NOTE OF THE MEETING OF THE CORE COSTS CLUB HELD AT THE BARING FOUNDATION ON 14th FEBRUARY 2007

INTERCULTURALISM

Janet Lewis-Jones (Baring Foundation trustee) welcomed 60 participants and hoped that the afternoon's discussions would help the Foundation to take forward plans for promoting interculturalism.

Ranjit Sondhi, Baring Foundation trustee

Ranjit encouraged people not to groan at the invention of another 'ism'. He described his experience of setting up the Asian Resource Centre in Birmingham in the late 1970s. Amongst the project's aims was to create a sense of ethnic pride. Until now, society has been fascinated by what is different about people, not the same. The question is how we navigate that difference. This has previously been considered through the idea of multiculturalism. This can be about equality of opportunity, equality of access, equality of outcomes. It's also about being sensitive to the specific needs of different cultural communities. Like this, it sounds like an idea that is worth buying into and it has saved us from the flattening of total assimilation. But commentators and academics now talk about multiculturalism as an idea that has outlived its usefulness. It focuses on containing and managing difference. It does not help cultures to understand each other but to live in splendid isolation, where groups emphasise their differences in order to be listened to.

This does not tackle social inequality. Left to itself it traps people within ethnic boundaries, with a strict vocabulary and code of behaviour speaking only for the minorities, alienating itself from the culture of the white working classes and driving them into the arms of extremists. Others have argued that the future lies not in integrating new settlers into British society but to fundamentally reappraising what we understand British society to be.

We need to reflect minority and majority cultural identities but also to go beyond them. We need a climate in which the traditional and the contemporary are respected so that specific ethnic identities will be neither obliterated nor preserved as fixed and unchanging forever. We have to provide an intercultural space – both mental and physical – in which cultures can meet and mix to explore the uncharted space between polar opposites; the points of similarity.

Innovation that happens when cultures meet and mix like this should be seen as a resource rather than a problem that needs to be corrected. Recognising hybrid, multi-layered identities is a positive thing which means that diversity can be about enabling everybody to succeed rather than about special treatment

for specific groups defined by ethnicity alone. Ziauddin Sardar argues that "cultures can be seen not just in terms of difference but also in terms of common ground."

Both cohesion and diversity are important, neither is sufficient on its own nor should be secured at the expense of the other. Diversity is important because any attempt to dismantle it provokes suspicion and fragmentation and denies people their culture. Diversity widens the range of moral sympathy and imagination, and encourages critical self-reflection. Cohesion is important because without unity there is no sense of common purpose, no regulation and resolution of conflicts, no shared national identity and an unwillingness to accept compromises for the sake of the greater good.

There are significant barriers to participation: (i) The experience of racism – a complex interplay of skin colour, class, culture, language and religion (ii) the promotion of ethnicism by self-styled community leaders where ethnicity becomes the one difference that makes all the difference.

People worry that interculturalism is an attack on tradition. In fact it has a deep respect for tradition but is not steeped in it. It recognises our identities as contingent and not doomed to survive forever. It is a matter not just of intellectual fascination but of great practical urgency. So how can it be defined?

> "The intercultural approach goes beyond equal opportunities and respect for existing cultural differences to the pluralistic transformation of public space, institutions and civic culture. It does not recognise cultural boundaries as fixed but in a state of flux and remaking. An intercultural approach aims to facilitate dialogue, exchange and reciprocal understanding between people of different backgrounds" *Comedia 2006*

Response by Michelynn Lafleche, Runnymede Trust

Interculturalism is not a new thing. In 1997 Michelynn was involved in anti-racism work in Europe during European Year against Racism. (Note that 2008 will be European Year of Intercultural Dialogue). 1997, after many years of campaigning, led to the Race Directive and Employment Directive. This had monumental legislative impact, but we are only now seeing those laws put into place in the UK.

In 1997, the term 'intercultural relations' was used by many other EU member states to refer to what we in the UK called 'race relations'. The definitions were simplistic expectations of the potential for inter-group contact to solve racial prejudice. And this usually meant contact between a homogenous majority group (culture associated with nation) and homogenous minority groups.

