

PAUL GILROY'S POSTCOLONIAL MELANCHOLIA

Reviewed by Neil Roberts

Gilroy, Paul. *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. ISBN-13: 978-0-231-13454-5 | ISBN-10: 978-0-231-13455-2. pp. xvi+170.

Paul Gilroy is one of the leading social and political theorists of our time. He is also one of the most controversial. Gilroy was born in London to English and Guyanese parents, and his mother, Beryl Gilroy, was an accomplished Caribbean novelist. Academically, he received a doctorate studying under Jamaican intellectual Stuart Hall at the University of Birmingham's Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies and has since held teaching posts at institutions including South Bank University, Goldsmith College, and Yale University. Currently, Gilroy holds the prestigious Anthony Giddens Professorship in Social Theory at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Although a protégé of Hall, Gilroy, like C. L. R. James's *Caliban*, has pioneered into regions Caesar never knew, earning his own distinct place in intellectual circles globally. *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987) marked an intervention into theorizing the intersections of race and nation in British political culture and the diasporic political imagination. With the publication of *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Gilroy ushered in a new field of study devoted to New World black identities and processes of creolisation and double-consciousness in the making of the modern world. Less than a decade later, Gilroy's *Against Race* (2000) signaled an explicit turn to the rejection of racial orders and by extension the idea of race itself. Whether siding with Gilroy or not, scholars would be remiss to ignore the profound insights of his oeuvre.

Postcolonial Melancholia (2005) presents a bold meditation by Gilroy on the debilitating effects of Empire and race-thinking on the postcolonial world in the wake of 9/11. Originally presented as the Wellek Library Lectures in Critical Theory at the University of California, Irvine, the book utilizes a mode of writing reminiscent of both Judith Butler's trenchant critique of the American "war against terror" in *Precarious Life* (2004) and the planetary sensibility of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism* (2006). *Postcolonial Melancholia* comprises a Preface, Introduction, and four chapters divided into two Parts entitled "The Planet" and "Albion" respectively. The chapter headings alone offer a glimpse into the area of the planet that the book is primarily addressed, namely Great Britain and Britain's melancholic relation to her former colonies. Gilroy returns to his social and intellectual roots for the purpose of diagnosing the reasons why Empire and race-thinking continue to function as diseases at the heart of postcolonial British political discourse, culture, and public policy. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'Albion' as the most ancient name of Great Britain and it locates the derivation of Albion in the phrase "perfidious Albion," which refers to the rhetorical expression for England and England's alleged treacherous, historical treatment of foreigners. Britain is more than England and its metropolitan center, London, and yet, for Gilroy, all the territories that make up Great Britain have a not-so-great historical *and* contemporary relationship to the former colonies and their descendants residing within its isles.

Great Britain is multicultural in the composition of its inhabitants. Nevertheless, as Gilroy laments in the Introduction's opening line, "Multicultural society seems to have been abandoned at birth" (1). In postcolonial Britain, "it is homogeneity rather than diversity that provides the new rule" (2). Multiculturalism and diversity are catch words of contemporary Anglo-American liberal political theory and neoliberal politics. Gilroy, though, is not defending this latter turn that remains trapped in the dialectics of recognition. For Gilroy, the Britain of the neoliberal Tony Blair administration and agents of governmental neoliberalism such as UK Home Secretary

David Blunkett have adopted the worst of American Vulcanism, nationalising patriotism, militarisation, and imperial expansionism under the guise of a globalising "ethical" force (59, 131-132). As a result, the "meaning and ambition of the term 'cosmopolitanism' has been hijacked" with the onset of the new imperialism (59). Gilroy favors a cosmopolitan convivial culture, or 'conviviality,' which refers to "the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculturalism an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere" (xv).

