

# Sticks and Stones

by JONATHON GREEN

We live in proscriptive times. Prescriptive too (in other words, that which prescribes or directs) too, but mainly proscriptive, a term which started off in Latin meaning to 'post' a person as condemned to confiscation or outlawry, and thence, *anglice*, to outlaw, to banish, to exile, to 'send to Coventry' and, as primarily experienced today, 'to reject, condemn, denounce (a thing) as useless or dangerous; to prohibit, interdict.' This is of course a horror to the lexicographer, whose task is descriptive (even if the foolish American lit. crit. John Simon has recently, and proscriptively, condemned such descriptivism as 'satanic'). As it happens prescriptivism is but lapping at the very edges of dictionary-making; a few rumbles about the exclusion of certain non-PC terms but on the whole such terms still, however reprehensible they undoubtedly may be, can still be found.

Nonetheless, the pointed finger is everywhere, goodies vs. baddies, white hats vs. black. Or more properly, as the American Dialect Society's tripartite word of the year for 2004 indicates: *red*, *blue* and *purple states*, defining the bifurcated state of American society and politics. (The concept seems to have been originated in 1908, but no matter). A stench of religiosity pervades the land: this play is verboten, that TV show condemned and in the case of religion's particular illiberality, like the proverbial rotten fish, the land stinks from its political if not titular head. Voters on a 'reality show' (what a perversion of 'reality' they seem to be, or is reality simply that perverse) 'elect' as a putative MP a convicted fraudster who advocates the castration of paedophiles, the repeal of human rights legislation, a massive programme of prison building and the deportation of 20 million individuals, that's nearly 40% of the population – all allegedly 'illegal' immigrants. This same man, to whom the possibly maligned Attila the Hun (the *echt* right-winger, though do we in fact have the slightest idea of his politics) and even the once, and all too likely future Home Secretary would tip their hats, intends to stand for real.

This column, however, treats not of politics but of language. In this case one linguistic aspect of proscription, and which might better be termed vituperation (ultimately from Latin *vitium*, vice): the calling of names. In 1996 I wrote and published a book called *Words Apart* which dealt in the vilifications of race and nationality. It was barely reviewed, and those who chose to do so seemed

united in their belief that while grimly fascinating, such an agglomeration of hatred might have been best left unamassed. Unfortunately, however hard we pretend it isn't there, it still doesn't go away. Looked at from the language end of things, it's an impressive vocabulary. All those mini-lexica of words and phrases that, when defined, simply and as unpleasantly as possible, mean black, Jew, French Oriental . . . you name it, we excoriate it. A back-handed tribute to human inventiveness, based not on some mythical positive creativity but on mutual loathing. It also gives something of a lie to my own cherished belief, oft-touted to those who will listen: that while the 'oldies', especially those of a religious bent, may still quail at a few syllables that deal with the parts of our bodies and what we do with them, the young – and my hope being that the young, even as they age, will carry such views with them – are appalled not by *fuck* and *shit*, but by *nigger* and *Paki*. I wonder. Whether or not the much-reported tide of Islamophobia is quite as pervasive as those who, some say perversely, benefit from crying it up may claim, the hatred of the alien, fostered so assiduously by our political leaders and the media to whose tune they cavort, seems undoubtedly to be surging.

Linguistic xenophobia can be seen to work on two levels. As the lexicologist Geoffrey Hughes has pointed out, 'The basic conceptual division in the field is between general terms, such as *alien* and *intruder*, and the more specific words of insult, such as *frog*, *hun* and *gook*.' To put it another way, the first reflects the act of intrusion by an alien into one's own culture; the second stems from the stereotype of the intruder. The concept of invasion tends to provide the chronologically earlier terms: thus such generalities as *heathen*, *paynim* and *infidel* were all established prior to the earliest recorded 'specifics', such as *Bugger* (from Bulgaria), *Turk*, *Greek* and *Coolie*. And while the coinage of general terms gradually dried up, references to specific stereotypes hugely expanded. Thus with the exception of the general term *native*, first recorded c.1800, such mainstays as *savage*, *alien*, *intruder*, *interloper*, *barbarian* and *foreigner* had all been coined by 1600; while conversely the specific terminology, still relatively limited in 1600, began its wide expansion in the 18th century, as of course did the great European empires, bringing 'the west' (as which it would not been known for some time yet) into contact not merely with the exotic (which could be traded), but with the 'other' (which might be

conquered). This expansion seems have peaked around 1900, with the great migrations from Europe to America, and has yet to abate.

