberation and progress. As this implies, notions of counternostalgia and countermemory do not necessarily represent a break with the radical suspicion of attachments to the past. Indeed, as we shall see in respect to British radical antracism in the 1980s, the rendition of `other pasts' into `histories of resistance' can be highly reductive. In Spectres of Marx Jacques Derrida (1994) deconstructed Marx's efforts to repress the `ghosts' of the past. For Derrida this is a doomed project - a yearning for an unobtainable historical transcendence. A decade earlier, Robert Sayre and Michael Lowy (1984), sensing the changing mood towards themes of loss, sought to cast the repression of the past as one of the deviations of `vulgar' Marxists. For Sayre and Lowy it is only `official Marxism' that denied the

``Romantic element that is unquestionably present in the works of Marx and Engels - one need only recall their sympathy with the Russian populists and their hope that the traditional rural district (obchtchina) would serve as the germ of a future socialist Russia'' (page 85).

Towards the end of the last century, Marxism's difficulty in accommodating or admitting the possibility of affinities between nostalgia and radicalism was coming to connote not intellectual focus and strength, but rigidity (see also Weiner, 1999; Yekelchyk, 2004). The past three decades have seen the past, and more specifically a sense of loss, come centre stage within areas of radicalism that have been able to bypass orthodox socialism and Marxism's weakening grip on the left. This process may, in turn, be linked to the emergence and reappraisal of the growth of `alternative'
and ‘folk’ countercultural milieux from the mid-1960s (Brocken, 2003; Hougan, 1975).

For Keith Melville (1972, page 100) this new “counter-cultural ... vision of the good life identifies the good with that which is natural, completely unencumbered by civilisation.” Critical intellectuals feted by the New Left, such as Herbert Marcuse, also contributed to the articulation of this nostalgic thread within radicalism [especially that thread found in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s (1979) Dialectic of Enlightenment] for this new generation. The suspicion of technocracy, of the mere domination of nature, underlies Marcuse’s One-dimensional Man

“As a technological universe, advanced industrial society is ... the latest stage in the realization of a specific historical project - namely, the experience, transformation, and organization of nature as the mere stuff of domination” (1972, page 14, emphasis in original).

As environmentalist critiques of the ideology of industrial progress have gained ground, this once ‘countercultural’ perspective has entered the mainstream. The reappraisal of nostalgia has become one of the characteristic discourses of our era (see, for example, Bennett and Kennedy, 2003; Blackwell and Seabook, 1993; Lasch, 1991; Rittivoi, 2002). As the critique of antinostalgia strengthens, the idea that nostalgia is of interest only to the left (and loses its antiradical toxicity only) to the extent it can be portrayed as a political weapon in a bigger fight for progressive change, begins to appear overly defensive. Indeed, the emergent metaphors of the relationship between modernity and antimodernity suggest the two are related and intertwined. For Bruno Latour (1993):

``the modern time of progress and the anti-modern time of 'tradition' are twins who failed to recognise one another: The idea of an identical repetition of the past and that of a radical rupture with the past are two symmetrical results of a single conception of time” (page 76).

Peter Fritzsche (2002) provides us with a similar image: ”Nostalgia stalks modernity as an unwelcome double” (page 62; also Fritzsche, 2004). In The Future of Nostalgia Svetlana Boym (2001) works with these double mappings of history and modernity to offer a comprehensive rescription of the relationship between the socialist and global imagination and attachments to the past. Having surveyed postcommunist ambiguities towards the industrial past across Europe, she concludes: ”Survivors of the twentieth century, we are all nostalgic for a time when we were not nostalgic. But there seems no way back” (page 355).

