The double consciousness of Paul Gilroy

*Striving to be both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness.*

Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity And Double Consciousness*

**Introducing Paul Gilroy**

On April 17 this year Prof Paul Gilroy (1956-) returns to Norway for the first time in over a decade for a series of public and academic events in Oslo and Bergen. Gilroy will appear at events at the Houses of Literature in Oslo and Bergen, and the universities of Oslo and Bergen from April 17 to April 20. 2018 marks twenty-five years since the publication of the seminal work for which Prof Paul Gilroy (King’s College London) is arguably best known, namely his 1993 classic *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness.*


Here is an admission: I was a late-comer to the work of Gilroy. That was partly due to my scholarly training within social anthropology in Norway, where notions of epistemological and disciplinary purity meant that the curricula to which we were exposed as undergraduates in the 1990s by and large excluded works within that nebulous and ambiguous disciplinary tradition known as ‘cultural studies.’ Gilroy had, for all his own noteworthy ambivalences about what cultural studies under the influence of poststructuralism had by the 1990s become, as an erstwhile young colleague of the late Prof Stuart Hall (1932-2014) [http://africasacountry.com/2017/05/thinking-aloud-with-stuart-hall/](http://africasacountry.com/2017/05/thinking-aloud-with-stuart-hall/) at the University of Birmingham in the 1970s, emerged from cultural studies. Gilroy was later to pay a moving tribute to his mentor and colleague Stuart Hall in the form of the splendid co-edited volume *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall.*
Hall’s influence on Gilroy’s thought is profound and readily acknowledged by Gilroy: Hall appears as the first reader mentioned in the acknowledgements of Gilroy’s seminal *The Black Atlantic: Modernity And Double Consciousness*. Hall and Gilroy also collaborated on a richly illustrated photographic history of modern black Britain first published in 2007, which qualifies as an obvious precursor of the widely acclaimed work of the historian David Olusoga in documenting the presence of blacks in Britain past and present.

But for social anthropological puritans past and present in my native Norway, cultural studies were and remain too disciplinary hybrid and impure to be an essential part of what they read and teach. This is in a sense fitting, in that Gilroy’s multi-pronged and multi-directed critique has long been directed against all forms of essentialisms past and present, and one which has long transcended all kinds of disciplinary boundary-making and marking. So, whilst I am quite sure that Gilroy’s modality of critique had filtered into anthropological understandings at the particular historical conjuncture when I myself started studying anthropology, I also happen to be quite sure that I never read Gilroy as a young anthropology student.

As a matter of fact, it was Gilroy who sought me out, not the other way around. And it still strikes me as an increasingly rare expression of academic interest and generosity that I should have had the fortune of receiving an entirely unexpected e-mail from none other than Paul Gilroy in the aftermath of the Norwegian right-wing extremist and racist Anders Behring Breivik’s notorious terrorist attacks in the autumn of 2011. The
context was an opinion piece I had written for Open Democracy,
https://www.opendemocracy.net/sindre-bangstad/norway-terror-and-islamophobia-in-mirror which somehow had caught Gilroy’s attention. Gilroy is of course not only theoretically and methodologically a man who contains Whitmanesque ‘multitudes’, he is also an exemplar of that increasingly rare academic creature, the activist and public intellectual, and has for a number of years been a central contributor to Open Democracy. 
https://www.opendemocracy.net/author/paul-gilroy


**Reading The Black Atlantic**

And so it was not until 2011 that I started reading Paul Gilroy’s work in earnest. This has to be accounted for: we all read in and in light of our present circumstances. And what appealed to me in Gilroy’s work from the 1980s and 1990s, written in a social and political context in which scientifically bogus and historically discredited and essentialist ideas about ‘race’, ethnicity and nationhood https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/02/the-unwelcome-revival-of-race-science?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other
could seem to have been buried once and for all, was Gilroy’s trenchant critique of such essentialisms and attempt to remodel the genealogies of black political thought in ways which took its intersections with Euro-American political thought into account. It is not as
if this had not been done before: significant signposts here are provided by Gilroy’s many references to the work of the late CLR James, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois and Edouard Glissant. And CLR James had already in his 1938 classic about the San Domingo revolution of the 1790s demonstrated that black aspirations and struggles for fundamental rights and freedoms had to be seen as part and parcel of a global history.

