

# *The Fall-Out: How a Guilty Liberal Lost His Innocence*

by Andrew Anthony, Jonathan Cape, 2007, 311 pp.

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## **Introduction**

To speak very generally, there are two kinds of left apostate: there are those who break with the left in order to move elsewhere (usually to the right, though not always) and there are those who repudiate certain beliefs or modes of thinking within the left in order to strengthen other competing traditions within the left, which they see as more authentic and valuable. Among the former, one can instance Norman Podhoretz, David Horowitz, Paul Johnson and, more recently, Christopher Hitchens. Among the latter, Rosa Luxemburg, Victor Serge, Arthur Koestler, C.L.R. James, and George Orwell are prominent. Since the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, the ranks of this latter group have swelled markedly. In America, Michael Walzer, Paul Berman and Mitchell Cohen, among others, spoke out against the left's reluctance or refusal to properly confront the menace of global Islamism, while in Britain a similar charge was spearheaded by, most prominently, David Aaronovitch, Norman Geras and Nick Cohen. Then, in April 2006, The Euston Manifesto was launched [1]. Authored by Geras and Alan Johnson, the Manifesto declared a commitment to democratic, egalitarian, humane, and libertarian values; registered its opposition to all forms of terrorism, political tyranny, ideological dogma, racist sentiment and cultural bigotry; reaffirmed the principle of a responsibility to protect the innocent from grave human rights violations; and expressed a profound impatience with elements of the left that have abandoned, or shown contempt for, the best aspirations of the progressive and democratic tradition. The appearance of the Manifesto, and the mass of interest it generated, seems to have been a galvanizing moment.

Later that year, the novelist Martin Amis joined the fray, and sought to challenge the assumption, widely shared among liberals and leftists of all stripes, that Islamic suicide mass-murder is a product of, or an 'understandable' resistance to, radical oppression. Drawing on the work of Berman, Amis (2006) argued that not all terrible deeds are rationally explicable, and urged western liberals to 'move on' – to 'stop believing in the purity, and the sanity, of the underdog,' and to 'start believing in a cult of death, and in an enemy that wants its war to last for ever.' Then, directly

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on the heels of Amis's intervention, came Nick Cohen's *What's Left: How Liberals Lost Their Way*. Cohen's central thesis was that in recent years the liberal-left has disgraced itself by excusing, or making common cause with, movements of the far right – as long as they are anti-western. With the publication of *The Fall-Out: How a Guilty Liberal Lost His Innocence*, Andrew Anthony, the extraordinarily gifted British journalist, has recruited himself to this small, but increasingly visible, group of left apostates. It is to their great benefit that he has done so.

As he explains in the opening chapter, Anthony, in September 2001, was just a few months into his fortieth year, had recently become a father, had acquired 'a growing sense of rootedness' (p. 6) and was generally poised to settle into English middle-class, middle-age life. He was also a signed-up member of the liberal-left, and could boast a history of determined political commitment among the comrades: he was a veteran of CND anti-cruise missile marches in the 1980s, had been an active supporter of the trade union movement throughout its fiercest battles during that same decade, and had even spent time in Nicaragua defending the Sandinista cause against the might of American imperialism. At the core of Anthony's ideological world-view were the following assumptions: that 'all social ills stemmed from inequality and racism'; that 'crime was solely a function of poverty'; that 'Israel was the source of most of the troubles in the Middle East'; that 'America was always the bad guy'; and that western civilization was a brilliant idea, but not, alas, a reality (p. 19, 9). Anthony writes that these assumptions were 'non-negotiables for any right-thinking decent person,' and that, more importantly, they had become definitive of who he was, of his sense of self (p. 19). *The Fall-Out*, a consistently fascinating, lucid and intelligent political memoir, is the story of Anthony's gradual disillusionment with these 'non-negotiables.' It is also a brave exercise in rational self-criticism, and an effort to reassert the truly progressive and democratic traditions of the liberal-left.

Anthony's method in *The Fall-Out* is to explore a wide range of subjects – Islamist terror, communism, multiculturalism, race, crime, so-called 'Islamophobia,' the Iraq war, the vilification of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the idiocies of Michael Moore, and Islamic hypersensitivity – in order to think about one big subject: namely, the fate or soul of the western liberal-left. What does, or should, it mean to belong to this particular spectrum of thought and feeling at the beginning of the 21st century? *The Fall-Out* is a sustained and instructive answer to that question.

Anthony's thesis can be summarized as follows: the western liberal-left is no longer a progressive force, and has radically lost touch with its democratic and internationalist ideals. Anthony's explanation for this development is that left-liberals are so mired in bourgeois guilt and cynicism that they lack the necessary strength of will (or in Christopher Hitchens's phrase, the 'testicular fortitude') not only to criticize non-western Others, however tyrannical or fascistic, but also to firmly defend their own ideals. Against this mentality, Anthony sketches out a vision of the liberal-left that is democratic, tolerant, internationalist, egalitarian, and civic-minded – and one that isn't remotely afraid of making some large claims for itself. In a recent interview for Channel 4 News, [2] Martin Amis recorded his dismay, if not surprise, at how many of the audience of a literary event at which he was speaking, [3] felt unable, at his request, to register their sense of moral superiority over the Taliban (only a third of the audience thought that they were superior). Amis then went on to declare that he did indeed feel superior to the beheaders of infidels, the stoners of women and the persecutors of gays. In *The Fall-Out*, Anthony similarly testifies to his dismay at the laxity of the liberal-left's response to reactionary Islam, and exerts a great deal of energy in showing why Amis's sense of moral superiority is right.

