



## Eurozine News Item

### Friend and foe. Shared space, divided society

*The 19th European Meeting of Cultural Journals  
London, 27–30 October 2006*

As a historical centre of global transit and lately a target of terrorist attacks, London was the appropriate location for a conference entitled "Friend and foe. Shared space, divided society". Speakers at the 19th European Meeting of Cultural Journals opened up the discussion on cultural diversity in two directions: first, as it is experienced in the physical urban space, and second, as it is reflected in the mirror of the media. Texts based on papers are now being published in Eurozine.

The meeting's grand opening took place in the imperial rooms of the Austrian embassy. Kenan Malik turned his [keynote address](#) into a radical defence of free speech that led to a heated discussion throughout the conference. In the name of "tolerance" and "respect", said Malik, liberals tend to hold that while free speech is good, speech must necessarily be less free in a plural society. This argument turns the notion of respect on its head, he said. It is precisely because we *do* live in a plural society that we need the fullest possible extension of free speech. The irony of multiculturalism as a political process is that it undermines much of what is valuable about diversity as lived experience.

### Parallel lives. Cultural diversity and inequality in the urban space



The "phobocity" is Les Back's term for London after the bombings of 7/7. Opening the panel "Parallel lives. Cultural diversity and inequality in the urban space", Back [said](#) that the sound of the phobocity — the police siren —

stands for a new "politics of misrecognition", which undermines not only our ability to coexist and share the public space, but also inhibits the ability to identify risk and danger. The phobocity is created not by the suicide bombers alone, but also by politicians and journalists who are concerned with the thought of the terrorists and who trade on people's fears. The answer must be a political language that is against racism and terror with equal commitment and vigilance.

The French *banlieues* have become a cipher for institutionalized exclusion and the failures of republicanism. Cynthia Ghorra–Gobin [argued](#) that only political representation can counter the force of populism and organized crime. Shame on those politicians who vote for cultural diversity at the Unesco level but not at the national level, said Ghorra–Gobin. Salil Tripathi echoed her in condemning a process whereby loss of faith in institutions leads to "mob rule" tolerated by liberal advocates of free speech. Nevertheless, Tripathi's three case

studies — Leicester, New York, and Singapore — provide good reason to hope that culturally diverse cities can succeed.

### Might is right and Urban Contact Zone



The film *La raison du plus fort* (*Might is right*) reports from the dark side of western Europe. In images characterized by controlled anger and affliction, it tells the tale of a European model about to implode, of how discrimination and exclusion leave the inhabitants of multi-ethnic and disadvantaged suburbs no way out. "It's all about economics", said director Patric Jean after the screening. He did not pretend to have any solutions

though. Instead he emphasized the urgency of the situation. The riots in the French *banlieues* in 2005 were nothing, said Jean, who has spent years filming in these suburbs. The big conflict is still to come. "I'm sure there will be blood on the streets of France. Next month? Next year? I don't know. I only know that it will happen. That is what happens when people have nothing to lose. Nothing. Last time they were very kind; they burned some cars, some buses. Next time they will kill people."

Monika Wucher and Christoph Rauch, members of the Hamburg-based artists collective "projektgruppe", presented the project "Urban Contact Zone". Short films about the urban public space included "The dissenter" by Jacek Niegoda (Gdansk), in which a man walking up a descending escalator is brought into line by two young bully boys; "Singular Hungary" by Lilla Khóor and Will Potter (Budapest, London), in which residents of Budapest talk about a newly erected war memorial and reveal their political sympathies in the process; and "The Occupation" by The London Particular, which investigates the disingenuously termed policy of "urban renewal" taking place in London's North East.

### Mirror writing. Reflections of cultural diversity

The Polish plumber is the butt of jokes throughout Europe. However, in the UK, which until now has put no limit on the number of work permits for members of new EU member states but will do so for Romanians and Bulgarians, there is growing resentment towards economic migrants from "East Europe". Speaking in the panel "Mirror writing. Reflections of cultural diversity", Irena Maryniak [outlined](#) how the UK press cultivates a discourse of hostility and ignorance towards Poles and other national groups.



Lazy journalism was a theme recurring throughout the second day: increasingly journalists react to events instead of anticipating them. Abdul-Rehman Malik, editor of Muslim magazine *Q-News*, criticized the big media aimed at the lowest common denominator. Getting a quote from a "community leader" is easier than doing the groundwork: but in the UK there are at least sixty different varieties of Islam, so who is entitled to speak for the community? To create an identity, he warned, is to create a box.

Edda Manga pointed to the long history of the multiculturalist representation of culture and difference. It belongs to the colonial tradition of thought, to the history of "ethnocism", she said. In fact, the political programmes of many of the populist and "racist" parties in Europe — from the Austrian Freedom Party

to the Swedish Sverigedemokraterna — are firmly based on a multiculturalist ideology.

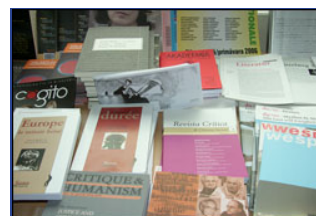
### An apprenticeship in assimilation



Looking at the conference theme through the lens of personal history, Urula Owen [showed](#) that the experience of being different is as universal as it is unique. The daughter of German Jewish parents, Owen arrived in the UK in 1938. "Is it justified to feel in exile in a country to which I came at the age of 18 months?" she asked in her closing speech at the Ognisko Polish Club. Justified or not, the urge to belong, to assimilate, is paired with the growing feeling of starting to enjoy being an outsider.

*Full texts will be appearing in Eurozine in the following weeks. The conference programme is also [available online](#).*

### Photo gallery




---

Published 2006-11-24  
Original in English  
© Eurozine