https://www.dukeupress.edu/the-black-jacobins-reader

The time of Gilroy’s penning *The Black Atlantic* was of course a time of significant optimism about the prospect of solidarities across and transcendent of historical boundaries of ‘race’, class and nation – it was after all written in the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and in the years of the dismantling of the formal legal and political edifice of apartheid in South Africa after 1990. Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* has been accused of an unbridled enthusiasm for and celebration of ‘hybridity’ and ‘creolization’, globalization and its flows easily rendered instrumental for neoliberalism. Yet I honestly cannot find much concrete evidence to support these claims in *The Black Atlantic*. There is simply in Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* too much of a sensitivity to the burdens of a past of racialized terrors in the name of white supremacism and its traces in the present for that to qualify as an assessment characterized by fidelity to Gilroy’s own text. For Gilroy right at the outset on page 2 notes that terms such as ‘creolisation’ and ‘hybridity’ are “rather unsatisfactory ways of naming the processes of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by its agents.” As a case in point, Gilroy is in *The Black Atlantic* scathing of what he refers to as “the excesses of anti-political post-structuralism in general and deconstructive literary criticism in particular” *(BA, page 43)*, of the “easy postmodernism [which] attacks both rationality and universality through an obvious and banal relativism” *(page 45)*, and of a “rhetorical anti-
humanism which simply trivialises the potency of the negative” (page 55). Furthermore, Gilroy explicitly cautions against a certain intellectual “distaste for uncomfortable questions of class and power” (page 100) and against “ignoring the undiminished power of racism itself and forsaking the mass of black people who continue to comprehend their lived particularity through what it does to them” (page 101). True enough, Gilroy’s analysis by and large operates on an ideational terrain. And much like Hall, Gilroy turns back at the ‘Little Englander’ Marxist version of the ‘New Left’ as represented by E. P. Thompson and its unstated nationalism and enthusiasms for ‘socialism in one country’ (page 14), which as we know all too well by now, left previous little intellectual space to think analytically in terms of anything other than class. Gilroy is clearly also opposed to Marxisant notions of a progressive teleology, which often renders the experience of slavery and racialized terror incidental rather than central to black histories of subordination and oppression. It may be precisely this which has irked Gilroy’s Marxisant readers well into the realms of misrepresentation. Furthermore, Gilroy stands at an ambivalent distance to what became of cultural studies: in The Black Atlantic, he speaks of the discipline’s “conspicuous problems with ethnocentrism and nationalism” and calls for a “critical evaluation of the ways in which notions of ethnicity have been mobilized, often by default rather than design, as part of the distinctive hermeneutics of cultural studies or with the unthinking assumption that cultures always flow into patterns congruent with the borders of essentially homogeneous nation states” (page 5). In other words, much as Hall noted in his posthumously published W.E.B. Du Bois Lectures, let us not be so naïve as to think that replacing historical notions concerning ‘race’ with ‘ethnicity’ or ‘culture’ does away with the persistence of epistemological and ontological nationalism.

“It is significant that prior to the consolidation of scientific racism in the nineteenth century, the term “race” was used very much in the way that the world “culture” is used today”, remarks Gilroy on page 8 of *The Black Atlantic*. The critique of the persistence of racialized modes of thinking – whether white or black – in *The Black Atlantic* is developed further in Gilroy’s 2002 *Against Race: Imagining Political Cultural Beyond The Color Line*.


**Gilroy as a feminist**

Gilroy’s engagement with feminist thought also means that he is alert to the dangers inherent in so-called ‘Afro-centric’ thought not only of building the reconstruction of black humanity and dignity by means of racial essentialisms and calls for racial authenticity which ultimately can only mirror those of white supremacist ideologies, but also at the cost of making the restoration of that humanity and dignity interchangeable with the restoration of ‘black masculinity’ (*BA*, page 194). For there is of course a very specific cost to that likely to be borne by black women, as Gilroy reminds us in his close reading of the work of the Afro-American novelist and one-time Marxist Richard Wright (1908-60) who “connected the violence found in the private, domestic sphere to the ritual, public brutality that was a means of political administration in the [US] South” (*BA*, page 175.).

**The Black Atlantic**

It seems to me that paying attention to what the anthropologist David C. Scott as characterized as a ‘Caribbean problem space’ may be a good way of approaching Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* twenty-five years on. For by way of not only his personal biography, but also his readings and influences (Hall, Glissant, James), Gilroy is a product of that
specific ‘problem space.’ There is of course a risk of engaging in yet another form of essentialism which does violence to Gilroy’s work: Gilroy is after all interested in routes rather than roots, in advancing a reading of black intellectual traditions past and present cognizant of the “traffic between African cultural forms and the political cultures of diaspora blacks over a long period”; “the double consciousness that fascinated black modernists”; and “the position of [black] thinkers in the contested “contact zones” between cultures and histories” (BA, page 199, 188, 6). Thinking about routes rather than roots is in fact where we find the strongest influence of anthropological theory in Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*—since the obvious reference here is the work of the anthropological historian James Clifford on ‘travelling cultures.’