Thus, Anthony is what liberal academics would scornfully call an 'absolutist' or a 'reductionist,' since not only is he committed to a rationalist defense of Enlightenment values; he also believes, in the tradition of Marx and the Frankfurt School, that truth is an essential tool for unmasking relations of domination and exploitation. To put this in less grandiose terms, Anthony believes that some principles – like freedom of expression or gender equality – are simply universal and must be defended without compromise. He also believes, furthermore, that there is such a thing as 'truth,' and that it can be wielded at the expense of those who threaten or undermine universal values. This clearly places him at a vast distance from the world of academe and the *bien pensants*, where Foucauldian perspectivism and Rortyan anti-universalism tend to predominate. From this rarefied setting, Anthony's moral certitude and epistemological naturalism will seem embarrassingly atavistic or 'inappropriate.'

Yet for all his moral certainty, Anthony lacks the self-righteousness and bombast that afflicts some of his fellow travellers in left apostasy. Although he is an enthusiastic and unapologetic defender of liberal democracy, he is acutely aware of its defects and deformations. Nor does he assail his errant comrades for betraying the left or for 'objectively' supporting fascism and tyranny. Hitchens (2003) writes 'that

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quarrels on the left have a tendency to become miniature treason trials, replete with all kinds of denunciation,' but Anthony rarely reverts to the ad hominem, which can scarcely be said of his critics (he has been accused, among other things, of being a foot-soldier for the British National Party – a racist thug, in other words [4]).

### September 11 and Islamism

To properly understand Anthony's argument in *The Fall-Out*, it is necessary to place it within the broader political context in which it emerged and to which it addresses itself. That context, as Anthony himself makes exhaustively clear, is 9/11, the global surge in Islamism and Islamist terror since then, and the liberal-left's response to these two things.

This is Norman Geras (2003):

On Sept. 11, 2001, there was, in the U.S., a massacre of innocents. There's no other acceptable way of putting this: some 3,000 people (and, as anyone can figure, it could have been many more) struck down by an act of mass murder without any possible justification, an act of gross moral criminality...What was the left's response?...The response on the part of much of it was excuse and apologia.

Does Geras exaggerate? Is he attacking men and women of straw? Let's see. Susan Sontag (2001) demanded to know, 'Where is the acknowledgment that this was not a "cowardly" attack on "civilization" or "liberty" or "humanity" or "the free world" but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions?'; Noam Chomsky (2003: 13) reflected that it was 'a terrible atrocity, but unless you're in Europe or the United States or Japan, I guess, you know it's nothing new'; [5] Gore Vidal (2002: 22-41, 45) produced a 20-page chart of US imperial aggression, in an effort to understand 'why Osama struck at us from abroad in the name of 1 billion Muslims.' Howard Zinn (2001) drew attention to 'the resentment all over the world felt by people who have been the victims of American military action – in Vietnam, in Latin America, in Iraq'; Alexander Cockburn (2001) brooded on Madeleine Albright's appalling suggestion that the death of half a million Iraqi children was a just price for the 'containment' of the Saddam Hussein regime; Charles Glass (2001) highlighted US crimes against Libya, Iraq, Lebanon, Somalia and Palestine; Fredric Jameson (2001) referenced 'the wholesale massacres of the Left systematically encouraged

and directed by the Americans'; and Alan Singer (2002) mentioned the US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In other words, the response of leading left-liberal intellectuals to the single most devastating terrorist attack in history was to change the subject or to blame not the actual perpetrators, but the 'real' culprit: America. Andrew Arato (2002:48, emphases in original) mockingly renders the response as follows: 'Yes, it was terrible what happened downtown...*but* US foreign policy (or the capitalist world economy, take your pick) is (ultimately) responsible. Do not therefore call the perpetrators terrorists; they are the last ones speaking in the name of the victims, hoping to call the beneficiaries to account. Call those who respond the aggressors, because it is they who continue aggression against the wretched of the earth.'

Far from being confined to a small section of the American intellectual left, these reactions – these evasions and 'contextualizations' – were actually widespread across mainstream liberal-left opinion in the aftermath of 9/11.

