An almost unbearable insecurity: Cameron’s Munich speech

Brian Klug

MnM Working Paper No 6
An almost unbearable insecurity: 
Cameron’s Munich speech

Dr Brian Klug
MnM Working Paper No 6

I. A touch of Basil Fawlty

I am chuffed to be here at the CSAA annual conference, but I feel a bit of a fraud. I am not in cultural studies. My discipline is philosophy; and philosophy is not so much a branch of enquiry as a strategy to enable ignoramuses like myself to avoid dealing with facts. But I shall do my best to say something useful.

I am going to speak about a speech: the one that David Cameron, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and Leader of the Conservative Party, gave at the 47th Munich Security Conference in Germany last February. Cameron began by saying, ‘Today I want to focus my remarks on terrorism’ and ended (more or less) with these words: ‘At stake are not just lives, it is our way of life.’ In between, he launched an attack on ‘the doctrine of state multiculturalism’.² As befits a head of government, this was a serious speech about weighty matters of state. It was not, for example, an episode of Fawlty Towers. Yet when I contemplate

---

¹ Dr Brian Klug is a Senior Research Fellow and Tutor in philosophy at St Benet’s Hall, Oxford. He is also an honorary fellow at the Parkes Institute for the Study of Jewish/Non-Jewish Relations, University of Southampton and Associate Editor of Patterns of Prejudice. This paper was presented at the Cultural Studies Association of Australia Annual Conference 2011 ‘Cultural ReOrientations and Comparative Colonialities’, hosted by the International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, University of South Australia, Adelaide, 22–24 November 2011.

² ‘PM’s speech at Munich security conference’, 5 February 2011, available on the official site of the Prime Minister’s office: http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2011/02/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference-60293. This is the source for all quotations from and references to the speech in this paper.

© 2011 Brian Klug

MnM Working Paper No 6
Cameron’s Munich speech, a scene from the series comes to mind; it is from the episode called ‘The psychiatrist’.

Being a true Brit, and therefore a natural-born cultural imperialist, I assume that all of you know about *Fawlty Towers*. So I do not need to explain that I am referring to the 1970s BBC television sitcom, with John Cleese as Basil Fawlty, the eccentric who runs a seaside hotel in Torquay. When Dr Abbott, a psychiatrist on holiday at the hotel, witnesses Fawlty’s latest bout of bizarre behaviour, he remarks dryly: ‘There’s enough material there for an entire conference.’ That is exactly what I think about Cameron’s Munich speech: it is so ripe that we could devote the entire CSAA annual conference to discussing it. All I can offer today is a limited critique.

The holes in Cameron’s argument, in and of themselves, do not interest me. I shall mention them only insofar as they play a role in the tendentiousness of the speech or in its rhetoric: the way it works on its intended audience, whether the immediate audience in Munich or the electorate who is, as it were, listening in from afar. For the same reason, I shall weigh certain words and phrases, some of which are as loaded as a pack mule. My aim is to delve beneath the surface of the argument and retrieve what I find there – not quite like Hannah Arendt’s pearl diver but more like someone salvaging an entire wreck.

The Munich Conference is an annual event at which political leaders from around the globe gather to discuss policy on security. Ban Ki-moon (Secretary General of the UN), Hillary Clinton (US Secretary of State), Baroness Ashton (EU Foreign Minister) and Angela Merkel (Chancellor of Germany) were among this year’s participants. On the face of it, this is an unlikely venue for a UK Prime Minister to set out his stall on cultural diversity at home. Yet, Cameron’s attack on multiculturalism was at the heart of his speech. I daresay that he was happy to earn brownie points from the likes of Merkel who, in October 2010, declared that the

---

3 ‘The psychiatrist’ first broadcast on BBC Television on 26 February 1979.
4 Arendt uses the image of the pearl diver in her essay on Walter Benjamin in *Men in Dark Times* (Harcourt, Brace and World, New York, 1968).
**multikulti** concept, where people ‘live side-by-side’, had ‘failed, utterly failed’ in Germany. But Cameron was doing more than playing to the gallery. His attack expressed a deep sense of insecurity; so the venue was fitting after all.

I shall argue that the sense of unease that his speech expresses goes deeper than the reasons he gave. It certainly goes deeper than the physical threat to the state or its citizens posed by terrorist acts. It is even more profound than a threat to ‘our way of life’. Something unsettling is happening in the early twenty-first century: different civilisations are coming into ever-closer proximity with each other, while the world is spinning away from the West. What I have to say about this will not necessarily be original; others have spoken more eruditely along similar lines. But what I want to suggest is that this unease, an almost unbearable insecurity, lies under the surface of Cameron’s Munich speech.

In the next section (part II) I shall give an outline of the overall argument. Using this outline, I shall work through the text in the following two sections (parts III and IV), joining the dots as I go, commenting on the picture that emerges, and including a brief reflection at the end on liberalism and cultural difference. In closing (part V), we shall pop back to Torquay and bid farewell to Basil Fawlty and an old Victorian structure – and I do not just mean the hotel.

**II. Outline of Cameron’s speech**

I shall start with the bare bones. Cameron, as I have already mentioned, opened by saying that he would focus on terrorism. But he straightaway interrupted himself with an aside about Britain’s strategic defence and security review. In this connection he explained that every decision his government makes has three aims in mind, the third of which is ‘to make sure that Britain is protected from the new and various threats that we face’. This segued into the body of the speech, for he went on to say that ‘the biggest threat that we face comes from

---


6 I am grateful to my partner Reva Klein for the phrase ‘an almost unbearable insecurity’ and for the thought that I am using it to express, both here and in the title of the paper.
terrorist attacks’. I take this to be the first line of his overall argument, which, in outline, is as follows. (This outline traces the logic, as it were, of his argument. It corresponds roughly to the order in which the items appear in the speech, though it leaves out some topics. Where possible, and as indicated, I have used Cameron’s own words.)