**Renewing resistance: nostalgia and antinostalgia in British radical antiracism**

Antiracism emerged in Britain in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a radical critique of multiculturalism. The urban riots of 1981 and 1985, combined with the strength of radical left elements in the Labour Party, provoked and provided space for an antiracist movement that eschewed reformism and compromise (associated with multiculturalism) with what was portrayed as a racist and capitalist state (see Bonnett, 1993). Although a relatively novel political development, the British antiracist movement was firmly aligned to the traditional radical ambition of making a new society and sweeping away the past. Indeed, radical antiracism may be seen as offering a powerful reaffirmation of this disposition. A characteristic of radical antiracist rhetoric was the charge that the traditional ‘white left’ were stuck in the past and, hence, were unable to grasp the shift towards race as a site of anticapitalist conflict in the United Kingdom. The influential
formula offered by Stuart Hall (1978) et al asserted that "Race is the modality in which class is lived ... the medium in which class relations are experienced" (page 394). In his first book There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation (1987) Gilroy offered a critique of English socialists (notably Tony Benn, George Orwell, and E P Thompson) for seeking to root socialism in English and/or British tradition. If "the hold of nationalism on today's socialists is to be broken" (page 69), Gilroy argued, a new postnational, postnostalgic radicalism needs to be forged. Gilroy's account of 20th-century socialists' wistfully harking back to yesteryear contrasts to the overview of the relationship between radicalism and nostalgia provided in this paper. Gilroy overlooks the fact that the socialist `nationalists' he mentions were offering a counternarrative: striving to find a `local' history for a movement that was associated with internationalism and deracination (see also Kenny, 2000). If this interpretation is accepted, it follows that the search for British radical roots—which Gilroy correctly associates with Orwell, Benn, and Thompson—was being offered as a form of engagement with, and criticism of, a more dominant antinostalgic tendency within the left.

At the political heart of There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack is the representation of the young black man as a site of resistance and transgression. This designation reflected a wider trend within the antiracist left. In 1980s Britain socialism was a declining force both as a mass movement and as an intellectual agenda. Within this context, the assertion, found across a wide range of radical antiracist discourses, of racialised minorities—specifically, young black men—was a repository of revolutionary hope. It represented a reassertion of antinostalgic radicalism: a new and youthful social group was being identified as challenging and upsetting an old social formation and auguring the creation of a new one. At the same time, in the context of the apparent loss of the traditional class agent of popular politics and radical change, the image of everyday, street-level, black militancy acted as a replacement for, and nostalgic echo of, an earlier, more certain period in political life. Hence, the construction of migrant communities as 'communities of resistance' (Sivanandan, 1990) meant that they could be slotted into a familiar rhetorical repertoire of struggle (see also Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1982; Sivanandan, 1990). The figure of the 'black rebel' allowed the contradictory relationship of radicalism to the past to be cohered and concealed. This process was also reflected in the way 'black history' was assimilated into socialist tradition. For the antiracist theorists Jenny Bourne and Ambalavaner Sivanandan (1980),

``West Indian cultures are, by the very nature of their slave and plantation histories, antiracist and anti-capitalist" (page 345).

If certain ethnic cultures can be represented in this way, the obvious implication is that the torch of revolt has passed into the hands of 'West Indian cultures'—more specifically, 'black youth':

``black youth ... they take nothing as given, everything is up for question, everything is up for change: capitalist values, capitalist mores, capitalist society" (Sivanandan, 1990, page 70).

Ironically, Sivanandan also inveighed against the disposition of "a certain politics on the black Left" to "romanticise the youth" (page 67). In fact, the romance of black rebellion was integral to the radical antiracist project. For Hazel Carby (1982),

``black youth recognise liberal dreamers and the police for what they are and act. They determine the terrain on which the next struggle will be fought - the street,
These political designations routinely overlooked the diversity of Britain's minority population (in which African Britons and Afro-Caribbeans form a minority). The figure of the 'black youth' was made to carry the weight of a putatively anti-capitalist ethnic culture whilst also offering a generic, nonethnically specific, politically defined, location of social revolt. The definition of 'black' that emerged in Britain at this time - as ``a common term used to describe all people who have experienced and have common history of: imperialism, colonialism, slavery, indentureship and racism'' (Clark and Subhan, undated, page 33) - assisted in this interpretation. Although this British use of 'black' as a political label was uneven [along with its corollary- that ``White as a political term is a term for the oppressor'' (page 33)], it helped to secure the rearticulation of the language of class rebellion into a rhetoric of race rebellion.