Like Geras, Anthony was disappointed and demoralized by both the reductive simplicity and glacial callousness of these responses. In particular, he cites (p. 10) a particularly mean and odious article by the Guardian journalist Seumas Milne (2001). This is what Milne had to say, on September 13, 2001: 'Nearly two days after the horrific suicide attacks on civilian workers in New York and Washington, it has become painfully clear that most Americans simply don't get it...Shock, rage and grief there has been aplenty. But any glimmer of recognition of why people might have been driven to carry out such atrocities, sacrificing their own lives in the process – or why the United States is hated with such bitterness, not only in Arab and Muslim countries, but across the developing world – seems almost entirely absent.' Anthony points out that to get his piece published on the 13th, Milne would have needed to have completed it by no later than 7pm on the 12th, and that it would be fair to assume that he would have begun writing it, at the latest, at around 2pm – 9am, New York time. Anthony acidly remarks: 'That left the Americans a whole twenty-four hours to absorb the shock, deal with the grief and then move on to some cold, hard self-criticism. And they flunked it.' (p. 11)

Anthony says that Milne's article was a conspicuous example of (as Todd Gitlin [2002] would put it) the 'blame America first' attitude that could be heard in plenty of sophisticated circles. But it wasn't the earliest: that prize, for Anthony, goes to the egregious George Galloway, still then a British Labour Member of Parliament. Galloway stated, not entirely without approval, that many people

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around the world ‘will consider the US to have had to swallow some of their own medicine’ (cited on p. 11). To which, Anthony responds: ‘It could not have been easy to have mastered that kind of dispassionate observation as scenes of the most visceral despair were being screened live on television, but Gorgeous George rose, or sank, to the occasion.’ (*Ibid*)

Surveying the 4 October issue of *The London Review of Books*, which featured the ruminations of 29 intellectuals, Glass and Jameson among them, on the meaning and implications of 9/11, Anthony observes that it dawned on him that ‘what all these reactions had in common’ was ‘not complexity’ or nuance, but rank ‘simplicity’: ‘For all of them, this was an issue of the powerless striking back at the powerful, the oppressed against the oppressor, the rebels against the imperialists’ (p. 12). Allied to this, Anthony writes, was their staggering lack of curiosity about ‘what kind of power the powerless wanted to assume, or over whom they wanted to exercise it, and no one thought to ask by what authority these suicidal killers had been designated the voice of the oppressed’ (*Ibid*).

9/11, Anthony confesses, was a hinge-moment in his political trajectory. What it did was to force him to reflect on the importance and fragility of the western liberal democratic polity, and gave him a stinging awareness of the existence, and terrifying murderous ferocity, of those who want to destroy it, and to usher in a system of governance infinitely worse. In particular, it alerted him to a profound lacuna within the world-view of the liberal-left: an inability to imagine, or to properly come to terms with, the existence of evil or horrific violence unrelated to the dynamics of global capitalism. For Anthony, 9/11 marked the beginning of a period of systematic political self-reassessment. ‘In a sense,’ he says, ‘11 September was the ultimate mugging, a murderous assertion of a new reality, or rather a reality that already existed but which we preferred not to see’ (p. 19).

Although he doesn’t directly acknowledge them, Anthony’s observations on 9/11 owe a heavy debt to those of Christopher Hitchens. Speaking of his initial emotional response to the attack on the World Trade Center, Anthony remarks:

Clearly some basic moral calculations needed to be performed. Starting with which vision of the world represented more closely my own liberal outlook. The cosmopolitan city of New York, a multiracial city of opportunity, a town where anyone on earth could arrive and thrive, exuberant, cultured, diverse, a place I had visited and loved for its liberty and energy and excitement? Or

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the people who attacked it, those arid minds who wanted to remove women from sight, kill homosexuals, banish music, destroy art, the demolishers of the Bamiyan Buddhas who aimed to terrorize everyone they could into submission to the will of their vengeful God. It was, as they say, a no-brainer, or should have been. (pp. 9-10)

Now, this is what Hitchens had to say about 9/11 in an interview with Harry Kreisler in April 2002:

Never mind what the Taliban and al-Qaeda forces want to do to you, why don't you just take a look at what they've done to the societies they can influence...The abjection of women and of the sexual instinct, another unfailing sign of the totalitarian impulse. The destruction of all art and culture and music, and the very rapid emiseration of everyone...I personally find that when there's a confrontation between everything I love – scientific inquiry, reason, cosmopolitanism, secularism, emancipation of women (and those are the things I love, by the way) – and everything I hate – Stone Age fascism, religious bullshit, and so on – it's a no-brainer. I know exactly which side I'm on, and I knew right away. [6]

And compare, if you will, this recollection of Anthony's –

I was amazed how these celebrated thinkers [the left intellectuals cited above] appeared to take in their stride a mass homicide that no one foresaw. The scale of the suffering, the innocence of the victims, and the aims of the perpetrators barely seemed to register in many of the comments. Was this a sign of shock or complacency? Or was it something else, a kind of atrophying of moral faculties, brought on by prolonged use of fixed ideas, that prevented the sufferer from recognizing a new paradigm when it arrived, no matter how spectacular its announcement? Marx referred to something similar when he noted how even revolutionaries turn reflexively to the past 'in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.' (p. 13)

– with the following testimony from Hitchens, penned in December 2001:

Having paged through the combined reactions of Sontag, Noam Chomsky, and many others, I am put very much in mind of something from the opening