A system of conviviality rejects the Manichaean civilisationism dominant in liberal and neoliberal global discourse. 'Civilisationism' according to Gilroy denotes the demarcation of an 'us' versus 'them' political philosophy and the liberal contention that certain groups have the rights and freedoms of all others so long as they are civilised enough to be able to appreciate those inherent notions:

Old colonial issues come back into play when geopolitical conflicts are specified as a battle between homogeneous civilizations. . . . Today's civilisationism shamelessly represents the primary lines of antagonism in global politics as essentially cultural in character. Its figuration of the post-Cold War world bears the significant imprint of the grand, nineteenth-century racial theory that was formed by the terrifying prospect of racial decline and degeneracy. (22)

Civilisationism from Arthur de Gobineau and Joseph Chamberlain to Samuel Huntington denies cosmopolitanism, promoting instead the idea of national and sub-national social collectives organizing into fixed racial assemblages. If a group can prove another group's inferiority, then the superiority of their own social collective triumphs, making those at the bottom of a racial hierarchy expendable in social and political life (23-26, 60-61). What an unfortunately unexceptional state of exception.

Gilroy introduces in chapter 3 one of the work's core concepts: melancholia. He builds upon the work not of Freud, but rather the psychoanalysts and social psychologists Alexander and Magarete Mitscherlich (98-106). In The Inability to Mourn, the Mitscherlichs' note patterns of alienation and the abdication of collective responsibility among agents who refuse to mourn loss. Gilroy expands the scope of their insight in his contention that Great Britain has failed to mourn the loss of its Empire. Britain's postimperial, postcolonial melancholia designates a condition whereby the current polity's repeated failure to let go of a long gone imperial past reproduces in the present an imperial impulse. The target of the imperial impulse is singular in many respects: the immigrant (100). Albion's criminalisation of immigrants and their progeny particularly from the Caribbean and South Asia signifies a melancholic response to these social and political groups that are essential to late modern British life (104, 119).

The alternative to postcolonial melancholia is a cosmopolitan 'planetary humanism.' Planetary does not equal globalization, as the "planetary suggests both contingency and movement. It specifies a smaller scale than the global, which transmits all the triumphalism and complacency of ever-expanding imperial universals" (xv). The planetary aspect of Gilroy's cosmopolitanism shares much with the perspective of Montesquieu in the Persian Letters and the comic television figure of Ali G (69-71, 131-139). Ali G is the iconoclastic, racially ambiguously wannabe rude bwoy British Jamaican who somehow manages to converse with several high-ranking British officials, demonstrating in candid fashion the aforementioned melancholia. Whether or not it is discernable if the "Ali G character was a white Jew pretending to be black, a white Jew pretending to be a white Jew pretending to be black, a white Jew pretending to be an Asian pretending to be black, and so on" (70-71), the bad faith and melancholia of metropolitan elites

is shown to be alive and well.

With regards to the humanism dimension of cosmopolitanism, Gilroy situates his argument around the theories of two black Atlantic thinkers: W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon. Gilroy argues that the existence of racism produces and reproduces the notion of race in Britain and around the world. Therefore, as the syllogism goes, eradicate the idea of races and one can end racism. Du Bois's conception of double-consciousness in The Souls of Black Folk along with essays in The Crisis detail a deep cosmopolitan imagination in Gilroy's estimation (33-38). Du Bois persistently challenged racism in modernity, and racism for Gilroy is the cancer eating away at the intrinsic humanism of racialized agents. Gilroy illustrates Du Bois's cosmopolitan sensibilities in Souls despite ignoring Du Bois's seminal – and widely debated – essay "The Conservation of Races" that fundamentally challenges the thesis on race which Gilroy puts forth. Gilroy does correctly show the planetary reach of Du Bois's vision and to this, we owe Gilroy thanks.