1. The ‘biggest threat that we face comes from terrorist attacks, some of which are, sadly, carried out by our own citizens’. The threat is ‘overwhelmingly from young men who follow a completely perverse, warped interpretation of Islam, and who are prepared to blow themselves up and kill their fellow citizens’. (Parenthesis A: terrorism by other groups)

2. The ‘root of the problem’ is ‘Islamist extremism’. We ‘must distinguish it from Islam. Islam is a religion observed peacefully and devoutly by over a billion people. Islamist extremism is a political ideology supported by a minority.’ They ‘are not the same thing’.

3. ‘I’m not saying that issues of poverty and grievance about foreign policy are not important.’ But they are ‘just contributory factors’; even if ‘we sorted out’ these problems, ‘there would still be this terrorism’.

4. An ‘important reason so many young Muslims are drawn to it [i.e., Islamist extremism] comes down to a question of identity’. ‘In the UK, some young men find it hard to identify with the traditional Islam practiced at home by their parents.’ They ‘find it hard it identify with Britain too, because we have allowed the weakening of our collective identity’.

5. The latter is a consequence of ‘the doctrine of state multiculturalism’. On the one hand, ‘we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives’. On the other hand: ‘We’ve failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong. We’ve even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values.’ (Parenthesis B: illustration of last point)

6. We ‘as governments and societies’ have got to do two things: confront this ‘extremist ideology’ and develop ‘a clear sense of shared national identity that is open to everyone’.
7. The latter calls for a policy of ‘muscular liberalism’: actively promoting the liberal values that the country ‘believes in’, along with certain ‘practical things’ aimed at achieving ‘true cohesion’.

Coda: ‘At stake are not just lives, it is our way of life.’

Two points. The first concerns the form of the argument. One way of looking at it is to see lines 1 to 5 as posing the problem and giving a diagnosis, while lines 6 to 7 propose the solution. (Note that the Coda casts a different light on the ‘threat’ in line 1, and therefore on the problem.) But another way of looking at it is to see the first three lines, whose theme is terrorism, as foundational for the remaining four, all of which are about the question of identity (Muslim and national). This is the principle I shall follow in critiquing the argument. In the next section of the paper I shall dwell at some length on lines 1 to 3, the ‘terrorism’ lines, and the following section more briskly on lines 4 to 7, the lines on ‘identity’.

Second, though Cameron’s argument applies to Britain, it is not confined to Britain. Just prior to the crucial multiculturalism passage, he remarked: ‘What I am about to say is drawn from the British experience, but I believe that there are general lessons for us all.’ And at the end of his speech he cautioned: ‘this ideology crosses not just our continent but all continents, and we are all in this together’. So, when I say that his speech contains a world view, I do mean ‘world’.

If I were true to type as an academic philosopher I would now embark on a process of evaluating the soundness of this argument: I would assess the factual claims that it makes and the inferences it draws. But, quite frankly, the game is not worth the candle: it is so obvious that the argument as it stands does not stand that there is no need to go through it systematically. The trespass against the logic of quantification alone – sliding around between some, many and all – is glaring. The argument is not so much a series of steps as a succession of leaps and bounds. And even if every line were unpacked and its contents laid out end to end, the lines would not meet – except at infinity. I take this as given.
Precisely because it is a given, I wish to take the measure of this argument – which is a rather different matter from evaluating it for consistency and truth. What are we to make of an argument that is manifestly unsound in so many ways? What does it signify? This is what I mean by taking its measure. Drawing on the full text of the speech, I shall put flesh on the bare bones of the outline, working through it, jotting down my thoughts and occasionally pausing to collect them.

But why bother? If the argument is really full of holes then is it worth spending time on? Not really; except for the fact that it is a case in point. Cameron not only puts into words the fuzzy thoughts and feelings of many people, but his speech bespeaks a mindset in the West that is common, if not dominant. Besides, in my experience as a philosopher, the arguments that have the most impact in the world are usually the ones that make the least sense. So, I think I shall bother.

III. On terrorism: lines 1 to 3
I shall begin by concentrating on the first three lines, which lay the foundation for the attack on multiculturalism in the second half of the argument. Because they are foundational, I shall subject them to greater scrutiny than I shall subject the rest of the argument. Taking these three lines one at a time, I shall devote most time to line 1, his opening gambit and the most complex of the three.

Line 1

The ‘biggest threat that we face comes from terrorist attacks, some of which are, sadly, carried out by our own citizens’. The threat is ‘overwhelmingly from young men who follow a completely perverse, warped interpretation of Islam, and who are prepared to blow themselves up and kill their fellow citizens’.

The first word to catch my ear is ‘threat’, together with its qualifier ‘biggest’. ‘Threat’ is the key in which the entire speech is composed. Even before we know what it is that is
threatening, or where the threat is coming from, or who exactly is included in the ‘we’ that faces this threat, we know there is something – massive – to be fearful about: that is the point.

We are at risk: this is the first thing Cameron wanted us to know and he wanted us to know it from first to last. ‘Threat’ hangs in the air, looming over the speech as a whole: we listen as if under a cloud.