The word *xenophobia*, the fear of strangers, is a 20th-century invention, but the emotion is as old as humanity. The idea of simply hating foreigners is basic: they're foreigners - and for many people that's good enough. Though how many, for example, of Britain's Little Englanders or France's *poujadistes* have ever left their suburban fastnesses to check the validity of their isolationist whinging? But when those same foreigners start impinging on one's own territory, whether as invaders or immigrants (or even tourists), then the emotional temperature really rises. What might have been no more than unfocused fear - they're not like me, there must be something wrong with them - becomes totally pointed loathing.

Yet, if this knee-jerk dislike does underpin all racist terminology, then there is a definite pattern in its development. There is, I suggest, an analogy with swearing. In the Medieval or Renaissance world, when religion held the kind of power that today's true believers mourn, oaths, based on 'God' or 'Christ' and thus *de facto* blasphemous, had a powerful resonance. Today's obscenities, based mainly on sex and excreta, may shock, but the moral subtext is missing. To quote Geoffrey Hughes once more, 'The categories change from those of strong moral stereotyping (with religious connotations) in earlier times to comparatively superficial characteristics of diet and appearance in modern times.' The images of savagery, cruelty and wanton destruction that underpin *Vandal*, *Goth*, and *Hun* or of primitive backwardness implied in *Hottentot* or *bog-trotter* are much more virulent than the comparatively 'jokey' ones that, based for instance on food, give *macaroni*, *frog*, *limey* and *kraut*. In addition one sees the way a basic fear of 'the other' can be refined into the various forms those others take. Forgetting political or religious differences, there is the not unreasonable dislike of the invader, who offers only fire and the sword but demands one's land and stability. Beyond this comes the fear of immigration: now 'they' displace 'us' from jobs and, with those vestiges of their culture that they have imported, 'pervert' or ruin ours. As our 'justifications' for racism expand, the terms, it would seem, become more general, or at least more willing to grasp at linguistic straws. If the Germanic tribe of Vandals lent their name to the xenophobe's vocabulary (c.1700) it was for their razing of cities and destruction of empires; when the Italians became *spags* two centuries later it was through no more than their appetite for pasta. Hardly the same thing, although the end-product and indeed the stimulus, mutual loathing, are identical.

Race is based on stereotypes; without them the majority of these terms would not exist. And while stereotypes, by their very nature, are rarely accurate,

there is a fundamental desire to create these pared-down characterizations. In this world of aggression, what matters is not the ingredients, but the brand-name. Like the Goths or the Tartars, who gained their image from their role as invaders, the Vikings, whose invasion broke the Anglo-Saxon hold on Britain, were universally loathed. While still debatable, the linguistic root of Viking is seen as either the Old English *wic*: a camp or settlement, or the Old Norse *vik*: a creek. Such niceties were irrelevant to those who labelled them. The lexicographer Abbot Aelfric, compiling his *Dictionarium Saxonico-Latino-Anglicum* soon after 1000, defined the word as 'pirata', i.e. a pirate. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (c.891-1164), a continuing 'diary' of national events, uses for *its* definition the unadorned 'heathen'. Both creeks and camps were surplus to requirement.

This primacy of propaganda over accuracy persists across the racial and chronological spectrum. Not every one of these words has the same effect, nor have all been as deadly as the sedulous preaching against the Jewish 'Christ-killers' which led inexorably to Auschwitz and Treblinka, or the doctrine of Black inferiority which helped fill the slave-barracoons of the West African coastline and justify the horrors of the 'Middle Passage' - but the general effect is all too simple: brand a people long enough and anything is possible. The most obvious example may be the 'softly-softly' approach of Germany's Nazi rulers, gradually piling one racist law upon the last, until the 'final solution' no doubt seemed a logical step. But whatever the context the drip-drip-drip effect of these words is to numb their users (and hearers) to their full import. It is only recently that, for most people, *nigger in the woodpile* has become unacceptable, while the yachting fraternity still use the phrase *boat nigger* to describe the least important member of the crew. The generalized equation of black as 'bad' and white as 'good' will probably never vanish. And so it goes on.

