

The Amis-Eagleton controversy: The British literary elite and the “war on terror”

By Ann Talbot
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The novelist Martin Amis appeared in the *Guardian* on Saturday to rebut the charge of racism that novelist and screen writer Ronan Bennett levelled against him the previous week in the same paper. Amis denied being a racist, professed himself disgusted by Islamophobia and praised the “beautiful reality” of Britain’s multi-racial society.

Amis then makes a switchback twist and declares that the issue is not one of racism, but ideology. In a liberal democracy, he argues, creed or colour does not matter unless some of its citizens believe in Sharia or the Caliphate or carry out acts of terrorism. Then, he declares, “numbers start to matter.”

Amis then proceeds to claim that the indigenous populations of Italy and Spain are set to halve over the next 35 years and that “this entails certain consequences.”

His remarks have a definite historical resonance—one with a far longer and even more sinister pedigree than when Margaret Thatcher said that Britain was being “swamped by an alien culture” in 1979.

Amis’s *Guardian* article was the latest salvo in a dispute that began after literary theorist Professor Terry Eagleton of the University of Manchester took issue with remarks Amis made in an interview in the *Times* last year. Shortly after the transatlantic terror alert of that year, Amis was reported to have said:

“What can we do to raise the price of them doing this? There’s definite urge—don’t you have it?—to say, ‘The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.’ What sort of suffering? Not letting them travel. Deportation—further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they’re from the Middle East or from Pakistan ... Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children. They hate us for letting our children have sex and take drugs—well, they’ve got to stop their children killing people. It’s a huge dereliction on their part. I suppose they justify it on the grounds that they have suffered from state terrorism in the past, but I don’t think that’s wholly irrational. It’s their own past they’re pissed off about; their great decline. It’s also masculinity, isn’t it?” (Interview with Ginny Dougary, *Times*, September 9, 2006)

Eagleton likened these remarks to “the ramblings of a British National Party thug,” located them in the context of the “War on Terror” and grouped Amis with other liberals and one-time leftist intellectuals who have moved sharply to the right. One year on, and only after being challenged by Eagleton, Amis claims to have been misquoted. His denial carries little weight. If Dougary did so, then Amis has had plenty of time to demand a correction, but he did not. Moreover, his reported remarks are perfectly consistent with his written remarks on the subject.

Eagleton even made the error of ascribing the offending passage to an essay by Amis published at the same time as the interview. His elementary mistake only serves to underline the symmetry of views expressed in the *Times* interview and the 12,000 word essay, “The Age of Horrorism,” published in the *Observer*.

In it Amis wrote, “Until recently it was being said that what we are

confronted with, here, is ‘a civil war’ within Islam. That’s what all this was supposed to be: not a clash of civilisations or anything like that, but a civil war within Islam. Well, the civil war appears to be over. And Islamism won it.”

As far as Amis is concerned there is a clash of civilisations in which the enemy camp consists of all Moslems, who are equally tainted by the suicide bombings of Al Qaeda. They bear, according to Amis’s disjointed logic, a collective guilt for the crimes of their co-religionists.

He even reveals the context that gave rise to the words attributed to him in the *Times*, describing how he was held up at airport security for half an hour while his six-year-old daughter’s hand luggage was searched. He writes, “I wanted to say something like, ‘Even Islamists have not yet started to blow up their own families on aeroplanes. So please desist until they do. Oh yeah: and stick to people who look like they’re from the Middle East.’”

Amis has insisted that there is a clear distinction between Islamophobia and his own anti-Islamism, as there is also a distinction between Islam and Islamism. But his writings make clear he does not believe that such a distinction counts for very much in practice. Rather “The Age of Horrorism” offers a series of sweeping and entirely unfounded judgements about Islam in general.

He writes of “the extreme incuriosity of Islamic culture” which, he claims, was so resistant to Western influence that it refused to employ the wheel. This assertion is so bizarre that it ranks with the claims that the Nazis made about the Jews. The only Western influences to which the Islamic world was open, he then asserts, were those of Hitler and Stalin.

It would be painful to list the outstanding figures from Moslem backgrounds that have made contributions to world culture in answer to this filth. Nor would it be appropriate to refer to the many professionals on whom we rely for health care, legal advice and education to counter Amis’s assertions. And the caring neighbours, school friends and colleagues certainly have no place here.

Christopher Hitchens defended Amis by comparing him to Jonathan Swift and arguing that “the harshness Amis was canvassing was not in the least a recommendation, but rather an experiment in the limits of permissible thought.”