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of Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. It's not the sentence about the historical relation between tragedy and farce. It's the observation that when people are learning a new language, they habitually translate it back into the one they already know. This work of self-reassurance and of hectic, hasty assimilation to the familiar is most marked in the case of Chomsky, whose prose now manifests that symptom first captured in, I recall, words by Dr. Charcot – 'le beau calme de l'hysterique.' For Chomsky, everything these days is a 'truism,' for him it verges on the platitudinous to be obliged to state, once again for those who may have missed it, that the September 11 crime is a mere bagatelle when set beside the offenses of the Empire. From this it's not a very big step to the conclusion that we must change the subject, and change it at once, to Palestine or East Timor or Angola or Iraq. All radical polemic may now proceed as it did before the rude interruption. (Hitchens 2001)

Anthony's 9/11 analysis also echoes the work of other prominent left apostates too, again unacknowledged. For example, one can discern the shadow of Michael Walzer, who, in an article published in *Dissent* in spring 2002, castigated the left both for its 'failure to register the horror of the [9/11] attack,' and for its unthinking reliance on the same old script:

Any group that attacks the imperial power must be a representative of the oppressed, and its agenda must be the agenda of the left. It isn't necessary to listen to its spokesmen. What else can they want except...the redistribution of resources across the globe, the withdrawal of American soldiers from wherever they are, the closing down of aid programs for repressive governments, the end of the blockade of Iraq, and the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel? (Walzer 2002)

One can also detect in Anthony's analysis the influence of Geras, who has written at length about the moral and intellectual inadequacies of the left's response to 9/11: 'The same thin categories that had been deployed in one conflict after another during a decade and more were instantly pressed into service. Imperialism and blowback – that was pretty much all one needed to understand what had befallen the citizens of Manhattan, the passengers on the planes, and the workers at the Pentagon.' (Geras 2005) Armed with their 'frozen' concepts and assumptions, wrote Geras (*Ibid*), 'many on the left shielded themselves from realities they didn't want to see or to assign their proper weight.'



Anthony's observations on 9/11 and Islamism, then, strike some familiar notes, although that unequivocally isn't to say that they lack originality or are redundant. On the contrary, one of the most impressive features of *The Fall-Out* is the clarity and forensic acuity with which it extends and builds upon the work of the anti-anti-imperialist left.

#### Double-Standards

Anthony is especially good at exposing the double-standards that structure the discourse of many left-liberals, and is scathing of a liberal-left that exhibits a radical over-sensitivity to the crimes and injustices of western governments, but which evades or excuses those of non-western governments or actors. Thus he writes of his fellow *brigadistas* in Nicaragua that they 'would happily call for the whole of the British establishment to be held to account over a single policeman's or soldier's actions, yet they showed no curiosity about the injustices committed in the name of a party-mobilized state' (p. 74). Of Noam Chomsky, a relentless critic of US foreign policy and the 'world's greatest public intellectual,' [7] he observes that he 'chastised those who claimed a genocide was underway in Cambodia and praised a book written by George Hildebrand and Gareth Porter that was a shameless defence of Pol Pot's homicidal regime' (p. 98). He notices a similar selectivity of moral accounting among those liberals and leftists who condemn white, anti-Semitic nationalists, but who remain reticent about virulently anti-Semitic Muslim groups (p. 190); among those who seethe with outrage over Israeli war crimes against Palestinians, but who make little mention of, or else try to downgrade, Saddam Hussein's crimes against humanity (p. 213-14); and among those who excuse the murderous actions of Islamists, but who wouldn't dare to rationalize the hate crimes of white racists (p. 243).

#### The Tribe, Soviet Communism, and 'Gulag Denial'

As well as exposing the hypocrisies of liberal-left discourse, *The Fall-Out* is full of riveting and sharp observations about the left as a *tribe*, with its own set of rituals and eccentricities. Anthony is especially insightful about the far left's obsessive preoccupation with ideological purity, and its corollary obsession with identifying and purging those elements which it suspects of impurity. The revolutionary left, he writes, was 'a secret world of schisms and vendettas,' with each groupuscule competing for the honour of leading a non-existent revolutionary working class (p. 53). Recalling his 'dispiriting forays' into trade union work, Anthony illuminatingly remarks:

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It was here that I first came across the boilerplate script that is used in most political meetings [among the left]. The shopworkers' and delivery workers' union at Harrods [where Anthony once worked as an assembler of cardboard boxes] was what used to be called a 'moderate' union. It had few hard-left members and none among its leadership and yet the spirit of the hard left hung over proceedings like an invisible commissar. Very soon I realized that the object of the meeting, and the object of many to come, was for each participant to appear more radical than whoever had spoken last. A kind of moral exhibitionism and inflationary zeal informed almost every utterance... (p. 55)

As Anthony goes on to observe, this moral grandstanding created a censorious atmosphere, in which anyone found guilty of wavering from the conventional radical wisdom was vilified as 'siding with the enemy' (pp. 56-7). Anthony adds that this repressive atmosphere was by no means confined to the margins, but was actually everywhere present in mainstream left circles.

