

Check Your Privilege!



EVERY DAY in Manchester I pass white men and women, huddled in doorways wrapped in sleeping bags and tattered blankets. I see wan, pale-faced hoodies – skinny teenagers, in from the outlying estates who appear rarely to have had a home-cooked meal or encountered much fruit or many fresh vegetables in their young lives. Yet, as the descendants of slave-owners, colonial police and soldiers, the beneficiaries of the Western literary canon, and the empire builders of centuries past they clearly need to check their privilege!

This is the kind of mad reasoning that we are now supposed to take seriously. The fact of being white is apparently a barrier to understanding and is something that needs apology.

However, a qualification has recently been introduced by the actor Maxine Peake. When attacking her fellow white thespian, Laurence Fox, she added “w/c” into the mix. Maxine clearly thinks that ‘working class’ should be factored into the schedule of

disadvantage suffered by people in her chosen profession. It is, of course, a moot point whether any actors at all are working class – is acting a working-class occupation? I seriously doubt it – it certainly does not rank in my definition as “routine manual or clerical labour” in jobs over which the worker has little or no control.

Actors are artists, who like those in other branches of the arts, often experience high levels of poverty and insecurity. This, fact in itself does not make them working class – it means that they’ve chosen a tough ‘row to hoe’ in attempting to choose art as their path, rather than the daily grind most people have settled for.

However, Maxine Peake, seems to think that ‘class’ is an inherited characteristic! She refers to a person’s class position as an inheritance from their parents, regardless of an individual’s actual position in the scheme of things. She notes the way that those who come from working class families, lack the easy advantage of their colleagues from more prosperous well-connected backgrounds like Laurence Fox, the husband of Billie Piper, and the son of James Fox; Laurence was, to cap it all, educated at Harrow public school and at RADA. She’s got it in for Fox, not only because he’s privileged, but because he’s “right wing”.

In denouncing Laurence Fox as “posh” and ‘entitled’ Peake is merely stating the bloody obvious. But she’s also doing something far more sinister – she’s attempting to devalue what he has to say, simply on the grounds that he is upper middle class, white, and male. We’re being invited to believe that because she (despite being white), is worthy of attention simply because she’s the daughter of a lorry driver and a careworker.

I have no doubt that Maxine had a battle to enter her life in the arts, but by the age of 21 she was at RADA, the same prestigious acting school in London’s Bloomsbury, as Laurence, albeit as a scholarship girl. Yet, because she still has some claim to victimhood in the hierarchy of the oppressed, she thinks she can

denounce her colleagues for the ease with which they “seek attention”, because they’re “posh”.

This is of a piece with those who think that gender and race are also factors, along with class, that must be used to evaluate the value of a person’s opinions, or even to determine whether they have a right to express them at all. Race and class, all confer credits in this intersectional battle. We must, of course, add sexual orientation, and more recently, gender identification – how a person feels about whether they are male or female or something more ‘fluid’. There has arisen a bewildering declension of victimhood, and, paradoxically, the privileges which attach to the victim’s, particular species of victimhood.

Basically, this means that unless you are a member of the victimhood in question you may not speak or express an opinion regarding anything to do with social status or disadvantage, whether it be to do with race, sex, class, or gender. So, only black women may talk about black women, only working-class people can speak of the working class, only homosexuals may speak of gay rights, and so on. It means that the Laurence Fox’s of the world, those at the top of the straight, white, male, tree, must shut up and stop seeking attention, so that ‘our’ ‘Maxine Peakes’ can grab the privilege of being listened to.

This rivalry amongst the oppressed recently came to the fore for me when talking to some very young gay men – it concerned whether homosexuals in their seventies had it harder than the startlingly entitled youth of today. What emerged from the discussion was that the historical circumstances of such diverse groups of people were so different as to be incomparable, literally so. It turns out that everybody’s hard time is their own hard time, and there are no rungs or prizes on this spectral ladder.

The much-engaged concept of ‘intersectionality’ is the imaginary place where all society’s manifold oppressions and disadvantages are supposed to meet. Unsurprisingly, a cacophony of rivalry arises as the oppressed and disadvantage fight it out,

attempting to secure a favourable position in the hierarchy. It's a process in which people cancel-out and silence each other, as they refuse the right to speak to some, and grant it to others. It is the place where history is mobilised – the famines, enslavement, and massacres of the past are weaponised all over again in the struggle between history's victims for apologies, for 'compensation', and the imposition of transhistorical guilt upon the imagined descendants of history's murderers and oppressors.

I'm not sure if Laurence Fox comes from a long line of slaveowners, but I know that my Catholic Irish grandfather fought in the Boar War and in Mesopotamia as an integral part of Britain's grand colonial enterprise. For which he was duly punished by the Irish Free State and ended his days as a nightwatchman, living in a chilly basement in Kilburn. Now, I'm not sure if he was punished enough for his misdeeds, but I'm pretty sure that I'm not responsible for the choices made by my grandfather in attempting to keep his family housed and fed, particularly as my Mother was born in the workhouse in Cashel eleven years after the end of the South African War – so I suspect reenlistment in Britain's colonial enterprise was pretty much unavoidable for Paddy Ryan.

We need to get real about all this. Life in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was pretty grim for most people – further back servile labour of one sort or another was the lot of more or less the entire population, apart from very small elites.

Consequently, the absurdity of suggesting that people should be silenced because they do not experience the same form of oppression or disadvantage is laid bare. Reason dictates that history cannot be a guide to who should be listened to and who should be ignored. Reason must surely tell us that none of us share exactly the same experience as each other, regardless of any group identity we might wish to claim or acknowledge; we cannot possibly understand the world we live in from our own direct

experience, or the 'identity' we may wish to claim. More, much more, than our own narrow personal experience, and our own emotional response to our troubles is required.

This does mean, that in our arguments and discussions we must always insist upon 'playing the ball, not the man'. The quality of an argument is always independent of the worthiness or otherwise of those making it

Maxine must listen to "posh boys" as much as to rude ones – she has to listen to them, and she must weigh their observations carefully – if she wants to know exactly what is happening in the world. Her personal experience is far too limited and far too specific to provide much insight into the trials and tribulations suffered by us all, regardless of race, class, gender, sexuality . . . and so on *ad infinitum*.