The second thing he did was give a name to this threat: terrorism (‘terrorist attacks’). This does not exactly come as a surprise. But there is a twist in the sentence, a sting in its tail, which does make us look up: he mentioned, without pausing for breath, that some attacks are ‘carried out by our own citizens’. This introduces from the get-go the theme of the threat from within – which will turn out to be imported from without – which is much more creepy and truly terrifying, and which becomes the crux of his attack on multiculturalism. But I am running ahead of myself and the argument.

Cameron at once made a tactical move that was logically subordinate to the argument but highly relevant to taking its measure. ‘It is important to stress’, he said, ‘that terrorism is not linked exclusively to any one religion or ethnic group’ (Parenthesis A). Clearly, this was a preemptive defence against punters who might suspect him of picking on one ‘religion’ (Islam) or ‘ethnic group’ (British Asians). He gave three examples to reinforce the point: dissident Irish republicans in the UK, anarchists in Greece and Italy, and the Red Army Faction in Germany. Having covered his rear, he then advanced his troops: ‘Nevertheless’, he said, ‘we should acknowledge that this threat comes in Europe overwhelmingly from young men who follow a completely perverse, warped interpretation of Islam, and who are prepared to blow themselves up and kill their fellow citizens’. We are back to the threat from within; only now he connected it specifically to acts where the perpetrators invoke Islam (even if their interpretation is ‘warped’). He could have described the perpetrators in his three examples the same way: he could have said that they are prepared to ‘kill their fellow citizens’: for they are. But he did not. He used this frame only for terrorist acts carried out in the name of Islam.

This is bound to strike a chord with his audience, not least the British electorate, whom indirectly he was also addressing, for in the background is 7/7, the suicide attacks on the London public transport system on 7 July 2005. The bombers, three of whom were from Leeds and one (though born in Jamaica) from Aylesbury, were widely described as ‘home-grown’; and I remember the shock and horror with which many of my fellow Brits at the time contemplated this fact – as if it were something unique. As if, for example, David Copeland, the young man who blew up a packed pub in Soho, London, on 30 April 1999, a native of Hounslow who spent most of his childhood in Hampshire, was not also ‘home-grown’ and prepared to kill his ‘fellow citizens’. So, it is a commonplace to put terrorist acts carried out in the name of Islam in the frame that Cameron uses. But this does not mean that we should not interrogate this commonplace in the context of his speech. What does it signify?

Let us put this question to one side for the moment and consider Cameron’s assertion that in Europe the threat of terrorism comes ‘overwhelmingly’ from this quarter. Is this true? Europol, the EU law enforcement agency, sheds light on this question. For several years, Europol has published an annual *EU terrorism situation and trend report* for the previous year. A press release for the first report, published in 2007, said: ‘Terrorism is not a new phenomenon in the EU. Nevertheless, in the twenty-first century, the threat posed by terrorism to Member States is more serious than ever.’ It went on to say that the report ‘indicates that 498 attacks were carried out by Islamist, separatist, left-wing and anarchist terrorist groups in eleven member states in 2006’. This appears, at first sight, to bear out Cameron’s position: the threat is serious; it comes from a variety of sources; and Islamism is top of the list. It certainly comes first in the text of the Europol press release. But when we look under the covers, as it were, at the statistical breakdown that the report contains, this turns out to be misleading. Of

---

8 See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/332743.stm, and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Copeland. The pub, the Admiral Duncan, was frequented by gay people, which is why it was targeted.

9 Europol, ‘First terrorism situation and trend report of Europe released’, press release, 10 April 2007. Available on the Europol site: http://www.europol.europa.eu/index.asp?page=news&news=pr070410.htm. The latest report defines a ‘terrorist act’ as follows: ‘EU member states have agreed to regards terrorist acts as those which aim to intimidate populations, compel states to comply with the perpetrators [sic] demands and/or destabilise the fundamental political, constitutional, economical or social structures of a country or an international organisation’ (Europol, *EU terrorism situation and trend report 2011* (TE-SAT 2011), p. 4). This definition of a ‘terrorist act’ is no less problematic than any other, and arguably is more so than most: the last part of the definition could cast a very wide net indeed.
the 498 ‘terrorist attacks’ that were carried out in 2006, the number attributable to ‘Islamist’ terrorism is: one.\(^1^0\) Even this single act was not successful. ‘There were’, says the report, ‘no successful Islamist terrorist attacks in the EU in 2006’. Zero successful attacks and just one unsuccessful attack. So who were the main culprits? It transpires that the ‘vast majority’ of attacks ‘were conducted by separatist terrorist groups targeting France and Spain’. These groups accounted for 424 acts out of the total of 498.\(^1^1\)

In subsequent years, the total number of terrorist attacks has varied considerably from one year to the next, but the number attributed to ‘Islamist’ groups has been consistently small. (Bear in mind that the figures include not only attacks that were completed but also those which failed or were foiled.) 2007 saw a 24 per cent increase in the grand total: up from 498 to 583, of which four were attributed to ‘Islamist’ groups. There was one out of 515 in 2008, one out of 294 in 2009, and three out of 249 in 2010.\(^1^2\) In every year, separatist groups dominate the chart. This comment from the Executive Summary of the 2009 report catches the eye: ‘Islamist terrorism is still perceived as being the biggest threat worldwide, despite the fact that the EU faced only one Islamist terrorist attack in 2008.’ The next paragraph confirms what the chart shows: ‘Separatist terrorism remains the terrorism area which affects the EU most.’\(^1^3\) The same picture emerges in the Executive Summary of the 2010 report, almost in the same words: ‘Islamist terrorism is still perceived as the biggest threat to most Member States, despite the fact that only one Islamist terrorist attack – a bomb attack in Italy – took place in the EU in 2009.’ And once again: ‘Separatist terrorism continues to be the type of terrorism which affects the EU most in terms of the number of attacks carried out.’\(^1^4\)

---

\(^{10}\) The relevant chart in the 2007 report has five categories of terrorist attacks: Islamist, separatist, left-wing, right-wing, and other/not specified. In the reports published in subsequent years, the fifth category is split into two: single-issue and not specified.