Mention of this fallacy – the fallacy that to question one's own side is to 'objectively' support the enemy – reminds Anthony of another: namely, that to demonstrate one's full opposition to the enemy, it's necessary to endorse the enemy's enemies. Anthony correctly argues that, together, these two fallacies pervade the history of the left and have seriously retarded its development as a truly progressive force (p. 74).

By way of illustration, Anthony revisits the western left's disgraceful record of apologetics for some of the most odious regimes of the 20th century. He is particularly scathing about the left's indulgence of Soviet Communism, and the thought-processes on the left which sought to block or deflect criticism of the Soviet regime. Citing Anne Applebaum's 2003 book *Gulag: A History*, Anthony relays that the number who died as a result of the Red Terror, the civil war, mass deportations, in the camps of the 1920s and between Stalin's death and the 1980s is estimated to be anywhere between 10 and 20 million (p. 109). Unquestionably, Soviet communism was a disaster, and yet, Anthony writes, vast sections of the liberal-left, and not just the hard left, evaded, rationalized away or were silent about the crimes of the Soviet State. Anthony points out, via Martin Amis's *Koba the Dread*, that whereas the names of the Nazi concentration camps are notorious, the same can't be said of those of the Soviet ones (*Ibid*). For Anthony, it is scandalous, and a source of lasting shame, that a generalized moral outrage about the inhumanity

of Soviet communism, to say nothing about other communist tyrannies, is largely absent on the left of the political spectrum.

Anthony also takes issue with the outright apologists for the Soviet regime, and refutes their arguments with the contempt that they deserve. One of key rhetorical devices they used was to change the subject: confronted with the horror of the regime, they would 'bring up the dismal record of Western European colonialism' (p. 104). Mitchell Cohen (2002) has also written about, and severely mocked, this kind of move: 'Confront Stalinist atrocities? Ummm...let's address "the real issues," czarism, capitalism, and imperialism.' Against this mode of arguing, Anthony writes that 'one crime does not absolve the other' (p. 105).

Another means by which the apologists sought to change the subject was by questioning or impugning the motives of the critics themselves, a tactic well-captured by George Orwell: 'The upshot is that if from time to time you express a mild distaste for slave-labour camps or one-candidate elections, you are either insane or actuated by the worst motives...' (Cited in Conquest 1999: 136)

This particular rhetorical device is what criminologists (see, classically, Sykes and Matza 1957: 664-70) call 'condemning the condemners,' and is routinely used by all kinds of criminal perpetrators to obscure or evade their wrongdoing. As Anthony shows later in the book, it has become the preeminent rhetorical weapon of choice for liberals and leftists, and is used by them to fend off any number of troubling questions.

Anthony diagnoses the left's indulgence of Soviet communism as part of a broader condition on the left – what he calls 'a state of Gulag denial': 'the failure to admit what was in our midst, an unwillingness to acknowledge the totality of the repression...' (p. 102)

For Anthony, 'gulag denial' – a condition well-documented by Robert Conquest (1968, 1993, and 1999), Paul Hollander (1998) and Martin Amis, among others – is a direct product of the two above-mentioned fallacies – fallacies which in turn originate from a deep, pathological loathing of the western liberal bourgeois polity, especially in its US guise. And, as Anthony convincingly argues, it is this loathing which lies behind the current crisis of western left-liberals, and which helps to explain not only why they're prone to excusing or defending various reactionary

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religious/political forces, but also why they're unable to countenance dissent from within their own ranks.

In focusing on these issues of Himalayan evasion and denial, Anthony's concern isn't to develop any new insights into their psychology or sociology, but, in part, to challenge the inclination, widespread on the liberal-left in Anthony's view, to think tribally – the inclination to think not in terms of what is morally right or wrong in any given situation or struggle, but strictly on the basis of the political identity of the conflicting participants involved. To amplify his point, Anthony invokes the following quotation from Orwell, drawn from his 1943 essay 'Looking back on the Spanish War': 'But what impressed me then, and has impressed me ever since, is that atrocities are believed in or disbelieved in solely on grounds of political predilection. Everyone believes in the atrocities of the enemy and disbelieves in those of his own side, without ever bothering to examine the evidence.' (Cited on p. 73) Anthony connectedly condemns 'the persistent, even dominant, strand of liberal thought' that holds 'if the West is not the criminal then almost by definition there can be no crime' (pp. 103-4), and trenchantly insists that 'human suffering is human suffering and those responsible for it should be identified, remembered, held to account' (p. 104).

One of Anthony's central arguments, then, is an argument against the politics of what he terms 'group-think' (p. 116), and all the repressive elements that are tightly bound up with it – a politics in which 'anyone who dares to bring attention to the diaphanous line of clothing the group has taken to wearing is condemned as a sell-out, a lackey, a counter-revolutionary...an "Uncle Tom" or an "apostate"' (*Ibid*).