There is a truth to this assertion. But while Swift was testing the limits imposed on progressive thought by the conservative establishment, Amis is testing the limits once imposed on reactionary declamations within an academic and literary milieu previously known for its progressive liberalism. His interviews, essays and articles are pushing at the limits of a democratic ideology that has been shaped by the experience of the wars and revolutions of the twentieth century.

His methods and those of his supporters exemplify the cowardly way that large swathes of the liberal intelligentsia are making make their peace with the right. At one moment they lash out with a racist statement, the next they back off denying they ever said it, until emboldened by the support of their peers they attempt another attack. Feeling their way and

testing all the time just how far they will be permitted to go, they move inexorably to the right.

The publication of “The Age of Horrorism” by the *Observer* is not the first time that this nominally liberal newspaper—and its week-day sister publication, the *Guardian*—has sought to legitimise the anti-democratic measures introduced by the Labour government by whipping up Islamophobia and fears over immigration. We can trace this editorial policy back to the *Guardian*’s publication of a three-part essay by David Goodhart, which claimed that the welfare state was untenable in an ethnically mixed society with a large immigrant population. The extent to which both publications speak for a social layer was evident from the fact that no prominent figure criticised Amis when his remarks were first published.

It was only once Eagleton had the courage to break ranks that it became difficult for journalists who had remained silent to any longer avoid commenting on his racist views. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, writing in the *Independent*, categorised Amis as one “with the beasts pounding the back door, the Muslim-baiters and haters,” making the observation that such figures “these days are as likely to come from the Groucho and Garrick clubs as the nasty, secret venues used by Neo Fascists.”

The Groucho club is associated with the media and the Garrick club with the dramatic arts.

Equally tellingly, Amis responded with an attempt to invoke social solidarity, noting that only last summer, long after his remarks were published, he and Alibhai-Brown had enjoyed drinks together at the Cheltenham Literary Festival.

Amis and Alibhai-Brown began their careers on the *New Statesman*. Amis has gone from being the cynical young man playing with left-wing ideas we see in his autobiographical *Experience*—when he liked to refer to the family home as the “fascist mansion”—to a man of the right. It is a journey that his friend from the *New Statesman* days Christopher Hitchens has also made.

Alibhai-Brown’s admission that Amis’s views are prevalent amongst the British literary elite is an important one. Always a privileged group, members of the literati were once marked out by their educational and cultural attributes rather than their wealth. But increasingly its representatives have been drawn into the orbit of, or even absorbed into, the plutocratic layer that has benefited from the plundering of the welfare state and the pillaging of the world’s resources by a renewed wave of imperialism. Vast sums of money have accumulated in the hands of a tiny oligarchy, which now sets the standards for the rest of society. The measure of intellectual and literary success has become the extent to which writers and intellectuals can be distinguished from the mass of the population by their bank accounts and real estate portfolios. Amis’s hate-filled essay expresses the deepest social interests of this group, because it gives voice to the sharpening class polarisation that has taken place on a global scale.

To call the literary princeling Amis a racist as Eagleton did is regarded by his peers as tantamount to an act of *lèse majesté*. In lining up to defend him, the literary elite were revealing their own social and, let us be frank, economic interests. That was clear from the rapidity with which the controversy focused on an attack on Eagleton for breaking ranks and on the question of Marxism. John Sutherland, professor of Modern English Literature at University College London, denounced Eagleton for making a public stand against his fellow Manchester University lecturer Amis—who Sutherland insisted might threaten Amis’s career—so that he could sell more copies of “a Marxist primer” that was “arguably, outdated.”

Michael Henderson in the *Daily Telegraph* wrote, “Neither Amis, nor anybody else, needs lectures on tolerance from old-style Marxists.” In the *Observer*, Jasper Gerrard wrote, “Quite why we still employ academics whose main qualification is their Marxism is a mystery.”

Amis himself condemned Eagleton in the *Financial Times* as “a marooned ideologue who can’t get out of bed in the morning without guidance from God and Karl Marx. This makes him very unstaunch in the struggle against Islamism because part of him is a believer.”

Here we see something of the deeper significance of this dispute. It is an attack on the accumulated social consciousness of centuries that have been illuminated by the intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment and which culminated in Marxism and the great struggles of the working class for social equality. Amis and his defenders are guilty of an attempt to eradicate all that is humane and progressive in the Western intellectual tradition so that an eviscerated caricature can be held up as something that must be defended—by force if necessary—against the barbarism that supposedly emanates from the East and is embodied in Islamism.