One of the consequences of the notion that British society is split between rebellious, anticapitalist blacks and oppressive, conservative whites was the emergence of a pattern of neglect towards British Asians, other ethnically non-African heritage minority groups, as well as ethnicities defined around religion (Modood, 1988). The deployment of 'black youth' as the axial term in a new lexicon of radicalism also had implications for the way the history of, especially, African heritage people (and to a lesser extent all majority world heritage people) could be told. By the 1970s and 1980s the nostalgic retrieval of 'black history' was already well established. In as much as this project relied on the attempt to supply cultural definitions and 'positive images' of racialised minorities, and hence to assimilate them into the 'mainstream society', it remained an object of intense suspicion for British radical antiracists (for example, Dodgson and Stewart, 1981). Far more congruent was the representation of black history as a history of continual struggle and resistance. Gilroy developed this position by tracing the 'oppositional' or 'alternative' modernities formed by intellectuals associated with the African diaspora (Gilroy, 1993a). Indeed, he became an acute commentator on the need for remembrance and the use of myths of the past to contest Eurocentric modernity. Writing about 'modern black art' in 1993, Gilroy's focus was upon its deployment of symbols of the past. Gilroy's vision of dispersed and politicised modernities led him to suggest that,

``this remembering is socially and politically organised in part through assertive tactics which accentuate the symbolism of the pre-modern as part of their antimodern modernism'' (1993b, page 164).

Gilroy's interest in countermodernities as alternative nostalgias opens out the possibility of a break from the conflation of nostalgia with conservatism and racism. However, as we shall see in the next section, After Empire treats nostalgia as inherently suspect. This may suggest Gilroy's ambivalence towards the topic. More clearly, however, it indicates that, for Gilroy, the value of attachments to the past, where admitted at all, must be measured in terms of their political utility in fermenting change. However, the figure of the black rebel remained an elusive presence in British radical antiracism. Despite the fiery rhetoric, there was as little evidence of an anticapitalist, socialist, or radical movement taking hold amongst black youth as there was for any other section of British society. It is difficult not to conclude that the attempt to find in black youth a substitute for, or development of, militant radical consciousness, tells us more about the aspirations of the British left than British blacks. In the context of the receding tide of the worldwide socialist project (eventually made crystal clear in Britain with the birth of `New Labour') and a lack of any substantive constituency to defend the gains of the urban left, radical antiracism in British local government and within nongovernmental organisations began to disappear. In organisational terms, radical antiracism declined throughout the 1990s (indeed, Gilroy
announced "The end of anti-racism" in 1990). Nevertheless, the political aspirations it articulated continued to be heard in a number of areas, perhaps most clearly amongst radical social scientists. Despite the disappointments of the past (and the present), the desire to locate an agitational and anticapitalist popular constituency remain powerful. In the 1990s this aspiration began to be mapped onto notions of diversity and hybridity. As I noted earlier, in Britain multiculturalism had initially been rejected by radical antiracists. In the 1980s it was routinely described as an ideological product of the state's attempts to diffuse and manage black resistance and, as such, antithetical to antiracism (Carby, 1980; Sivanandan, 1990; Troy and Williams, 1986). However, a decade later, by emphasising the connections between myths of cultural homogeneity and conservatism and, at a theoretical level, between 'essentialism' and conservatism, multiculturalism began to be represented as having a radical content. Thus, by construing 'multiculture' as an energetic challenge to racism, and as a facet of internationalism and antinationalism, it began to be drawn into the antiracist and radical project. One of the areas where this chain of association has been pursued is within debates on the nature of place. The traditional modernist hostility to place as defensible space - to what David Harvey (1989) calls "place-bound nostalgias that infect our images of the country and the city, of region, milieu, and locality" (page 218) - has been extended into the idea that radical politics is inherently antagonistic to essentialist notions of 'real place' and organic community. Thus Doreen Massey (1997; 2006) uses terms such as 'defensive' and 'reactionary' to account for places that lack the 'buzz' of changeability and hybridity. Yet the attempt to find in antiessentialism, or its associated shifting multiculture, a new articulation of radical politics is a fraught undertaking. The associations of these themes with liberalism and neoliberal capitalism makes their deployment as agents of radical change prone to contradiction and evasion. For some critics on the left, multiculturalism is still better understood as a product of late modern capitalism than as political heir to the radical tradition (Jacoby, 1994). Moreover, for radicals the question of nostalgia cannot be escaped. It clings to the modern imagination. The problem is not lessened or avoided by attempts to install new agents of revolt (whether black youth or hybrid multicutures) within the radical project. Indeed, as we shall see, such attempts make the presence of the past more awkward. Nostalgia is not necessarily a good thing but it is inevitable. The further you try and distance yourself from it, the more painful and unsettling its return.

Nostalgia strikes back: a critique of After Empire

Nostalgia is a site of denial and dilemma in After Empire. Its presence can be explored in two stages: first by looking at the way loss and yearning are refused, and second by addressing how nostalgia makes its presence felt, sustaining and challenging Gilroy's text. In the end I hope to show that After Empire is as much an articulation of, as a challenge to, nostalgia. The political implication, that radicals should be far more generous and reflexive in the face of the experience of loss, is briefly explored in the conclusions to this paper.