\(^{12}\) Europol, *EU terrorism situation and trend report 2008* (TE-SAT 2008), p 10; Europol, *EU terrorism situation and trend report 2009* (TE-SAT 2009), p 12; Europol, *EU terrorism situation and trend report 2010* (TE-SAT 2010), p 12; Europol, *EU terrorism situation and trend report 2011* (TE-SAT 2011), p 36. For 2008, the chart shows a zero in the Islamist column. However, in the case of the UK, the total (74) is not broken down into separate categories; and the Executive Summary mentions that there was one ‘Islamist terrorist attack’ that year in the UK (Europol, *TE-SAT 2009*, p 7.)


By the way, the 2009 report points out: ‘Animal rights extremists dominated the illegal activities of single issue extremism’, of which there were 5 attacks in 2008 – five times more than there were ‘Islamist’ attacks.\(^\text{15}\) It seems, then, that in 2008 there was a far greater terrorist threat to Europe from activists seeking to liberate chickens than from young men wanting to revive the Caliphate.

Let me make a couple of things clear. Not for one moment do I mean to minimise the gravity of attacks, planned or perpetrated, that put civilian lives at risk in the name of Islam. The issue here, however, is not one of minimisation on my part but of overstatement on the part of Cameron and others. Nor do I mean to imply that the statistics and commentary that I have quoted from the Europol annual reports are the last word on the matter. For one thing, statistics often turn out to be a messier business than we think.\(^\text{16}\) For another, there are other ways of measuring the extent of the threat from terrorism and the distribution of this threat across different categories of groups.\(^\text{17}\) Facts can get complicated – which is why, as I confessed at the beginning, I shy away from them. So, to clarify, I am not so much making a statistical case as taking a reality check. Put it this way: if Cameron were right, if the threat of terrorism in Europe comes ‘overwhelmingly’ from the source he mentions, then you would expect to see this reflected in the figures I have quoted; but it is not.

Let us now pick up the point that I left suspended: the fact that Cameron framed the bombers who act in the name of Islam as young men who are prepared to ‘kill their fellow citizens’, which, I have argued, is skewed.\(^\text{18}\) If we combine this point with the point that I have just been developing – that official figures do not appear to bear out his assertion that the terrorist threat in Europe comes overwhelmingly from young men acting in the name of Islam – what

\(^{16}\) So, for example, the database in the Europol reports is not the same in every year: eleven states were included in the relevant chart in the initial report in 2007, but only nine in 2008, seven in 2009 and six in 2010, with the number back to nine in 2011.
\(^{17}\) All the reports, for example, include a chart showing the number of arrested suspects of terrorist attacks, with the figures broken down according to groups. These charts give a somewhat different impression of the relative significance of the different groups.
\(^{18}\) They are also prepared ‘to blow themselves up’, which emphasises subliminally the idea that, unlike ‘us’, they do not value life. However, I have not laid a basis for this point, which, in any case, lies to one side of the present argument.
do we get? We get, I suggest, the unmistakable whiff of a construction, a construction with a strong dose of the *a priori*. That is to say, Cameron’s assertion in line 1 is not simply a factual claim, a claim that might or might not be true: it indicates a pre-existing view: a *world* view.

It is tempting to say that this view of the world stigmatises Islam. But has he not guarded against this by characterising the Islam followed by the young men in question as ‘a completely perverse, warped interpretation’? This is our cue to move on from line 1 to line 2. But before moving on I want to take a moment to comment on Cameron’s ‘voice’. He said their interpretation of Islam is perverse and warped. The question is not whether he is right or wrong. The question is: Who is he to say this? In what voice does he speak when he characterises their Islam this way? He is speaking as the British Prime Minister. But is this a ministerial judgment? What kind of judgment is it exactly? Let me suggest a parallel to help explain what I am getting at. Consider those religious Jewish settlers in the West Bank who claim the land and attack Palestinian farmers in the name of the Torah. Do they follow an interpretation of Judaism that is ‘completely perverse’ and ‘warped’? If you are asking me, then, speaking as a Jew, my answer is: Yes, they do. But if *Cameron* gave this answer, my hackles would rise and I would say, ‘Hang on: who are you to give an answer to this question? It’s not your question. The question belongs to us Jews. It’s for *us* to say yes – or no – or to argue about it. It’s not your thing.’ Similarly with Islam and the use of terror: it is not his thing. It is not that he is wrong in what he says; it is that he is the wrong person to be saying it. Yet he assumes he can speak with authority for Islam. He takes it for granted – as if it were within his prerogative to distinguish the true Islam from the false, the goats from the sheep, the good from the bad. Thus, what at first looks like a move on his part to protect against a negative stereotype of Islam is actually a chutzpah, an assertion of authority.