http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674779617

But what, then, is ‘the black Atlantic’? The first attempt to define the term comes on page 19 of *The Black Atlantic*, where Gilroy writes: “The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation that I want to call the black Atlantic can be defined, on one level, through this desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity.” The work that the term is meant to do for Gilroy becomes clearer on page 29, where Gilroy asserts with reference to the work of the Afro-American black abolitionist and nationalist Martin Delany (1812-85) that “locat[ing] the Black Atlantic world in a webbed network, between the local and the global, challenges the coherence of all narrow nationalist perspectives and points to the spurious invocation of ethnic particularity to enforce them and to ensure the tidy flow of cultural output into neat, symmetrical units. I should add that this applies whether this impulse comes from the oppressors of the oppressed.” Gilroy on the same page goes on to characterize blacks as “people in, but not necessarily of the modern, western world”
and black histories as involving “processes of political organisation that are explicitly transnational and international in nature.” This attempt to think the global and the local, the universal and the particular, the national and transnational at the same time, seems to me profoundly important. And all the more so in a context in which, as Pankaj Mishra rightly notes in a recent review of the important work of Ta-Nehisi Coates, https://www.lrb.co.uk/v40/n04/pankaj-mishra/why-do-white-people-like-what-i-write there seems to be a widespread tendency, especially in the USA, to think of histories of oppression and suffering of black peoples, and resistance to that oppression and suffering from black intellectuals and the black masses in parochial and US-centric terms. What stands out for Gilroy in the work of the black intellectual modernists he analyzes in The Black Atlantic, and most notably Du Bois and Wright, is of course the fact that they were in profound senses products of ‘the black Atlantic’, of their deep engagement with Euro-American intellectual canons of their times, and concerned with thinking about the oppression and suffering of black peoples in global and universal terms. It is also clear that Gilroy's drawing attention to the rich and ambivalent traditions of black Atlantic intellectual thought and experiences is a way of transcending the myriad impasses created by reducing black agency past and present to defensive responses to victimization and victimhood. And not only black Atlantic thought and experiences – part of what makes Gilroy so interesting as a scholar is his keen attention to black Atlantic popular culture past and present – whether it be in the form of close readings of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, hip-hop or rap – and their artistic use of material drawn from a wide range of sources. What interests him here is, quite similarly to the case of black Atlantic intellectual thought, the analysis of forms of expressions which transcend ready-made binaries relating to these expressive forms’ alleged ‘racial authenticity.’ In the current
heated debates about ‘cultural appropriation’, there is certainly rich analytical material to draw upon in Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic.

**Double consciousness**

Gilroy dedicates an entire chapter of The Black Atlantic to Du Bois. Du Bois hovers over Gilroy’s entire work as one its most central and recurrent signposts. And so it is unsurprising that Gilroy was in 2006 invited to deliver the prestigious W. E. B. Du Bois Lectures at Harvard University, lectures later published as Darker Than Blue: On The Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture.

http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674060234

As the subtitle of Gilroy’s 1993 The Black Atlantic indicates, Gilroy is centrally concerned with the theme of ‘double consciousness’ or what Du Bois in his 1903 classic The Souls of Black Folk https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/43324/the-souls-of-black-folk-by-web-dubois/9780375509117/ defined as “this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others” in Du Bois magisterial oeuvre. Though Gilroy admits that Du Bois’ developed the concept as a means of “conveying the special difficulties arising from black internalization of an American identity” he argues that Du Bois’ also used it “to illuminate the experience of post-slave populations in general” (BA, page 126). Long before the sociologist Aldon Morris took on the task of restoring Du Bois’ to his rightful and pivotal role as a pioneer of empirical sociology in the USA, https://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520286764

and long before the historian David Levering Lewis brought us the monumental biography which traced the intellectual trajectory of the intellectual and activist giant that Du Bois was, https://us.macmillan.com/webdubois/davidleveringlewis/9780805088052/
Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* chapter on Du Bois notes his role as a sociologist, and the ambivalences which characterizes Du Bois work. Gilroy posits his reading of Du Bois’ double consciousness – with which he clearly also identifies on a personal level – against those who would refuse to “accept the complicity and syncretic interdependency of black and white thinkers” (BA, page 31).

**Against purity**

There can be little doubt that Prof Paul Gilroy is and remains one of the most important and incisive post-colonial intellectuals in our time. Twenty-five years on from the publication of the first edition of *The Black Atlantic* in 1993, we live in a world once more besotted by various inflections of old and dated ideas of ethnic or cultural purity, a resurgence of right-wing populism and its attendant and interlinked nationalism and racism. One of many lasting merits of Gilroy’s work is his anti-essentialism, his vernacular cosmopolitanism, and his attempts to think of “the flows, exchanges, and in-between elements that call the very desire to be centred into question” (BA, page 190). We all need to be centred in some way or other. So in the dark times in which we happen to live, this is easier said than done for all of us. But that is no excuse for not trying to heed Gilroy’s resonant calls for trying to live up to the aspirations of what is ultimately a shared human heritage.

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(Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)