My interest in Gilroy's distrust of nostalgia was, in part, sparked by a paradox, namely his openness to questions of emotion and affect. Although he distances this disposition from any validation of prediscursive materialities [refusing to give credence to the idea that black identity can be located in "the memory tape carried in those black cells" (Gilroy, 2000, page 264)], Gilroy is constantly alert to the unkempt experience of social and personal life. Yet nostalgia and melancholia seem to provoke his immediate suspicion.

Before proceeding, a note is needed on Gilroy's use of the term `melancholia'. After
Empire is, after all, ostensibly an engagement with this concept [a fact made more prominent in the title of the US version, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005)]. Gilroy borrows his definition of the term from Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich (1967), who applied melancholia to the inability to `mourn' and, hence, to come to terms with, the Nazi past they identified in post-Second World War Germany. Gilroy translates this idea across to postimperial Britain, a country unable to mourn (and, hence, to come to terms with) the violence of its imperial past. However, whilst the Mitscherlichs' account detailed a culture of turning away from the past - what they called ``breaking all affective bridges with the immediate past'' (1967, page 26) - Gilroy's material is very different. The relationship to the past he details is one of yearning, illustrated most forcefully by his numerous references to Britons' desire to relive the national drama of the Second World War. These examples display not a breaking of 'affective bridges' but an attraction to the past, indeed a reveling in it (also of Lepenies, 1992). Moreover, Gilroy offers little evidence of the kind of contemplative, quiet pleasure in sadness traditionally associated with melancholia. Although the two terms overlap and do much the same work in his book, it is the nostalgic nature of British culture and not simply its melancholia that Gilroy engages and challenges in *After Empire*.

It is true that Gilroy does begin to disentangle the varieties of melancholia. In a tantalisingly short passage he employs Mathew Arnold's 1867 poem ``Dover Beach'' to make a distinction between Victorian and contemporary melancholia. Arnold's version of melancholy, Gilroy (2004) tells us, offered ``consolation in the private and intimate places where romantic love and fidelity could offset the worst effects of warfare, turbulence, and vanished certitude'' (page 99). Gilroy contrasts this disposition with the contemporary British scene:

``We can say that Arnold's articulate melancholy was shaped by the culture of that Empire in its emergent phase. It combined with and was complemented by the older melancholy of the poor, the expropriated, the empressed and the abjected which is still remembered in the folk music of England. An altogether different pattern became visible once the imperial system shifted into undeniable decline. Victorian melancholy started to yield to melancholia as soon as the natives and savages began to appear and make demands for recognition in the Empire's metropolitan core'' (page 99).

This passage is the only one I can find in *After Empire* where Gilroy does not equate a sense of loss with political reaction. The historical shift he proposes - from melancholy to melancholia - recognises the longevity of emotions of loss and regret whilst reinforcing the argument that, today, nostalgia is a reactionary and morbid cultural current. However, Gilroy's periodisation needs to be questioned. Given the presence of themes of national decadence and decay in late Victorian literature (Nordau, 1993; Pearson, 1894; see also Chamberlain and Gilman, 1985), it would be more plausible to argue that melancholia reached its apogee with the rise of empire. Such a perspective might also usefully draw out the connections between nostalgia and imperial cosmopolitanism [for discussion on Gilroy's ambivalence towards cosmopolitanism, see Knowles (2007); Robotham (2005)]. For the imperial project was, in part, one of deracination: a cultural uprooting for both imperialists and their subjects that simultaneously excited sentiments of loss, transgression, and progress. These insights are foreclosed both by Gilroy's historical despatching of 'good melancholia' to a poetic moment in the late Victorian era and by his political categorisation of contemporary nostalgia as a conservative force that needs to be superseded and overcome by cultural destabilisation and transnationalism. Hence, Gilroy's brief concession to the possibility of radical nostalgia is suggestive, not of the utility of arguing that British culture moved from a good sense of loss to a bad sense of loss `as soon as the natives and
Sick nostalgia versus convivial youth