The question of voice goes, in a way, to the heart of the matter; for a multicultural world, as I conceive it, is one with multiple voices, where no voice usurps any other. Moreover, the criticism I have just made of Cameron’s ‘voice’ lies at the crux of my critique of his speech. For what I want to say in the end is this: the speech betrays an unease or anxiety about a world that will not stay on its accustomed axis, a world that is spinning out of control of the West,
leaving the West unsure of itself. This, an almost unspeakable insecurity, elicits a reaction that takes the form of reasserting superiority over lesser breeds and authority over the unruly.

**Line 2**

The ‘root of the problem’ is ‘Islamist extremism’. We ‘must distinguish it from Islam. Islam is a religion observed peacefully and devoutly by over a billion people. Islamist extremism is a political ideology supported by a minority.’ They ‘are not the same thing’.

In line 1 Cameron said that ‘the biggest threat that we face’ comes from ‘young men’ who follow a certain interpretation of Islam. In line 2 he gave their version of Islam a name: ‘Islamist extremism’. But at this point there is a subtle kink in the argument. According to line 1, the young men follow the wrong kind of Islam. With line 2 it transpires that what they follow is the wrong kind of thing to be called ‘Islam’: it is different in kind: it is a political ideology rather than a religion – as if Islam and Islamist extremism belong to different logical categories. ‘It is vital’, he said in this part of the speech, ‘that we make this distinction between religion on the one hand, and political ideology on the other’. Note that the distinction he made is general: it applies across the board and not only in this particular case. In other words, he is asserting a larger scheme of things into which he slots Islam, placing it under the heading ‘religion’ rather than ‘political ideology’. You could say, if you were so minded, that he is putting Islam in its place. And (as we shall see shortly) he is; but, if anything, this ratchets up his defence of Islam. For, if he is right, then Islam cannot be blamed for the threat that we face. The argument goes like this: The root of the problem is a political ideology; Islam is a religion; a religion is not a political ideology; therefore Islam is not the root of the problem. QED, and thank you very much David from the Muslims of the world.

The trouble with this argument is that it relies on a distinction that is so brittle that it crumbles at the touch. He is seeking to place a firewall between Islam, the religion, and
Islamist extremism, the political ideology. But if the one is categorically different from the other, why is the name of the first contained in the name of the second? Is it not because the second, Islamist extremism, is derived from the first, Islam? He himself says towards the end of the speech, ‘The extremism we face is a distortion of Islam.’ But to say it is a distortion of Islam (or derived from Islam) is tantamount to saying that it has its roots in Islam; which seems to make Islam, in some sense or other, ‘the root of the problem’: n’est ce pas? That Cameron himself thinks this can be seen from the following: Having made the point that this extremist ideology is ‘a distortion of Islam’, he went on to say that, for this very reason, arguments against it ‘must be made by those within Islam’ and not only by governments. He seems to want to have his cake and eat it: to exonerate Islam while at the same time holding ‘those within’ it responsible, in part, for the continued existence of the ideology that he sees as ‘the root of the problem’. So, Islam and Islamist extremism are and are not separate from each other. It is a muddle. What does this muddle mean? What does it signify? Let us take a closer look at the text and see what emerges.

Cameron used the word ‘Islamist’ six times in the speech. On four occasions it occurs in the phrase ‘Islamist extremism’. The other two instances patently have the same meaning. Apparently, ‘Islamist extremism’, in his use of the phrase, is a pleonasm. It does not mean an extreme form of Islamism; it means Islamism, full stop. An Islamist, in his use of the term, is an extremist. He does recognise a ‘spectrum’ of Islamist views, but they are all extreme. He said

At the furthest end are those who back terrorism to promote their ultimate goal: an entire Islamist realm, governed by an interpretation of Sharia. Move along the

---

19 For further evidence of a wobble in Cameron’s thinking, see the subheading for his Munich speech on the official website of the Prime Minister’s Office: ‘Prime Minister David Cameron has delivered a speech setting out his view on radicalisation and Islamic extremism.’ ‘Islamic’, not ‘Islamist’. What does ‘Islamic’ mean if not ‘pertaining to Islam’? But if it pertains to Islam, then this extremism cannot be in a different category; the category must be the same, whether we call it ‘religion’ or something else. Perhaps I am reading too much into what might be nothing more than a slip on the part of a Downing Street typesetter. On the other hand, slips (as we have known ever since Freud) can be a bit of a giveaway.

20 As in ‘an entire Islamist realm, governed by an interpretation of Sharia’ and in (re Egypt) ‘I simply don’t accept that there is somehow a dead end choice between a security state on the one hand, and an Islamist one on the other.’
spectrum, and you find people who may reject violence, but who accept various parts of the extremist worldview …

So an Islamist, on his account, is not necessarily violent, but is, necessarily, an extremist.

In contrast, there is Islam: ‘a religion observed peacefully and devoutly by over a billion people’. And it is an either-or: either politics or religion or nothing. There is no in between. The one is extremist, if not actually violent; the other is peaceful and devout. Moreover, the political identity is threatening to ‘us’; for he said that even people on the non-violent end of the Islamist spectrum bear ‘real hostility towards Western democracy and liberal values’. The religious identity, in contrast, is benign. It is harmless. Somehow, I imagine Cameron giving a billion devout and peaceful Muslims a metaphorical pat on the head, while saying: ‘Well done, chaps. Heads down. Keep praying. That’s the ticket.’