Earlier roots of interculturalism can be found in 1930s socio-linguistics, Gordon Allport's 1954 book *The Nature of Prejudice* and in contact theory. Despite 80 years of theory, prejudice is still a pervasive feature of our society.

The call for greater, mutual understanding between groups is persuasive but in the process of interaction, we cannot be told to avoid those things which might insult or alarm a person. If so, we risk avoiding those things that underpin tension and conflict between communities. Also we cannot assume that there are 'neutral' territories. All public space is political and this affects the ways in which we are able to / we are willing to engage.

Wikipedia defines 'intercultural competence' as the ability of successful communication with people of other cultures… the bases are emotional competence, together with intercultural sensitivity.' An 'interculturally competent' person 'captures and understands, in interaction with people from foreign cultures, their specific concepts in perception, thinking, feeling and acting. Earlier experiences are considered, free from prejudices… there is a motivation to continue learning.' It goes on to list a range of cultural differences, for example, the sign 'thumbs up' can be understood in different parts of the world to represent 'everything's ok' or an indecent sexual sign. These definitions of intercultural competence, like those of the late 1990s, sound fine but there was not one mention of racism, discrimination, disadvantage, deprivation, exclusion or powerlessness.

In diverse communities changing tensions will always exist. In that reality cohesion relies on the ability of people living there to manage the situations not erase them. Some form of intercultural knowledge will help towards this. But, just as importantly, where racialised tensions exist at neighbourhood level it is underpinned by a lack of / competition for material resources (housing, employment, education and health care). This disadvantage and discrimination has to be both acknowledged and addressed explicitly.

Interculturalism perhaps reflects a shift from the concept of group rights to individual rights, leading from an 'equalities' culture to a 'human rights' culture.   There are flaws in this: (i) interculturalism remains dependent on a social concept of groups. However, individuals remain in and defined by group associations, whether they choose to or not. (ii) We do not have an 'equalities' culture here – yes in rhetoric and policy but not in practice. Is there even a commitment? We are ten years on from those 1997 Directives, and in their implementation we are challenged about to the need for 'more' anti-discrimination laws. We have businesses celebrating diversity in their advertising (high street bank advert) and others making the business case for racial, age, sexual orientation and religious discrimination. And we are far from a human rights culture in the UK as well.

But don't throw out the concept of interculturality. It has a value but only as part of an approach that: recognises the continued importance of group solidarity; clearly articulates its connection and commitment to social and racial justice; and explicitly understands and challenges structural and material disadvantage and discrimination. The biggest challenge for the Baring Foundation in devising a programme will be to find a way to tackle powerlessness, disadvantage and discrimination through the lens of culture.

Discussion / questions

- This is about how people relate to each other. In psychotherapy the starting point with a client is acceptance, without this no conversation starts and nothing happens.
- We should be wary of attacking multiculturalism at a time when there is pressure on people to return to notions of assimilation. There IS a problem with multi-culturalism – if we challenge honour killings or female genital mutilation we are told these are cultural issues. There is an overarching diminishing of human rights, without which neither multiculturalism nor interculturalism will work.
- We need to engage people in a critical analysis of their own traditions. You can't beat your wife and hide behind cultural and theological permissions. Cultural relativism or universal human rights?
- People have multiple identities – reminded of *My Beautiful Laundrette* – Indian, gay, lawyer. Which identity is emphasised depends. If an emphasis is put on culture, it assumes this is the most important and denies the others.
- How much of this depends on what you are brought up with? We can find ourselves suddenly instinctively reacting in ways that we hadn't understood. We can get over them but not simply or without personal critical analysis.

Presentations

Fabio Santos and Paul Brett, Project Pharkama (PP)

PP is an international youth arts organisation which grew out of cultural exchanges between South Africa and the UK. It now involves people from all over the world, using various art forms for people to tell their own stories. **Abdoul Diallo, Alpha Thiam, Fienga De Massi, Noel Mapianda, and Osman Bah** have all been involved with PP's work and spoke about their experience of working with people from other cultures and what they had gained from it: increased confidence, a sense of welcome, friendship, new skills, good food, new ambitions, a better ability to think for themselves, satisfaction, enjoyment at entertaining others, team skills, a belief that everyone has something to give, a belief that everyone can find their own place no matter where they are from, a

family, inspiration, a shared future, insight into personal history, a sense of what we have in common with each other, a sense of unity with one set of rules to follow: Brilliant expressions of what interculturalism can achieve! Interculturalism can feel complicated, but the message is just get on with it.