Nostalgia was first diagnosed as a medical condition so it is appropriate that Gilroy (2004) applies a clinical vocabulary to its various symptoms. The contrast he draws between backward-looking Britain and forward-looking conviviality is between a "neurotic" (page 97), "pathological" culture (page 107) and a "restored and healthier Britain" (page 166). Gilroy's target is Briton's morbid fascination with romanticised images of the nation's past glories. Yet because his analysis is premised on the opposition of old and new, the ageing and the youthful, melancholia and an "emergent Britain" (page 104), his political focus loses precision, rolling together seemingly any and all aspects of British life that do not conform to his vision of the "convivial metropolitan cultures of the country's young people" (page 131) into a landscape that is "anxious, fearful, or violent" (page 13). Gilroy's Britain is a diseased and ugly society: the "arterial system of [its] political body" is "obstructed" (page 98); its attitude to strangers is characterised by a "violence and hostility" (page 166).

"an anxious melancholy mood has become part of the cultural infrastructure of the place, an immovable ontological counterpart to the nation-defining ramparts of the white cliffs of Dover" (page 15).

The youthful Britain that will scale these `ramparts' are not unfamiliar. Gilroy takes a familiar radical idea - that urban young men are the heartland of authentic social rebellion - and applies it to "the chaotic pleasures of the convivial postcolonial urban world" (page 167). In this way one of the paradoxes of left-wing hostility to nostalgia is replayed: intimate, organic community is repudiated only to be reinvented in a radical guise.

For Gilroy this is a doubly awkward manoeuvre, for by linking street-level, popular `conviviality' to multiculturalism he is connecting it to what in Britain is a well-established institutional and municipal ideology. This difficulty may help explain his insistence that, whilst authentic multiculturalism emerges from `ordinary' people, politicians, with their "strategic crocodile tears" (page 136), traduce such efforts, for "There is no governmental interest in the forms of conviviality and intermixture that appear to have evolved spontaneously and organically from the interventions of anti-racists and the ordinary multicultural of the postcolonial metropolis" (page 136). To claim that authentic multiculturalism exists in an antagonistic relationship to government suggests that its representation is being shaped by traditional radical political considerations. Hence, the "spontaneous tolerance and openness evident in the underworld of Britain's convivial culture" (page 144) becomes a recognisable resource for agitational activity.

"The enduring quality of resistance among the young is no trivial matter. ... It communicates something of the irreducibly changed conditions in which factors of identity and solidarity that derive from class, gender, sexuality, and region have made a strong sense of racial difference unthinkable to the point of absurdity" (page 132).

Gilroy's reference to "factors of identity and solidarity" reminds us of his broader quest for "planetary humanism" (Gilroy, 2000; 2004). However, both phrases have an elusive quality. They suggest a familiar political paradigm of struggle and transcendence. Yet, apart from their apparent power to overcome `racial difference', the nature
and consequences of the various `factors' Gilroy lists remain ill defined. Young people's `enduring quality of resistance'' is evoked but remains frustratingly unclear. Gilroy's celebration of the convivial culture of ordinary young people is weakened by the fact that, although his main argument leads us to expect a detailed depiction of this new social space, this account never arrives. There is a blankness at the heart of the book: the vigorous and intimate street-level creativity constantly alluded to remains at the level of the sweeping statement. The vignettes that Gilroy does offer have a distant, generalising quality. For example, he suggests that `many British youth have been delivered to a place, as Nitin Sawhney memorably put it, `beyond skin'' (2004, page 132), supporting this idea with the observation that

``Electronic dance music, almost always without words, has been a dominant form during most of these years. Its technological base and its metropolitan conditions of existence have promoted a spontaneous and ordinary hybridity that has, as The Streets continually remind us, been alloyed with recreational drug use on an extraordinary scale'' (page 132).

Gilroy's reference to pop band The Streets is supplemented by long explorations of the television comedy character Ali G and the BBC comedy The Office. This material is used to flesh out the meaning of convivial Britain. Gilroy's focus on television as the locus on conviviality may be said to offer an accessible guide to the book's political journey. However, I would suggest that it represents a telling absence. The nonappearance of the ordinary, creative youth upon whose shoulders Gilroy has laid such burdens (for they represent the future and are required to overcome the past) creates a phantom presence. Gilroy has sketched the part and set the scene but the stage remains empty. We are left with memories of struggles from earlier periods, when young rebels really did occupy the streets; when books on radical politics in Britain did not dwindle into accounts of television comedies.