### **The Cult of Multiculturalism**

Not content with criticizing the liberal-left for its indulgence of Soviet communism, Anthony moves on to criticize it for its embrace of a more recent development: the politics of multiculturalism and identity, which he sees as descending from the same root as 'gulag denial' – 'the guileless preference for any group or idea that stands opposed to liberal democracy' (p. 117).

Anthony explains that although he is convinced that cultural diversity is 'not only beneficial but preferable' (p. 120), he is strongly opposed to those forces which seek, in its name, to defend cultural practices and ideas that are an anathema to liberal notions of justice, equality and tolerance.

Anthony's case against what he terms 'the cult of multiculturalism' rests on two central claims, both of which are plausible. The first is that far from promoting diversity and the open interplay of cultures, multiculturalism, especially in Western Europe, has actually fostered the opposite: cultural separatism, and a mutual suspicion or distrust between different cultural groups. Like the political philosopher Brian Barry (2001), Anthony argues that multiculturalist policies do not advance the values of liberty and equality but instead engender a strident nationalism among groups by focusing on what divides people at the expense of what unites them.

The second claim is that multiculturalism, as interpreted by its current champions, offers ideological support for the reactionary agendas of the self-appointed leaders or custodians of minority groups. Anthony argues that multiculturalism is supposed to promote tolerance, but in reality doesn't, since it's predicated on the relativistic idea that that no culture should be judged by the terms of another. Hence it prohibits the criticism of cultures that are themselves very intolerant. It rules out, in other words, a universalist, human rights-based critique of social injustice, and thus places under protection all manner of illiberal and inegalitarian practices. Martin Amis (2006), in a recent essay on Islamism for *The Observer*, brilliantly parodies the menacing logic of this position in the concluding sentence to the following story:

Two years ago I came across a striking photograph in a news magazine: it looked like a crudely cross-sectioned watermelon, but you could make out one or two humanoid features half-submerged in the crimson pulp. It was in fact the bravely circularised photograph of the face of a Saudi newscaster who had been beaten by her husband. In an attempted murder, it seems: at the time of his arrest he had her in the trunk of his car, and was evidently taking her into the desert for interment. What had she done to bring this on herself? In the marital home, that night, the telephone rang and the newscaster, a prosperous celebrity in her own right, answered it. She had answered the telephone. Male Westerners will be struck, here, by a dramatic cultural contrast. I know that I, for one, would be far more likely to beat my wife to death if she hadn't answered the telephone. But customs and mores vary from country to country, and you cannot reasonably claim that one ethos is 'better' than any other.

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Amis, according to Anthony's analysis, is right: multiculturalism is a friend, and not a foe, of intolerance, and must be countered by an ethics which demands a universal respect for the fundamental rights of *all* people, whatever their religious, cultural or ethnic background.

### **Islamic Hypersensitivity, Freedom of Expression and 'Islamophobia'**

One of the most salutary features of *The Fall-Out* is its brave willingness to name and to confront the problem of Islamic hypersensitivity and the cult of victimhood from which it originates. Anthony observes that today, in Europe, it's possible to criticize anything, or almost anything (p. 291). He recalls that in December 2004, *Behzti* (Dishonour), a play written by a British Sikh named Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, was stopped and then cancelled, following protests from Sikhs in and outside the Birmingham Rep theatre, where the play was showing. 'Censorship,' Anthony writes, 'was effectively instituted not by some anachronistic arm of the state,' but 'by a minority of religious extremists' (*Ibid*). Still: 'at least Behzti made it to the stage, before falling victim to victim mentality, and at least liberal arts figures signed a petition of protest at the play being pulled.' 'That,' he continues, 'would simply not have happened had the play taken a critical or satirical look at Islam' (*Ibid*).

For Anthony, the immunization of religion, and in particular Islam, from comedic artistic treatment or, more broadly, open and robust public debate, is intolerable, and ought to be resisted. What depresses and deeply worries Anthony is just how few of his fellow liberals and leftists agree with him, and how readily they are to abandon fundamental liberal principles in a creepy effort to placate the Islamic reactionaries. In his chapter on the Danish cartoons controversy, Anthony takes them to task for their cowardly capitulation to 'the illiberal, the intolerant, and the violently superstitious' (p. 292). He rejects the mentality, now common among liberals and leftists, of victim-blaming and excuse-making, a mentality that is razor quick to condemn western institutions or governments, even when under violent attack, but which is full of imaginative sympathy and tolerance for the enemies of the west, even when they resort to the most depraved tactics.