It is a ticket to ride: that is the point. It is the only way for a Muslim, as a Muslim, to gain acceptance in a western society – or a world dominated by the West. The cost of admission is to give up a politics that is based on Islam. ‘In my understanding’, wrote Salman Sayyid, ‘an Islamist is someone who places her or his Muslim identity at the centre of her or his political practice’.21 But, even if not ‘extremist’, such a person is unsettling, because once the principle of a political Islam is accepted there is no saying where it will lead. Best to keep Islam out of politics altogether.

Consistent with this position, Cameron castigated ‘those on the hard right’ who ‘ignore this distinction between Islam and Islamist extremism, and just say that Islam and the West are irreconcilable – that there is a clash of civilizations’. Thus, he disavowed the view of Islam and the West that we associate with Bernard Lewis or Samuel Huntington. I do not think he was being either cynical or duplicitous when he said this. But his way of reconciling ‘Islam and the

---

21 S Sayyid, A fundamental fear: Eurocentrism and the emergence of Islamism, Zed Books, London, 2003, p. 17. Essentially, as the title indicates, the main thesis of this paper is a variation on Sayyid’s theme: the deeply unsettling effect of ‘the contemporary assertion of a Muslim identity’ (p vii) and what he calls ‘the decentring of the West’ (p 155).
West’ was essentially to make the former fit for purpose. *Defending* Islam, denying that it is the ‘root of the problem’, he was *disciplining* it, keeping it within bounds, barring it from the political realm, confining it to peaceful and devout observance, rendering it ‘safe’ – so that it does not pose a threat to ‘us’. In this speech, we are still within the *imperium* of the *Raj* – or clinging on to it. This is what line 2 signifies.

*Line 3*

‘I’m not saying that issues of poverty and grievance about foreign policy are not important.’ But they are ‘just contributory factors’; even if ‘we sorted out’ these problems, ‘there would still be this terrorism’.

If line 2 exonerates the religion of Islam – the Islam that keeps out of politics – line 3 absolves ‘us’ of any real responsibility for ‘this terrorism’. I say *real* responsibility because Cameron did concede that material conditions, such as western foreign policy (‘not least in Palestine’) along with ‘the poverty that many Muslims live in’, play a part. But he conceded only to deceive: Calling these factors ‘contributory’, he said, ‘Even if we sorted out all of the problems that I have mentioned, there would still be this terrorism.’ And he went on to reaffirm what he maintained earlier in the speech: ‘I believe the root lies in the existence of this extremist ideology.’ The key point in line 3, therefore, is not the concession that he made with one hand but its withdrawal, which he made with the other. We might be fallible, and even culpable, but ultimately we are not responsible. As he put it in his closing remarks: ‘This terrorism … has been thrust upon us.’ It is how ‘they’ think, not what ‘we’ do, that is the *real* issue.

Cameron was singing from the same hymn sheet as George W. Bush, Tony Blair, and other heads of government of western states, going back at least ten years to September 2001. But if this view has a long pedigree, its scholarly refutation has also been around for a while. In 2005, the political scientist Robert Pape, director of the Chicago Project on Suicide Terrorism at the University of Chicago, published the results of his extensive research in the field. His

---

22 Or almost the same. Blair always took a harder line in discounting altogether the role of grievances.
database comprised every suicide terrorist attack around the globe over a period of twenty years. One of his principal conclusions was this: ‘suicide terrorism is mainly a response to foreign occupation rather than the product of Islamic fundamentalism’. Roughly, this stands Cameron's view on its head. According to Pape, ‘the root cause of suicide terrorism does not lie in an ideology’. Thus, six years before the fact, his words directly contradict what Cameron asserted in his Munich speech: ‘I believe the root lies in the existence of this extremist ideology.’

How should we hear the word ‘believe’? Taking lines 1 to 3 together, it is clear that this is not ‘believe’ as in ‘on the strength of the evidence I incline to the view that …’ It is more like the strength of an a priori conviction. Lines 1 to 3 contain various faux pas by Cameron. We have dwelt chiefly on the following: he framed the issues in a tendentious way; he appeared to grossly exaggerate the scale of terrorist acts carried out in the name of Islam; his distinction between Islam and Islamist extremism is not coherent; and he perpetuated a discredited theory of causation. That is quite a catalogue of unreason (not least for a man who took a first at Oxford in PPE). What, we might wonder, is the root of the problem? Why has he carried out these (shall we say) terrible cogitative acts? It is tempting to say (by way of touche): I believe the root lies in the existence of an ideology.

If not an ideology exactly, then something like it: a mindset, a narrative, a script in his head that was mirrored in his speech. It is not that his argument does not contain facts, but it contains them like flies in a spider’s web: some are caught, some get away, but the web is the thing. This, in a way, is the main point to emerge from the critique of Cameron’s argument so far.

IV. On identity: lines 4 to 7

Trying to squeeze a full critique of Cameron's Munich speech into the space of a paper is like attempting to insert a ship into a bottle: it cannot be done. If nothing else, though, I think I can claim to have done enough to establish my main thesis: there is enough material in the

---

speech for an entire conference. There is certainly far more material in lines 4 to 7 than I am about to examine. As I dash through the remaining lines, lumping them together rather than taking them individually, I shall neglect some significant topics in his speech. But what is lost in thoroughness will, I hope, be gained with the clarity that comes with a thumbnail sketch.

The stunt that Cameron wanted to pull off in his speech was even more difficult than the one that I face in this paper. He tried to turn on a sixpence and go straight from his theory of terrorism to his attack on multiculturalism. How did he do it? Having said, ’I believe the root lies in the existence of this extremist ideology’, his next sentence was this: ’I would argue an important reason so many young Muslims are drawn to it comes down to a question of identity’ (line 4). But it is his speech that comes down to a question of identity. What his speech evinces is an almost unbearable sense of insecurity about being British today; hence the attack on multiculturalism. Turning on a sixpence, he meets himself coming from the opposite direction.