Loss in After Empire

After a consideration of what he calls Gilroy's "color blind" project of "planetary humanism" Don Robotham (2005) concludes that Gilroy's politics have "nothing to do with notions of a proletarian internationalism springing from the socialist tradition" (page 576). Robotham arrives at this judgment in response to Gilroy's earlier book, Against Race (2000). However, a broader view of Gilroy's work places him firmly within the antiracist left, more specifically the radical antiracist left that emerged in Britain in the 1980s. After Empire confirms this political location. "[T]his book'', he tells us, "offers an unorthodox defence of [the] twentieth-century utopia of tolerance, peace, and mutual regard" (Gilroy, 2004, page 2). Gilroy's portrait of the "utopia" he wishes to defend - before the "flight from socialistic principles" (page 135) - has all the hallmarks of nostalgia. It is soft-edged, regretful, and yearning. Once "Neither women nor workers were committed to a country. They turned away from the patriotism of national states because they had found larger loyalties" (page 5). Back then, "Socialism and Feminism ... came into conflict with a merely national focus because they understood political solidarity to require translocal connection" (page 5). It is striking that Gilroy does not identify any contemporary political allies. Even the "tolerant, humane, pluralistic and cosmopolitan" elements within "black political culture" have deserted the cause.

``They are still present in diminishing quantities, but they are muted these days. They have to take a back seat behind simpler, noisier, and for many, more attractive options that are in step if not always in tune with the mainstream sentiment of consumer capitalism'' (page 61).
Thus, ironically, the youthful new culture Gilroy wishes to celebrate becomes a site of regret and loss: in today's individualistic society and "beleaguered multicultural" (page xi) Gilroy finds himself at odds with the "currently fashionable" (page 27). Indeed, Gilroy's promotion of the "convivial" can itself be read as a nostalgic gesture. The friendly, cheery disposition that Gilroy offers as a slogan of the new echoes one of the most ubiquitous and familiar discourses of yearning: for a time when people were more welcoming and when doors were left unlocked. Nostalgia is not a minor theme in *After Empire*. The book strains to identify itself with the emergent and forward looking and, by so doing, allows a hostility to nostalgia to shape its political and intellectual structure. At the same time *After Empire* is shot through with a sense of loss. The past is deployed as a place of certainty, of community and of morality, and used to critique the present. The presence of loss in *After Empire* may be tied to the specific contemporary context in which the book was written, a time when socialists of many different stripes are turning to the past for compensation and inspiration. However, Gilroy's antagonism to nostalgia is indicative of the fact that the presence of loss remains an awkward and unacknowledged feature of the radical imagination.

The history of radicalism can be narrated as a flight from nostalgia: of the development of an attitude of reverence for the new and a deep suspicion of notions of prepolutical community and the hold of the past. *After Empire* needs to be understood within this broader project. Indeed, it may be approached as a site of struggle over the political role of the past. It is a site whose turbulent, creatively ragged quality is testament to the fact that long-repressed fissures and paradoxes are now coming into view as traditional narratives of revolutionary change appear to point not to the future but to the past.

**Conclusions**

``Among the great struggles of man - good/evil, reason/unreason, etc - there is also this mighty conflict between the fantasy of Home and the fantasy of Away, the dream of roots and the mirage of the journey." - Salman Rushdie (2000, page 55)

Radicalism has a long and complex relationship with nostalgia. There is ample historical evidence that nostalgia was instrumental in shaping the radical imagination. I have argued that, from the late 19th century, this relationship became problematic as socialism and Marxism defined themselves as the politics of the future.

This kind of compromised political and historical context is rarely brought into view in assessments of antiracism. Indeed, the historical analysis of antiracism remains underdeveloped [see, for example, the redemptive melodrama provided by Herbert Aptheker (1993)]. Yet the radical antiracist project in Britain can be understood only when seen within the context of a changing and paradoxical history.

There are a number of implications that flow from this analysis. Many turn on the way that radical antiracism politically characterises the past and present. The framing of radicalism as necessarily focused upon 'emergent' and youthful groups and the related association of capitalism and authoritarianism with the nostalgic and the old, is a central trope of 20th-century socialism. Yet this approach relies on a set of questionable stereotypes. Over the past decade, a variety of survey evidence has suggested that young people may, in fact, be more politically conservative than their parents (Allison, 2004; Glassman, 2007; Noe and Gannon, 2007). The figures of the 'young rebel', the 'black rebel', of 'communities of resistance' fighting for a 'new society', as well as the more
recent notion of antiauthoritarian hybrid "everyday muticultures", provide radicals with a set of assumptions and expectations through which to understand different societies, as well as different ethnic and age groups. However, the conflation of nostalgia, insularity, authoritarianism, and conservatism creates a myopic view of contemporary political and emotional landscapes. Even Massey, who allies Gilroy's perspective to her own interest in creating an antiessentialist senses of place, is perplexed by his insistence on the dominance in Britain of a gloomy, backward looking sense of loss. Massey (2006) points out that