As Anthony makes vividly clear, the cartoons controversy didn't materialize out of nowhere, but was the direct outcome of dedicated moral entrepreneurship [8] on the part of a group of Danish imams, who compiled a dossier and toured the Middle East to raise awareness of the 'pain and torment' caused by *Jyllands-Posten* (the newspaper which commissioned and published the cartoons). The dossier,

Anthony reports, 'contained not just the cartoons but other more extreme images that had nothing to do with the newspaper (for example, a photo of a Frenchman dressed up as a pig with a caption identifying him as Muhammad), as well as other spoof images that another Danish newspaper had used to make fun of *Jyllands-Posten's* perceived pomposity' (p. 294). The tour was a massive success, and resulted in a consumer boycott of Danish goods across the Middle East. Then, on 4 February, 2006:

the Danish Embassy was set alight in Syria, and for good measure, the Norwegian Embassy too. In Lebanon, the Danish Embassy was burned down and a protestor died. It's estimated that in demonstrations from Nigeria to Pakistan 139 protestors perished. A reward of over \$1 million was offered by Haji Yaqoob Qureishi, a minister in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, to anyone who beheaded one of the Danish cartoonists. Later, Amer Cheema, a Pakistani student, was apprehended with a knife in the *Die Welt* newspaper offices in Berlin. He admitted that he intended to kill the paper's editor, Roger Koppel, for reprinting the cartoons. And two undetonated bombs were discovered on German trains, planted by Lebanese suspects who, according to German federal police, claimed to have been acting in response to the 'assault by the West on Islam' that the Danish cartoons represented... (pp. 295-96)

'All of this,' Anthony contemptuously remarks, 'because of a dozen comic line drawings' (p. 296).

And how did a large part of the liberal-left react? Anthony's answer: 'As I read the British newspapers, particularly the liberal press, I learned that the blame lay with the Danish people as a whole, the Danish government in particular, and most specifically the 'arrogant,' 'right-wing' Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*. It was accepted that the mobs in Damascus and Beirut could not help themselves, such was their sensitivity to presumed insults made in a far-off country of which they knew little.' (Ibid) In other words: Denmark is subjected to an organized campaign of hatred and violent intimidation, orchestrated by the most reactionary forces, and the dominant response of the liberal-left is to condemn not those who lit the powder trail, and who call for the beheading of cartoonists, but Denmark – a small democratic country with an open society, a system of confessional pluralism, and a free press. Anthony correctly describes this response as 'shameful' (p. 292).

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What Anthony also finds instructive about the cartoons episode is how graphically it illustrates the radical selectivity of Muslim fundamentalist disgust. He remembers a remark made by Jihad Momani, the editor of the Jordanian weekly *al-Shiban*, who was sacked and charged with insulting religion for publishing the cartoons. What, Momani inquired, is the greater defamation of the prophet: an unflattering cartoon or blowing up innocent commuters in his name? Correspondingly, Anthony wonders ‘why it was that the MCB [Muslim Council of Britain] and other Muslim groups could organize demonstrations against one blasphemy but not the other’ (p. 301). Anthony’s take on this is expressed in a statement made by the writer Kenan Malik: ‘What they [groups like the MCB] are mostly about is a sense of victimhood – ‘We’re being victimized by Western secular society.’ You can articulate that sense of victimhood in relation to the cartoons but you can’t articulate it in relation to the use or abuse of Islam by certain groups.’ (Cited on p. 301)

Like 9/11, the cartoons affair was another ‘watershed’ moment for Anthony – the moment, he says, at which he decided to write his book (p. 292). And, also like 9/11, what it did was to powerfully reconfirm his view that liberal democratic societies, as long as they tolerate the forces of intolerance, are in grave danger of inviting their own destruction, and that liberals must defend their beliefs as implacably and unapologetically as their sworn enemies. This, in a sentence, is the central, urgent, and devastatingly important message of *The Fall-Out*.

Anthony is no less trenchant in his views about the charge of ‘Islamophobia’ that is habitually and mindlessly levelled against anyone who happens to criticize, however sensitively or even-handedly, the religion of Islam or the practices of Muslim individuals, groups or societies. For Anthony, the charge is used almost exclusively as a means of invalidating a criticism by defaming the person who is making it. And, as Anthony knows, it was a technique in wide currency among the cold-war left, who, according to Orwell, would dismiss the critics of the Soviet regime as ‘Red-baiters,’ the purveyors of ‘absurd out-of-date prejudices’ (cited in Conquest 1999: 136). What especially concerns Anthony is just how intensely corrosive the charge is to the free exchange of ideas, especially the kinds of discussions – about Islam, Islamist terror, the role of religion in society, and tolerance, to mention the most salient – that he thinks are so urgent. To paraphrase Anthony, ‘Islamophobia is a word that in most cases’ occludes ‘legitimate and necessary debate’ (p. 204).



### Iraq

The Iraq war, inevitably, features in Anthony's rich narrative, about which he has some compelling things to say. On balance, he was against it, since he distrusted the Bush administration's equivocations over the aims of the war, and wasn't sufficiently convinced that it had the desire, let alone the actual capability, to create a secure and democratic Iraq (pp. 216-7, 220).

As it turned out, Anthony was right, and so were all those who shared his concerns. The situation in Iraq is now even worse than it was during Saddam's tyranny. Yet Anthony wasn't, as indeed so many anti-war protestors were, blind to, or evasive about, the scale of the sheer inhumanity of Saddam's regime, and he rightly castigates them for their cold indifference to the plight of ordinary Iraqis. He approvingly quotes the Iranian Nobel Peace laureate Shirin Ebadi: 'Any anti-war movement that advocates silence in the face of tyranny can count me out.' (p. 222) Anthony writes, tellingly, that 'the Bush administration can be said to have betrayed Iraqi democracy,' but the same charge can't be made against the leaders of the anti-war movement, 'for they never supported the democrats in the first place' (p. 228).

