

## BOOK REVIEW

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### A question of diversity

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*The Tribe: The Liberal-Left and the System of Diversity*, by Ben Coble. Societas. 263 pp. £14.95

What links together the Grenfell Tower fire, the Brexit vote, the sexual harassment of women in Cologne on New Year's Eve in 2016, and the adoption of all women short-lists in the Labour Party? For Ben Coble, it is 'the system of diversity' by which advocates of progressive politics seek to assign identities and prescribe behaviour on the basis of a victim-based understanding of social organisation in modern Britain. This polemical book—written by a former Labour Party activist and formidable blogger—sets out to uncover the way diversity is administered in the interstices of public life and in so doing rejects the antinomy of favoured and unfavoured social groups supposedly at the heart of this agenda.

The array of issues pertaining to diversity (running the gamut from immigration, the EU, party politics, to education policy) is primarily culled from a deep dive into the politics of the Twitter dominated public sphere. The result is thus more Allan Bloom meets the twitterati than a work of conventional empirical scholarship refracted through a disciplinary lens. Nevertheless, as with Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, the analysis and its conclusions are thought provoking in terms of what is covered as well as what is left unsaid.

Coble has fun dissecting the favouritism certain groups are said to benefit from, especially in terms of the choice of adjectives used to cast aspersions on those that deviate from progressivist norms. This is probably where he is at his most acute, identifying and comparing the way feminist and Islamist groups—taken to be the most important constitutive parts of the diversity agenda—and their representatives operate to uphold certain standards of behaviour and speech. The key message is that 'diversity is a code',

which differs from an ethical set of principles because what matters is not discriminating between good and bad, but 'assigning value in the correct way, according to identity'. In this regard it is a pity his attentiveness to the phenomenon of denunciation of in-group and out-group behaviour, 'the glue that binds the system together', was not more comprehensive in scope.

What drives the promotion of diversity according to *The Tribe* is the need to compensate for victimhood, which in turn presupposes the existence of an oppressive force. For Coble, the agents of oppression that the system of diversity targets are above all male and pale. The dialectic presented between supposedly favoured and unfavoured groups is less interesting than the reflections on the administration of diversity as a performative act with real-world policy consequences. Particularly noteworthy is the highlighting of how, in the name of diversity, there is frequent recourse by politicians or public institutions to an outsourcing of authority to community representatives. A case in point is the notion of hate crime, which, as Coble rightly points out, in part outsources authority over what constitutes a crime 'to the victim or anyone who wishes to speak on behalf of a victim or a group of victims'. The more pervasive this outsourcing becomes, the greater the problems it raises for political accountability. This is because the pursuit of diversity encourages outsiders to respect the boundaries set by identities policed by largely self-appointed representatives who define stories of victimhood. The Rotherham child sexual exploitation scandal, which is referenced at various points, shows exactly what can go awry when the state lacks the self-confidence to exert its authority.

Cobley also engages with the aftermath of recrimination amongst the liberal-left caused by the Rotherham scandal. This is far from a coincidence, as the sorry episode is a telling moment where the interests of gender (the victims were girls under the age of sexual consent) and religious identity (the perpetrators came from the British-Pakistani community) can no longer be seen as mutually reinforcing. Here, the message is that there is no need to resort to the dystopian vision of Michel Houellebecq's novel *Submission* to discern the tension occasioned by promoting identity politics amongst groups with clashing interests or values. Hence the potential contradictions of the administration of diversity are such that the political coalition driving it ought not to be considered immutable.

Such a conclusion is of particular relevance to the Labour Party, which has made sensitivity to gender and religious diversity a central platform of its electoral strategy. That explains why this is such a Labour-centric book and likely to be of most interest to students of contemporary left-wing politics. Yet that focus means the book perhaps misses a trick by not explaining how the diversity agenda has successfully become embedded in institutions well beyond the direct purview of the Labour Party—for instance, the business world, universities, or even the military. One partial answer Cobley gives to this conundrum seems to be that the corporate world has bought into the system of diversity as a *quid pro quo* for accessing immigrant labour and enhancing the commodification of labour to achieve greater efficiency. When exactly and by whom this grand bargain was enacted remains a mystery, although some of the responsibility apparently lies with EU freedom of movement, thereby raising more

questions of causality. More frustratingly, the book's argument surrounding the diversity-immigration connection is weakened by a failure to explore attitudes to immigration and diversity among migrants as well as second or third generation immigrants to Britain. There is also a sometimes casual approach to compiling evidence, as with the unreferenced comment that some of Britain's towns and cities no longer have a white majority population.

Above all, what emerges from the depiction of diversity as a specific system of social organisation is the question of whether the promotion of diversity is simply a mask for other forms of power and privilege, notably education or access to decision makers. Cobley's narrative points out multiple instances where this appears to be the case, opening up space he hopes for a different kind of leftist politics. This questioning of the virtues of diversity politics is a necessary, but hardly sufficient condition, for the emergence of a rival ideology of social justice akin to Blue Labour. The plea for an agonistic politics that provides space for excluded white Britons could well spell the end of the diversity agenda as the dominant form of social progressivism. Yet the great unknown running through this book remains how a left response to the system of diversity can remain sensitive to structural inequalities not captured by class and its proxies. The solution to that riddle depends, in turn, on the world of politics beyond the liberal-left since the critique of identity politics might equally serve to help create a new story of victimhood, with an agenda far removed from considerations of equality.

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