``the financial City [in London] and the constellation of interest and social forces that surround it are by no means melancholic. Those who at the heart of (this aspect of) London's claim to global citydom are triumphant and celebratory, as they pick up and build upon the threads of an older imperial order“ (pages 175 - 176).

Massey's point could be extended further. Until the financial crisis of late 2008 the political and economic life of `New Labour' (and `New Conservative') Britain was aggressively forward looking. This neoliberal and multicultural success story drew in `young exiles' from abroad attracted by the competitive and meritocratic `Anglo model' - exiles who found something ``dynamic and cosmopolitan“ (quotes from Seager and Balakrishnan, 2006) in the UK's (or at least London's) brash multiculture of consumption.

Drawing up battle lines between racist nostalgics and the antiracist proponents of a `new society' may make sense in certain circumstances and certain places. But it is an inadequate paradigm through which to understand social change. Recent years have witnessed the experience of immigration and exile being discussed in terms that suggest that, far from being a problem to be overcome, nostalgia is an inevitable component of emotional responses to modern population mobility (Akhtar, 1999; Volkan, 1999; see also Cheng, 2001; Geschiere, 2009). In Britain the need to acknowledge nostalgia has also emerged in explorations of "progressive patriotism" (Bragg, 2006) and, even more controversially, in wide-ranging attacks on left-wing and radical antiracists' supposed contempt for the fear and sense of loss experienced by the 'indigenous' working class. Some of the seeds of this latter approach may be detected in the work of Jeremy Seabrook. In the 1970s Seabrook produced a set of ethnographic studies on a generation of working class people who, to judge by his interviews, felt displaced devalued (Seabrook, 1971; 1978; see also Spencer, 1988). The result is that

``people talk as though they were under siege; victims of some universal and impenetrable conspiracy. A fictive sense of shared values evolve ad hoc to fill the vacuum which ought to be occupied by a shared sense of social purpose. These values are reductive and inconsistent; often vengeful and cruel" (Seabrook, 1978, page 71).

More recently, Geoff Dench and Kate Gavron (2006) ignited opprobrium from sections of the left and adulation from the British press for their account of the way a left-wing `urban elite' (page 212) has stereotyped English heritage working-class Londoners as a nostalgic and, hence, reactionary social force:

``the old Bethnal Greener have been condemned for their `irrational' attachment to locality... .Whites resentful of loss of local rights have been discredited politically by being represented as pathologically inadequate, not capable of living alongside people different from themselves" (pages 212 - 213).
Although identifying such locally `attached' groups as `white' may be misleading (both in terms of contemporary patterns of immigration and indigenous identity), Dench and Gavron appear to have hit upon a rich seam of class resentment (see also Collins, 2004). Without an understanding of the chronic nature of nostalgia within the modern imagination, of the inextricable ties between resistance to deracination and resistance to capitalism, the radical antiracist response to such fears is inevitably dismissive. The more difficult but, I think, necessary response is to admit that nostalgia is a shared and inevitable emotion in an era of rapid and enforced change. Across different ethnic, age, and political groups, displacement and uprooting are painful processes (especially for the least affluent, for whom community and attachment to place are not dispensable aspirations). Being `bandied about from pillar to post' (Jones, 1967, page 532) is the modern experience. Yet so too is nostalgia. A sense of loss is a necessary burden. The racialisation of nostalgia needs to be resisted. But this is unlikely to occur when the whole field of nostalgia is denied and repressed. Radicals in a postsocialist era need to rethink their relationship to attachments to the past.

Notes
(1) A tone of dismissal and condescension is habitual within radical critiques of nostalgia (see also Baucom, 1996; Shaw and Chase, 1989). ``Mournful histories: narratives of postimperial melancholy'', a paper by Ian Baucom (1996) that prefigures After Empire, drips with sarcasm. The nostalgic is a risible and mediocre figure, with a ``teary eye towards the image of a vanishing England'' (page 271) and a sad fetish for ``chewing England's picturesque cud'' (page 286).

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