



On Tolerance: *A Defence of Moral Independence*
by **Frank Furedi**

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Reviewed by **Denis Joe** August 2011

Eamonn was not the most enlightened person I ever knew. He was the epitome of today's liberal caricatured working class white male. He was sexist, avowedly racist, hated 'queers' with a passion, and was the machine setter on the drills section, at Automotive Products, where I worked back in the late seventies. He was extremely witty and very intelligent and was quite a reserved man until he had a few pints down him. Then you found yourself in the presence of someone who was not entirely comfortable with the world he lived in.

I left AP in 1980 but I met up with Eamonn in 1987. It was a time when one of the biggest news stories concerned a group of men from Manchester, who were charged with assault, occasioning actual bodily harm, for their long held practice of sadomasochism, which was entirely consensual. They had videoed some of their sessions for distribution amongst themselves.

I was involved in left-wing politics at the time and my comrades were none too keen on giving an opinion on the case. If I remember correctly none of the left-wing groups took an interest and if they did then the matter was treated as an example of the anti-homosexual establishment, using an extreme case to promote their own agenda. Admittedly, if the reports in the press were

to be believed, then some of the things these guys did to each other was eye-watering and the press certainly went into detail.

Reading *On Tolerance*, brought that later meeting with Eamonn to my mind because I was shocked, at the time, to hear him say that it was up to them what they did in their bedrooms. Further chat made me see that Eamonn had not softened in his views, as far as he was concerned they were a bunch of perverts. But in this he was adamant: no matter how much he hated gays, it was up to them what they did in private and the courts had no right to criminalise them.

For many of us on the Left, who called ourselves 'Marxist', defending the rights of the individual was a bourgeois activity and did not fit comfortably with the collectivist politics of class struggle. One of the justifications for the Anti-Nazi League's 'no platform for fascists' was that fascists did not uphold freedom, so why should we allow them the freedom to propagate their hatred [see p. 92 – 94 where Furedi highlights more recent variants of this approach]. This rejection of extreme views meant that the left felt it was okay to set the terms of the debate on issues such as immigration and no other view could be tolerated

In more recent times intolerance was seen as the preserve of the middle-class. However this can be understood as a response to how the idea of tolerance moved away from that of the role of the individual in society and towards a way of viewing different groups within society. In the post WWII period, tolerance came to be seen as an aspect of pluralism and the diverse cultural groups that made up many modern societies, particularly the USA. Actually, in some respects the British middle-class could prove very tolerant of the individual, and used endearing terms such as 'eccentric'. One could see that attitude reflected in the popularity of the sedate detective novels, such as those of Agatha Christie, with their 'odd' little men and women, Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot. The view of the middle-class as intolerant was one that portrayed them as racist and anti-working class.

Even young and anti-establishment fashions were tainted by the pettiness of the petit bourgeoisie. The Punk movement was itself riddled with the snobbery of the middle-class. Groups like The Clash were accused of 'selling out' for signing to corporate labels such as CBS. Disco music was sneered at as were the audiences, and white working class youth were, generally seen as racist and violent oiks, prompting Mark Perry, front man of the band Alternative Television, to berate his audience by saying: "If a bunch of skinheads came in here now, you'd all shit yourselves and you know it!" ('Alternatives' on the album 'The Image Has Cracked').

But it was not the classic understanding of protecting the rights of the individual that led to the middle-class (particularly the older generation) being portrayed as intolerant, it was that they were identified with the increasingly outmoded idea of Britishness.

In an interview for the Granada television programme, *World In Action*, a year before becoming prime minister, and a period of heightened racial tension in Britain, Margaret Thatcher, responding to a rather innocuous question about immigration, made this statement:

Well now, look, let us try and start with a few figures as far as we know them, and I am the first to admit it is not easy to get clear figures from the Home Office about immigration, but there was a committee which looked at it and said that if we went on as we are then by the end of the century there would be four million people of the new Commonwealth or Pakistan here. Now, that is an awful lot and I think it means that people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture and, you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped, people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in.

[see Britain: Facing a Multiracial Future. *Time*, 27 August 1979.]

This comment is credited with helping the Tories to victory in the general election and giving Thatcher a popularity rating of 11% in the opinion polls. Whilst Thatcher may have intended to simply feed into the concerns of those who felt that there were 'too many immigrants' and that Britain could not sustain the (perceived) levels of immigration, she also politicised identity. Whereas traditionally, immigrants were seen as a drain on resources: "taking our jobs", "bringing their families with them", etc., now they were seen as a threat to our way of living.

Much of the criticism of Thatcher suggested that she was the epitome of the much despised 'Blue-Rinse brigade'. Coming to power on a promise to sort out the trade unions, she formally addressed many of the concerns of the older members of the middle-class; including immigration and single parents and the old bogey of the permissive society. She spoke the language of a home economics teacher when talking about the state of the British economy. But the Thatcher government was far more sophisticated than that.