### Conclusion

In a chapter entitled 'Crime Scenes,' Anthony describes a crime he witnessed, and intervened to stop, in Maida Vale, West London, just minutes away from his home. As he was driving, he noticed a 'bejewelled' gang of teenage girls involved in some sort of scuffle:

A single girl was being kicked and punched and having her hair pulled by the rest. I wound down my side window and barked: 'Hey, stop that!' At the sound of my voice the gang eased off and looked up momentarily, then, having satisfied themselves that I was of no concern, set about their quarry once again. Now I could see that blood was pouring from the victim's face onto her white, school-uniform-like shirt. I jumped out of the car, uncertain of what I was going to do, and headed straight for the gang, shouting as loudly and authoritatively as my strangled vocal cords could manage. Whatever strange sound was emitted seemed to do the trick. This time they let her go and, with theatrical reluctance, stepped back. The ringleader proudly inspected her work and received high-fives from her companions. A large thick flap of skin hung from the cheek of the beaten girl, like a sole that had come loose from a shoe. I asked her if she was OK and told her I was phoning

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an ambulance. She was about 16 or 17 and she was shaking in shock. She had been stabbed in the face with a broken bottle.

Her attackers casually sauntered off, chatting and laughing, as if they had come out of a lively film at the cinema. If they felt in any danger they did not show it. I called the police and gave a description of the gang and clear directions on where it was heading. As I tried to comfort the girl, she was surrounded by several helpers. These people were spectators a few seconds before but now the attackers had gone they snapped into loud Samaritan mode, shouting at each other and me to stand back as they led the girl into the off-licence. Where had these caring voices been before when the teenager was undergoing a lifetime's disfigurement? The attack had lasted for five minutes, they had plenty of time to intervene. I looked around. There were perhaps 10 adults standing by, men and women, mostly in their thirties, and further along, easily within plain view and earshot, were at least 20 more. Anger began to rise in me. I noticed one stationary onlooker with a smile on his face, a sort of amused smirk. He was standing no more than five yards away, a well-built, reasonably fit-looking man in his mid-thirties. His clothes – faded jeans and T-shirt – and general demeanour – unshaven, unruly hair – suggested that he did not earn his living as a stockbroker or corporate lawyer. He looked like he worked in the arts or some creative field, though of course looks can be misleading. In any event, he conformed to nonconformist style and I wouldn't have fallen over in surprise if I learned that his sympathies were anti-authority, pro-underdog, leftish, liberal.

'What's so funny?' I asked him. 'She's a young girl. How could you stand by and watch that happen to her?'

'Don't have a go at me, you pompous prick,' he replied, full of belated aggression. 'Why should I get involved? It had nothing to do with me.' (pp. 162-4)

Two things in particular shocked and appalled Anthony about the attack: first, the radical insouciance of the attackers – 'the apparent absence of compunction, the offenders' lack of fear of censure, their obliviousness to social constraint'; and, second, the 'the compliance, almost conspiracy, of the silent onlookers' (p. 172). What he also found dispiriting was the absence of an adequate liberal-left vocabulary to describe the attack. Sure, he says, there's a liberal-left way of *evading* the problem

of interpersonal violence, which involves characterizing the perpetrators of violence as the victims of wider social forces, like unequal life-chances or alienation, about which nothing, short of a radical restructuring of society, can be done. In other words, there's a liberal-left way of *doing nothing* about violent crime – 'of waiting for society to change, for it to become less unfair, with more equitable wealth distribution so that street violence would miraculously disappear' (p. 164). But, Anthony argues, there isn't a *compelling* liberal-left narrative of how we can act, in the here and now, to better protect ourselves from the violent. This lacuna, Anthony convincingly suggests is part of, or reflects, a broader lacuna in the liberal-left imagination: a failure to properly confront and take seriously threats unrelated, or external, to democratic governments.

For Anthony, the liberal-left has some very important things to say about state power, and what should be done to limit it. But it is decidedly less vocal on the equally crucial Hobbesian question of how individual citizens can be best protected from the violent actions of their fellow citizens. *The Fall-Out* is an injunction to liberals and leftists to think seriously about this latter question, and not to bewitch themselves into thinking that only the first matters.

The crime scene that Anthony chillingly evokes above is in fact powerfully symbolic of the crisis of liberalism which *The Fall-Out* seeks to diagnose and remedy. Like the by-standers of Anthony's description, left-liberals currently evince a kind of cynical, neutralist, sometimes smirking isolationism, and lack the courage to actively defend their values and way of life against those who menace them.

A liberal, Robert Frost said, is someone who can't take his own side in an argument. *The Fall-Out* is a brilliant refutation of this observation, and shows that a robust defense of liberalism is not only possible, but urgently imperative in the post 9/11 world, where the most serious threats to liberty come not from democratic states, but their enemies, who include, shamefully, certain elements of the western liberal-left.

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