Eagleton is no Marxist, but the fact that he refers favourably to Marx in his lectures and books is enough to condemn him in the eyes of Amis and his friends. The campaign they have launched is a considered attempt to outlaw Marxism and all progressive thought from the universities and wider intellectual circles. An association with Marxism, it appears, renders an internationally known academic unsuitable for employment in a university. Hence Sutherland closing his October 4 comment in the *Guardian* by asking, “Is Eagleton too big a beast on campus to be reprimanded for uncollegial conduct—if that is felt necessary by the university authorities? Or perhaps they agree with their professor of cultural theory.”

In giving Eagleton a kicking, the British literary elite are sending a message to younger and less well-established academics, to aspiring writers and to students that Marxism is not acceptable and that they had better adopt the same degenerate stance as Amis if they expect to be published, get promoted or be awarded any grade above a gamma minus.

The full extent of Amis’s project is clear when one considers the trajectory of his development from his days as literary editor of the reformist *New Statesman* to the publication of *Koba the Dread* in 2002. *Koba* purported to be an examination of the phenomenon of Stalinism.

There is a place for the skills of a novelist in such a project. It might even be argued that only novelists can provide us with the textural quality of history and that their work is as necessary as that of the historian to our understanding of the past. The ability of the novelist to reveal the emotional content of social relations is a skill particular to their craft that depends upon the development of their own subjective faculties and the linguistic technique with which to express their vision. That subjectivity which is so essential to their work demands, however, a basis in objectivity. A novel without that objective basis provides a display of technique alone. It may flash before us the images of a lurid fantasy, but the emotional response it elicits is akin to the way a commercial disturbs our emotions in order to deflect our critical faculties.

Koba has all the appearance of an adolescent, ill-informed, derivative and emotionally immature work although it is written by a man nearer 60 than 16. The appearance does not lie. In essence that is what the book is. Yet those negative qualities have been harnessed in a project as sophisticated as a piece of advertising. The product that Amis is selling us is the conception that Stalinism was the inevitable and necessary outcome of Marxism, that Stalin was the heir of Lenin and Trotsky and that the Soviet Union was the equivalent of Nazi Germany.

The aim of culture is to raise us to a truly human level, but a novel without objectivity degrades our humanity. Amis devotes page after page to the accounts of survivors of Stalin’s terror, to descriptions of the interrogations, the tortures and the camps. Yet there is no light of humanity in his account. He examines the monstrous crimes of Stalinism as though he were poking a dead cat with a stick. We emerge from the experience of reading with no sense of why these horrors happened or how they might have been prevented. Lenin and Trotsky, we are told,

created a police state for Stalin's use. But if that was the case, why was it necessary for Stalin to murder Trotsky and any one associated with him?

Trotsky, despite the title of the book which would lead a reader to suppose that it was about Stalin, emerges as the real subject of the *Koba the Dread*. Amis cannot help himself spitting venom on the page every time he writes the name. "Trotsky was never a contender for the leadership," he writes. "In that struggle he was a mere poseur (reading French novels during meetings of the Central Committee): a Congress election result of 1921 put Trotsky tenth (and he didn't come tenth because he was more humane). More basically Trotsky was a murdering bastard and a fucking liar. And he did it with gusto. He was a nun-killer—they all were."

Amis has asserted that the British left's "rampant" affinity with Hezbollah and hostility to Israel is the only real expression of racism—Anti-Semitism. It is revealing then that when he discusses the murder of Trotsky and his family he cannot prevent himself from using the name Bronstein—A name that Trotsky never used and by which his children, who took their mother's name, were never known, but which was assiduously promulgated by Stalin when he wanted to cultivate an anti-Semitic hatred of Trotsky. Amis unwittingly reveals that at the heart of the Zionism he has espoused sits a deep revulsion towards a particular layer of Jewish intellectuals and workers whose cultivated and progressive ideas both Stalin and Hitler wanted to eradicate from the heart of European culture.

For Amis, the invasion of Iraq was a mistake. But whereas he has an aesthetic aversion to Bush, he dreads an American defeat. He fears that the "coalition adventure has given the enemy a *casus belli* that will burn for a generation." His fear makes him willing to sign up for the war against terror and urges him to recruit others to the cause. His books draw on the ideologues of neo-conservatism and White House advisers such as Bernard Lewis. Transmuted through his books, views that would be abhorrent to *Guardian* readers are repackaged to become acceptable in literary circles that would despise Bush and his Christian fundamentalism.

Amis is one of the darlings of the British literary establishment, rarely out of the quality papers since he published his first novel at the age of 24 and long expected to fulfil the literary promise expected of Kingsley Amis's son. His prominence has made him a suitable figure to engineer a shift in the social consciousness of wider layers of educated people who look to novelists and journalists as a source of cultural guidance. We are witnessing a concerted effort to make the "War on Terror" respectable and to create an acceptable face for neo-imperialism in the Middle East.

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