Nothing is more revealing of this underlying mood than the phrase he introduced near the end of his speech: ’muscular liberalism’, his term for what Britain – and the West in general – needs in order to tackle the root cause of terrorism (line 7). The term itself is a show of strength, but one that betrays a sense of weakness. This will become clearer as we take stock of the second part of his argument.

Cameron did not explain what he meant by ’the doctrine of state multiculturalism’, but let that pass. Calling it a ‘doctrine’ seems a little loaded: there is just a hint of a suggestion that advocates of the multicultural idea are doctrinaire. But let that pass too. His point was that under this doctrine ’we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream’ (line 5). We cannot quite let this pass. First, he was painting with a very broad brushstroke indeed. The question of whether people ’live separate lives’ along cultural lines is complex because lives are complex: people might reside in areas where there is a dominant – even a single – ethnicity but mix with wider society in the course of doing their jobs or going to football matches or taking part in civil society. Moreover,
insofar as ethnic groups do form residential clusters, there is a variety of possible causes, including discrimination in the housing market, a form of ‘encouragement’ that no multiculturalist would condone. Second, once again, scholarship does not seem to be on Cameron’s side. Social scientists Nissa Finney and Ludi Simpson, for instance, argued that ‘Britain’s so-called ghettos are diverse areas both ethnically and socially’.24 But, as I say, this is a complex matter; which is the point. Cameron spoke as if the question were both simple and cut-and-dried. It is neither. Who, we might ask, is being doctrinaire?

Cameron warmed to his theme: ‘We’ve failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong. We’ve even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values’ (line 5). Who, we might also ask, is driving a wedge between people? For, though they do it verbally rather than physically, these two sentences do the very thing he has been criticising: they segregate; they divide Britain sharply into ‘they’ and ‘we’. The plot is thickening and the dénouement follows at once. What he said is not a step in the argument exactly but it illuminates the speech from top to bottom:

So, when a white person holds objectionable views, racist views for instance, we rightly condemn them. But when equally unacceptable views or practices come from someone who isn’t white, we’ve been too cautious frankly – frankly, even fearful – to stand up to them. (Parenthesis B)

I am almost grateful to Cameron for this illustration of his point. With the clock ticking and my argument still cooking, it helps me bring things rapidly to the boil. I shall look first at the language of race and consider what it signifies. Then, in that light, I shall turn to the moral rebuke that is addressed to ‘us’.

When I say ‘the language of race’ I could also say ‘the language of empire’, for the distinction Cameron employed between ‘a white person’ and ‘someone who isn’t white’ is not just about biology. It is about status in the context of former British rule. Colour or race was a

constitutive part of the postwar project of adapting, but preserving, Britain’s pre-eminence over its former colonies. Specifically, the Commonwealth, which was created not to replace the empire but to translate it into a post-imperial form, has always been understood to combine two elements. On the one hand, there is the ‘Old’, comprising the prewar dominions which, like the ‘mother country’, are ‘white’. On the other hand, there is the ‘New’: the ‘non-white’ countries decolonised after the war. The language of race that Cameron used reminds us that the ‘young men’ who ‘overwhelmingly’ pose ‘the biggest threat that we face’ (line 1), are not defined by their religion alone. Nor, by and large, are the communities that flout ‘our values’ (line 5). They are (to recall a problematic term that I used earlier in passing) ‘British Asians’: immigrants or descendants of immigrants from ‘New’ Commonwealth countries in Southern Asia. The status of their countries of origin – nations that were once subject to British rule – rubs off on them: the status of being ‘non-white’. They (or their parents or grandparents or even great-grandparents) bring this status with them upon being admitted into ‘our’ country as citizens. It is implicit in the unwritten immigration contract (so to speak) that governs their presence in ‘our’ midst.

The terms and conditions of this contract are set by ‘us’ – or should be. This, in a way, is the most salient point for taking the measure of Cameron’s argument and understanding what it signifies. It signifies, in part, a project under threat: the postwar project of managing the transition from imperial to non-imperial power. Just as the former colonies once had to adapt to the requirements set by the metropole, so immigrants from these former colonies have to fit in if they want to settle in the metropole. They have to fit in with us: this is the basic principle of the immigration contract. It means the onus is on ‘them’. In the words of Tony Blair, they have a ‘duty to integrate’. The word ‘integrate’ is a code to which this principle is the key.

25 Pointedly, the Commonwealth continued to be called ‘British’ in everyday language long after the official change of name in 1949 to Commonwealth of Nations.
26 ‘The duty to integrate: shared British values’, speech by Tony Blair, 8 December 2006. Available at www.vigile.net/The-Duty-to-Integrate-Shared. The webpage gives www.number10.gov.uk, the official website of the Prime Minister’s Office, as its source.
‘Ultimately’, said Cameron three years before his Munich speech, ‘it’s about making Britain a welcome home for those who want to integrate – for those who want to share in our common endeavour – and a cold place for those who don’t’.27 Chilling words. They indicate an iron fist inside the velvet glove – as does his clarion call for a ‘muscular liberalism’ (line 7). I shall come to the ‘liberalism’ bit in a moment. But, in a way, it is ‘muscular’ that wears the trousers. Muscular is the opposite of weak, and weak is what ‘we’ have been in Cameron’s moral reckoning. We have ‘allowed the weakening of our collective identity’ (line 4). Along with this goes the moral rebuke about our being ‘too cautious frankly – frankly, even fearful – to stand up to them’ (Parenthesis B). In short, we have lost our nerve. Calling for a ‘muscular liberalism’, Cameron is calling for us to take back ownership of the immigration contract: to insist that newcomers from the New Commonwealth abide by the terms set by the former ‘mother country’. At stake is our collective – our national, our British, our ‘white’ – identity. Certainly this national identity should be ‘open to everyone’ (line 6); but we must hold the keys to the kingdom. The ‘biggest threat that we face’ is the loss of our grip: that is the thrust of his speech.28