Many of Thatcher's statements were derided at the time. However the idea that 'There Is No Alternative' has much resonance to us today, where there is a real absence of political differences, and any suggestion of optimism is met with extreme caution or accusations of naivety. One can hear the echo of Thatcher's statement that 'There is no such thing as society' in the ideas and practice of multiculturalism in which the concept of society as an homogenous entity is replaced by a wide variety of different groupings all clamouring for attention.

That is not to credit Thatcher or her government with a visionary outlook (though many liberal and old-fashioned lefty commentators today still see her, Banquo-like, at every gathering of two or more Tories). Those remarks were intended to strike at the heart of concepts that were central to left-wing thinking, and with the end of the Cold War, history seemed to endorse that view.

Anti-racist groups increasingly came to celebrate lifestyles. The annual Brixton carnivals were not always the multicultural love-ins we see today. Up until fairly recently the establishment were not comfortable with large gathering of black people, even within their communities, and it was not unusual for the carnival to end in a pitched battle between local people and the police. The tendency for many liberals and left-wingers was not to confront the racism of the state but to celebrate black identity, which, in itself is okay, but it tended to see racism as a moral issue rather than something that required a political challenge. Sometimes this way of thinking descended into pettiness. I recall telling a comrade that I wasn't too enamoured with reggae music, and was immediately cross-examined, not about my musical tastes but about my political commitments. It was a time when, if you didn't have a copy of Bob Marley's *Exodus* LP in your record collection you were one step away from become a supporter of the National Front.

Much of the discussion about, what became known as, identity politics, took place mainly in academia. The immediate triumphalism that greeted the fall of the Berlin Wall, within a decade had evaporated as it became obvious that Western democracy had not been defined on what it was, but on what it was not. This led to a questioning of the very values that underpinned Western democracy and not just by those who were traditionally seen as anti-capitalist.

The end of Stalinism exposed the exhaustion of much of the left-wing ideals but it also exposed the enervation of Western democracy. Historically the middle-classes played an ambiguous role in the struggle between capital and labour and any criticism of the system was directed at excesses of either class. So it was possible to be anti-trade unionist whilst being staunchly against big capital [as beautifully captured in the Ealing, 1959 film *I'm Alright Jack*]. What typified middle class thinking was its lack of vision of itself as a class. Middle-class thinking could always be defined by its muddle-headedness: nostalgia was at home with the latest gadgetry; condemnation of single parents welfare dependency sat comfortably with the professional wife collecting child benefit. In the years following the end of the Cold War this lack of certainty and vision began to creep in to the wider society and even the Enlightenment principles, that gave birth to modern democracy and had previously been taken for granted, were to be held up for questioning and even ridicule.

Furedi observes the way that our understanding of the word 'tolerance' has changed. In the introduction, under the heading 'What tolerance is not'[p.5] he effectively provides us with the definition of what tolerance *is*. But it is not just the popular understanding of the word 'tolerance' that has altered. For tolerance to exist there has to be an appreciation of the true meaning of 'freedom'. Tolerance can only be practiced in a society that values freedom, and freedom itself requires a tolerant society. Tolerance carries with it a proviso; the recognition that some people's lifestyles or actions may harm others. So, for example, a person who was quite content to live in squalor and dirt and presents an environmental health concern that would impinge on the quality of life of his neighbours. In such a case it would be quite reasonable for the neighbours to insist that the individual clean up their act.

Murder, theft, etc. are not acceptable within societies and the state deals with these actions and punishes the transgressor. These limitations on an individual's lifestyles and actions are rightly seen as reasonable restrictions on individual action. But the individual should be free to hold any belief and should be able to express their views either through speech or through a media (such as the press). It is this freedom that has little popular understanding because it is not seen as an *absolute*. It is quite common for certain ideologies to be censured or proscribed because they are not tolerated by the establishment. Tolerance should not mean an acceptance or respect of other lifestyles and "[f]ormal freedom does not lead to the . . . realization of an individual's desires" [p.19]. Tolerance provides the "precondition for the exercise of freedom, rather than a guarantee of its realization" [p.20].

In the past, society organised itself around its strengths; whether that meant its commitment to democracy and freedom or its ability to rule by brute force. Contemporary society seems to organise itself around the needs of its weakest members. So in Britain, for example, the last Labour government introduced a raft of legislation, much of it designed to outlaw behaviour that would previously be seen as a nuisance.