Writing nearly ten years ago, when Thatcher's comments as to the 'swamping' of the country by immigrants still seemed to appeal only to a minority of Little Englanders, and the big outcry was against the possibility of the UK actually fulfilling its paper commitments to 'Europe', I suggested that 'it is ever-more clear that England remains, perhaps more than any other similar country, imbued with [nationalism]; and that social grouping known as 'Middle England' is as dedicatedly xenophobic as the proles. There is only a tiny space between the patrons of the golf club's 'nineteenth hole' and of the public bar, or the baying back-benches of the House of Commons and the football terraces. Were it not so intrinsically vile, such hollow self-aggrandisement would be the most pitiable of conceits.'

On the whole nothing has changed. The immigrant issue has been hugely inflated by the media and the 'war on

terror', the cacophony of Islamic fundamentalism and the occupation of Iraq have changed the focus, but the name-calling is not new, only louder. That said, what interests me now, as then, is that the balance between those who call the most names, and those who are afflicted with them, is equally unchanged. The 'Paki' is surprisingly charitable to those who thus characterise his disparate, and of course utterly misnamed community. Even the fundamentalist end of the spectrum seems only to manage the relatively veteran *crusader* and of course *Zionist*, the former paradoxically coined some five centuries after the last cross-emblazoned knight stumbled back from Jerusalem, the latter one of the final *-isms* of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is possible, given that the seemingly tortured translations of the rallying cries of Islamic extremism may well lose a good deal in translation, that there is more. It may well have a strictly religious angle, but even so, such terms as *infidel* hardly rival America's *towelhead*, *sand nigger* or *halal* (an oriental *frog* or *spag*) in their unalloyed contempt. We, as it were, are to be pitied; they must be blamed. White Christianity, perpetrator of the greatest wounds, keeps anointing the victim with linguistic salt.

Name calling is of course the possession of the powerful, the diplomacy of the bully. It comes with disdain, contempt, arrogance, patronage and dismissal. It comes with fear as well, but that fear can be minimised if you ensure that the 'bad guy' remains the weak guy too. You do not mock, or not too openly, a powerful rival. If one looks at the primary target groups: blacks and Jews, one sees groups that are categorised as weak. (The Israelis are currently loathed, but weakness is not part of the equation and neither the liberal west, which specializes in what one might term 'context-sensitive' insults as 'fascist' and 'Nazi', or their Middle Eastern rivals, who move quickly back to the barebones 'Jew', see them as

pushovers). Back in the UK, despite back-to-back world wars, the Germans have never earned the level of verbal contempt accorded to their predecessors as national enemies: the French and before them the Spanish and Dutch. As for the Irish...although once again, our disdain focusses on their supposed stupidity, and not on any feeling that the IRA, for all their bombs, were a genuine threat. But such dislike of the Germans as Britain managed seemed limited to a couple of world wars (and of course the odd world cup) and the nature of the abuse, other than our dislike of *kraut* (cabbage), prioritises their military strength, i.e. Huns. And America, however much at least a portion of society may find her wanting, has barely a nickname at all, bad or good. Yankee comes from *Jan Kees*, and as such refers to the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch. There are a few rhymes on 'yank', but the Americans themselves, in their North vs South and inter-State rivalries are far more vituperative and, as I found, America is responsible for a large proportion of all racist/xenophobic language.

Let us, however, resist an excess of piety. The weak, especially the weak who believe, most fervently, that they are in the right, have their methods: playing on what might be seen as the weakness of their opposite numbers. Thus the liberal press is forced onto the back foot, prescribing in their turn: a liberal film-maker, murdered in repellent circumstances by a religious fanatic, deserved his fate: he was anti-religion. A play can be shouted off the stage: it mocks faith. The producer of a TV show forced into hiding, with attendant death threats because the god-botherers have decided to bother those of us on earth and we, apparently, must bend the knee.

We live in prescriptive times. Sticks are brandished, stones are hurled, bones, whole lives are broken. And words, it would seem, do hurt us.

[2005]