Of all the figures discussed, Fanon occupies the most central role (40-42, 49-53). Gilroy's Fanon is overwhelmingly the Fanon of Towards the African Revolution and Black Skin, White Masks. References to The Wretched of the Earth appear only insofar as they buttress Gilroy's belief in the political language of a 'new humanism.' But whereas the invocation of Du Bois is partially plausible, the examination and utilization of Fanon's political theory leaves the reader confounded. Gilroy's distorted interpretation of Fanon explicated here began earlier in Against Race, a text that used Fanon's passage in Black Skin about human phenomenological existence between 'two camps' – the white and the black – as the basis for denying claims to racial attachments and ethnic absolutist categories. In Postcolonial Melancholia, Gilroy returns to a view of Fanon that "draws inspiration from Fanon's determination to make 'race' historical and, above all, social. Like him, it [Gilroy's cosmopolitanism] assigns racism(s) to the past and can help to make antiracism more than just a jumbled collection of political instruments" (53-54).

The problem with Gilroy's reading of Fanon is twofold. First, Gilroy glosses over numerous crucial sections of Fanon, ignoring the full context that the words cited belong to. Second, and more importantly, Gilroy incorrectly conflates two distinct issues: (1) the fight against the new imperialism and (2) support for the eradication of 'race' as a mode of late modern identity. At the philosophical level, Gilroy's arguments against the new imperialistic logic of post-9/11 Great Britain are substantive, at times breathtaking, and have political implications as far reaching as the stakes of Judith Butler's critique of neoliberal America. That being said, Gilroy does not make the case for why the fight against imperialism and race-thinking necessitates the dissolutions of races and denial of forms of solidarity such as black political solidarity. Points (1) and (2) are equally important topics, but the justification for including and defending (2) in this work is not clear. If Gilroy could have made the case for addressing (2), he still would have been unable to account for the position of Tommie Shelby who, in We Who Are Dark (2005), illustrates intricately how black political solidarity and other notions of solidarity can be achieved without relying upon a notion of racial or identity essentialism. Gilroy's classification of group aspirations for national and transnational political solidarity as "suspect" is premature (63-68), and a closer examination of solidarity could have ironically served to ground philosophically Gilroy's call to resist the racism and melancholia produced by race-thinking. Gilroy concludes the book by reiterating the anti-race claim (151) even though the majority of the text is about the battle to preserve the postcolonial planet amidst imperialistic forces. This move is all the more perplexing given Gilroy's constant fascination with Black Studies/African Diasporic Studies. Gilroy's intellectual enthrallment with Black Studies and the question of blackness is evident

most recently in the publication of his lengthy photographic history entitled Black Britain (2007, Preface by Stuart Hall).

My critique notwithstanding, Paul Gilroy's Postcolonial Melancholia is essential reading for anyone concerned with the future of the planet in the era of the postcolony and for those interested in procuring methods for remedying the excesses of neo-imperialism, neoliberal economics, and xenophobia. The prophetic words of C. L. R. James in Beyond a Boundary (1963) provide an appropriate ending to the dual backward-looking and forward-looking dialectics of post-imperial transformations suggested by Gilroy's important work, yet not carried through completely in its theorising. Like Frantz Fanon and Sylvia Wynter, James acknowledged the presence of races in the life-world and systems of late modern souls while simultaneously imagining another world *after* Empire, a planetary *marronage*, a world of movement in which the idea of race may be present, albeit in a capacity that avoids suppressing the radical agency inherent in us all, the citizens and foreigners of Albion included:

Times would pass, old empires would fall and new ones take their place, the relations of countries and the relations of classes had to change, before I discovered that it is not the quality of goods and utility which matters, but movement; not where you are or what you have, but where you have come from, where you are going, and the rate at which you are getting there.

Neil Roberts was a postdoctoral fellow and visiting member of faculty at Johns Hopkins University in Political Science and Africana Studies. In July 2008, he became Assistant Professor of Africana Studies and Faculty Affiliate in Political Science at Williams College. Roberts's work has appeared in Caribbean Studies, The C. L. R. James Journal, Journal of Haitian Studies, Philosophia Africana, Sartre Studies International, and Souls, and his forthcoming publications include an article in Political Theory and a co-edited collection of essays on the theme, 'Creolizing Rousseau.' Currently, he is working on a book manuscript entitled Freedom as Marronage: the Dialectic of Slavery and Freedom in Arendt, Pettit, Rousseau, Douglass, and the Haitian Revolution.