So, many rail services, after 'consultation with passengers', found that people disliked other passengers putting their feet up on the seats and so the behaviour was made into a punishable offence under railway by-laws. In 2007 courts saw hundreds of people prosecuted, and although the practice was widely condemned for wasting courts time, *Merseyrail* felt confident enough to ignore the objections [see Sunday Times, September 5, 2007].

The criminalisation of nuisance behaviour may strike some people as ludicrous. However if it is questioned the 'justification' is usually given that some people lack confidence to challenge individuals anti-social behaviour and so laws are made to protect their right not be offended, scared or inconvenienced. But democracy does not recognise such a right. Any society that values freedom and human dignity would recognise that individuals are quite capable of negotiating such obstacles and if someone lacked the confidence to ask another person to desist from their nuisance behaviour, well that's tough. Society should not be burdened by the inability of individuals to speak up for themselves.

Some commentators see tolerance as an out-dated concept and the fact that tolerance does not carry with it an affirmation of an individual's lifestyle, only a recognition that the individual should be free to pursue it, is seen as problematical in regard to the multiculturalist demand to respect other people's lifestyle. So racist views are not tolerated and are effectively outlawed, yet liberals see no contradiction between their own commitment to freedom and the censorship of such views. For racist, sexist or anti-gay views a grotesque reinterpretation of the idea of what constitutes harm to society is thought sufficient for their proscription. But as Furedi points out:

The tolerance of dissent and of opinions that are regarded as erroneous or offensive is motivated by the conviction that it is only when no belief is beyond question that insight into truth can be gained. [p.55]

We test our beliefs and understanding through positing them against views that run counter to our own. The 'harm principle' has become one of the most prevalent forms of state intrusion [see Chapter 5]. Its premise is the result of a debased view of humanity. Calls to censor offensive views are either seen as a protection of vulnerable groups within society (and the list of what constitutes a 'vulnerable group' is continually added to), or concern that the views may influence others into taking action. Whilst the former views people as so pathetic that they need protection from ideas, it also seems to see them as incapable of dealing with offensive remarks or literature and negates their individual understanding of how to deal with it. The latter plummets the same depths, sharing the same low opinion of mankind, viewing us as robots incapable of autonomous decision making.

But the approach results from a change in our understanding of what is meant by 'tolerance'. The classic model of tolerance, from Locke to Mill, was concerned with restriction of the state to interfere in individual privacy. Today we understand tolerance to mean the acceptance of the lifestyle of a certain demographic or group or culture. To be tolerant means only that we accept the existence of other lifestyles and respect the right of others to lead their lives differently from us, it does not mean that we have to respect those lifestyles, or even regard them as morally equal to our own practice.

As Furedi makes clear in this book, the contemporary view of tolerance affects life at the social and individual level, sometimes to the extent that it has become unclear where the dividing line is, such that criminalising 'hate speech' in society can lead to the hectoring of parents by the state and its agencies about how they should bring up their children. Whilst champions of such intervention will justify themselves on what appears to be grounds for concern, the reality is that the contemporary idea and practice of tolerance is really the practice of intolerance.

In one sense the contemporary approach can be seen as resulting from a society in crisis; one that is searching for its own meaning and *raison d'être*. But crisis does not adequately explain

the continual flow of assaults on freedom. It seems as if the confusion that Western societies face today results from the Establishment's inability to provide answers to even the most mundane issues.

The recent spate of riots in Britain provided us with a snapshot of the confused state of the establishment mind. Rioters were treated with the same understanding as a parent would give to their two-year-old child who had just kicked the family dog. At the same time, ordinary working class people who found themselves forced into protecting their lives and property were seen as potential fodder for the [extreme right](#). An unemployed boxer was elevated to Christ-like status. A week previously he had been asked what he thought the future held (for inner-city areas) and replied "There'll be riots" (See Guardian 13 August 2011. P7]. Presumably under the same criteria the pop group, The Kaiser Chiefs, will become his apostles. In the same paper, on the front page, after the appearance on BBC's

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programme of the renowned historian David Starkey, we read the headline: 'Shock as Starkey claims: the whites have become black'. Shock, normally suggests surprise, but shock was not aimed at

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's rather infantile provocation, but at the fact that Starkey made such comments. David Starkey is not one to shy away or hide his bigotry, so why the surprise? One is left with the feeling that the establishment is made up of shock junkies who, when there is nothing around to shock them, will manufacture outrage in order to get their fix.

On Tolerance: The Life Style Wars is Furedi's most important contribution to the debate, over the crisis that has gripped Western democracy, to date. It presents a clear argument, based on astute observation and a sharpness of debate, as to why we should not accept the continual calls to censor and police our lives.

Tolerance is the most important attribute of a democracy. It gets to the heart of what it means to be human. For this very reason it is vital that we reclaim the true meaning of the term. *On Tolerance: The Life Style Wars* is essential reading for those who value human autonomy and progress.