I said a few minutes ago that the ‘young men’ who haunt the speech are not defined by their religion alone. Nor are the communities that flout ‘our values’. They are, for the most part, British Asians. Conversely, they are not defined solely by their ethnic roots. They are Muslim; which makes them part of a larger identity whose reach is worldwide. This points to the wider context signified by the holes and the biases in Cameron’s argument. In the background is not only the British postwar project that I have just been discussing but also the post–Cold War project that the West (of which Britain of course is an integral part) has been pursuing for the past twenty years or so. It is a project that, broadly speaking, has produced friction between

28 In the distant background is the notorious ‘rivers of blood’ speech that Enoch Powell gave in April 1968, where, by quoting an anonymous constituent (‘a middle-aged, quite ordinary working man’), he conjured up the following scenario: ‘In this country in 15 or 20 years’ time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man’ (text of his speech available on the website of The Telegraph, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643823/Enoch-Powellss-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html).
western and Islamic states. Very roughly, the British project can be inserted inside the larger western project, almost like a Russian nesting doll. So, when Cameron referred to ‘liberal values’, his words did double duty: they referred simultaneously to Britain’s idea of itself and to the West’s idea of itself.

This is too vague; but it is too late to say more about it, even if I could, except to offer, before bringing the paper to a close, a reflection on liberalism and cultural difference. I do so partly for its own sake, but also to make a point about the basic stance or posture of Cameron’s speech. He called for a ‘muscular liberalism’ and he professed ‘liberal values’. Now, liberalism is one thing; liberal values are another. The latter (human rights, equality, freedom, democracy, and so on) can be derived from various sources – not just from liberalism. Liberalism is a moral or political tradition that has, at its heart, the principle of universalism: the idea of a common humanity (or the unity of humankind). Cameron is not alone these days in thinking that a vigorous liberalism leads away from multiculturalism. But, on the question of cultural difference, the principle of universalism gives rise to a profound ambiguity, if not an inner contradiction. Looked at one way, the principle *demotes* cultures vis-à-vis humanity, since each culture is particular whereas humanity is universal. Looked at another way, it *promotes* culture, because culture is universal: having a culture is as ubiquitous as speaking a language. On the first way of looking at the question, humanity is something over and above its different cultures. On the second way, it is only ever expressed in and through a culture; and though culture is universal there is no universal – no single or comprehensive – culture (just as there is no universal language – nor would there be even if everyone spoke the same tongue, for in that case you would have uniformity, not universality). Both these ways of taking the principle affirm a common humanity; but they have a different take on what this means and they tend in different directions. The first tends to put liberalism itself on a higher plane than any other tradition. The second undermines the claim of any tradition or any culture – say, western or British – to own the values called ‘liberal’. So, at the heart of liberalism is a riddle.

---

29 Sayyid referred to the conviction that ‘universal values can be generated from Islam’ (*A fundamental fear*, p xxii). The title of my book *Being Jewish and doing justice* (Vallentine Mitchell, London, 2011) is intended to convey a similar conviction about Judaism.
We are living at a time of crisis, when history, far from coming to an end, is going through a transition from one era or epoch to another. At such a time, one possible response is muscular: confronting your opponent or ‘enemy’: facing them down. This is the stance of Cameron’s speech. But there is a better alternative. The alternative is to face or confront yourself: to enquire within, to re-examine the values you claim to believe in and the principles you think you understand clearly – but which might contain a hidden riddle, leading you to rethink. This is the reorientation of Socrates, the original philosopher: the man who knew he did not know. So, perhaps I do not need to feel a total fraud for being here at the CSAA annual conference: ignorance, after all, has its uses.

V. Back to Torquay

I have not forgotten Basil Fawlty, now in his dotage. As we bid him farewell, I invite us to view his establishment on the English Riviera as a metaphor for another rickety Victorian structure whose grandeur has faded: one on which it used to be said that the sun never sets.

Picture the scene as we climb the crumbling steps at the front of Fawlty Towers and peer through the window of the hotel bar. It is evening. The curtain, which is half-drawn, hangs from its rail by a thread. An elderly, slightly dodderly, Basil Fawlty is knocking back Madeira, muttering imprecations against multiculturalism, while the Major is searching for Germans behind the settee. The building is in a state of decay: the roof is leaking, the foundations are creaking, the paint is peeling, and there is a heck of a lot of dry rot – especially in the bar where the two men are now discussing the war in Afghanistan. Suddenly a guest enters the room: it is Cameron. The Major meanwhile has fallen asleep on the settee and is dreaming of an elephant shoot in darkest Africa. But Cleese and Cameron hit it off. As we are about to turn away we catch a glimpse of the two of them, side by side, getting into their stride: Cleese as the Minister of Silly Walks, Cameron as the Prime Minister of Silly Talks. The curtain falls.