Ute Navidi, London Play

Ute speaks from a background of being an immigrant, with a partner who is a refugee, a Ph.D. in racism and immigration and as a practitioner campaigning for a London where all children can play. Over five years ago research by London Play revealed that children from different ethnic backgrounds were 'playing in parallel.' The report made 40 recommendations on how to make play more inclusive. The Commission for Racial Equality recently followed up this research, uncovering shocking findings: BME play workers were frightened to talk and wanted guarantee of anonymity; people said they were actively discouraged from discussing issues of racism with white colleagues at work. London Play is going to work with Black Training and Enterprise Group (BTEG) on this. So, in discussions on interculturalism there is a concern that racism is not considered. Racism has evolved from crass, proud racism of the 1960s and 1970s. It is more 'polite' and therefore difficult to identify and tackle.

John Martin, Pan Intercultural Arts (PIA)

Having looked at interculturalism for 21 years, John was delighted and perplexed to see it as a topic for discussion. In the arts field, the imposition of multiculturalism did not allow for dialogue. Interculturalism is a space for dialogue and exchange BUT what comes out of this space? What is decided? It's not enough to talk. It has to create something new, like two seeds cross pollinating or two musicians from different traditions playing together and creating something unheard before or John's Mum, previously unaware of the garlic, now using world spices not to recreate dishes exactly but to create something new and right for her taste. There is both a process and a product.

PIA was established to create theatre that reflected life outside (we don't have buses for Africans and Asians, so why African theatre for African audiences or Asian theatre for Asian audiences) and to use this coming together to create a model of how life should be. Arts can help to tackle tension, for example a project PIA ran in Kings Cross for Camden Council. The Council had tried sports, equalities groups etc. Arts were the last resort, but it worked. Lots of work with refugees is mono-cultural. PIA did a project with Medical Victims of Torture where refugees from many different backgrounds, but with the common experience of torture, came together and developed confidence and new understanding. Stratford Theatre Royal in east London says 45% of its audience

aged under-25 is mixed race. What is the culture of a mixed race person? Multiculturalism has no answer for that. Interculturalism is more chaotic and hybrid. John is author of *The Intercultural Performance Handbook*.

Discussion / questions

- There are different interpretations of interculturalism. Baring Foundation will have to work hard to achieve a programme that supports political visions.
- Perhaps the distance between interculturalism and multiculturalism is not so far; developing from multicultural boxes to intercultural processes. The trouble is from a position of personal insecurity how to decide whether to stay in tradition or give it up completely where nothing matters.
- Multiculturalism is a precious word. I don't see it inevitably encourages groups to turn in on themselves. Groups have soft edges. The way it is talked about in the media, in the context of terrorism, makes problems worse.
- There has been a big arts focus so far, and there are a very small number of people using the arts. How does this relate to housing and education?
- Interculturalism must be able to contribute to the major determinants of quality of life – health, housing and education. We need intercultural projects in GP surgeries, A&E waiting rooms. The arts are well ahead.
- Explicitly including issues of racism and power are how to take this work outside the arts fields – South Africa's Rainbow Nation began with an understanding of power. You can't think about the high number of young black men in prison in the UK without considering racism.
- We have to distinguish between individual and collective experience – it's possible to have a black friend and be racist. We must change the wider institutions – media, business – that shape our deeper beliefs.
- You can't force people into changing attitudes. You have to reach them and inspire some sort of revelation.
- We must not forget the international dimension e.g. the way immigration is defined as a 'problem.'
- We must do anti-racism differently so that it is not about making white people feel guilty about themselves.

David Cutler thanked everyone for their thoughts and advice. The Foundation must not do this work without reference to power, racism and equality. Trustees will consider the Foundation's contribution to this complex area over the next few months and will be greatly helped by this discussion.

**The next meeting of the Core Costs Club on
10th October 2007 will be on Tackling Climate Change**