

Where did it all go wrong, Morrissey?

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He was once a radical icon, but now he's a mouthpiece for racism and nationalism. Time to get off stage, writes Michael Calderbank

Let me start with a confession - my admiration for Morrissey has at times bordered on the obsessive. For me, growing up in the Thatcher years in the de-industrialising North West, the Smiths' frontman was peerless as a male role model - confronting the usual moronic laddishness with a working class intelligence, humour, sensitivity and audacious flair, he was like no-one else. Who else would go on Top of the Pops wearing a hearing-aid, pair of chunky NHS specs, a blousy shirt stripped to the waist waiving gladioli at the audience? This charming man was an idol. What's more, he hated Thatcher and was part of the Red Wedge tour. The Smiths were the antithesis of Thatcherite values and Morrissey was their spokesman: a counter-cultural icon.

For many this is where the story should have ended. Had Morrissey had fallen under his double-decker bus at this point in his career maybe his light would never have gone out. Instead, he launched a solo-career. As a true believer rather than fair-weather fan, I stuck with him. 'Everyday is like Sunday' defines my memories of weekly trips trudging over wet sand in Blackpool. I grew up and stuck with Morrissey's maturation as a solo artist, and he soundtracked my life. Initially, his political edge was still very much in place. The first solo album *Viva Hate* featured 'Margaret on the Guillotine': 'The kind people/Have a wonderful dream/Margaret on the guillotine / Cause people like you/ Make me feel so tired When will you die?'

It's true that there's always been a conservative and wistfully nostalgic element to Morrissey's worldview - a backwards glance to the both the grit and glamour of working life in fifties and sixties Britain. Even in The Smiths he had a tendency to deprecate black forms of musical culture - disco, soul or reggae - as representing a tide of commercial influence, churning out cheap product for the mass market without any sense of artistic value or integrity. Whilst it would later see accusation of racism thrown at him, it seemed at the time a means of attacking not the culture of black communities, but the aesthetics of The Police, or Stock, Aitken and Waterman.

Even on *Viva Hate*, the track 'Bengali in Platforms' appeared to imply that Asian immigrants don't 'belong here', and advises them to 'shelve your western plans'. This was certainly problematic, but could be interpreted as meaning that the depression and decay experienced in Britain was not something to which other cultures should have to face. The charge sheet was mounting up, but was not yet conclusive.

He was first accused of flirting with far right nationalism around the time of *Your Arsenal*, but there was a sense that a song like 'National Front Disco' was an ironic framing of the idea of 'England for the English'. 'We'll Let You Know' from the same album was a plaintive lament written from the perspective of alienated football hooligans, worried that they might be 'that last truly British people you will ever know'. But wasn't this an artistic attempt to explore the psychology and motivation of an alienated class in search of an identity, rather than an identification with their politics? When Morrissey was accused of draping himself in the Union Jack at the same time as it was being waived

aggressively by the BNP, his defenders could point to the reactions of the far right followers of Madness, who hounded Morrissey offstage when he was supporting the band.

At this stage, Morrissey developed a real disdain for the press, and refused to answer their charges directly and would let his work speak for itself. The answer would perhaps come obliquely, in an admission in the lyrics to 'Speedway' on *Vauxhall* and I where he admits 'All of the rumours keeping me grounded/I never said, I never said that they were completely unfounded'. There is considerable ambiguity here. Which rumours is he talking about? Of his homosexuality or his racism? Or both? If the latter, perhaps he is just saying that none of us are entirely without unconscious prejudices, and it would be better to face this than to deny it. Perhaps.

Famously, in an epigrammatic flourish from Morrissey's beloved Oscar Wilde, 'the only thing in life worse than being talked about is not being talked about'. So, too, Morrissey himself couldn't resist the lure of controversy for getting himself press attention. Once the 'racism' furore died down, he would resort to further crass attention-seeking tactics. His invective was sprayed around indiscriminately: at the Royal Family, Chinese people (dubbed a 'sub-species' for their treatment of animals), Madonna (her act described as organised prostitution), the London Olympics (like Nazi Germany) etcetera etcetera. Bigmouth strikes again.

But as he moved to California before adopting the lifestyle of the international jet-set, Morrissey's politics has become increasingly quixotic, veering towards the downright racist and reactionary. When he toured Israel and draped himself in the flag in 2008, attacking the campaign for a cultural boycott as a politically correct attack on free speech, I shuddered. The Smiths' last ever live show was an Artists Against Apartheid benefit gig in 1986. Maybe the irony didn't occur to him.

Perhaps the final straw was his reaction to the terrorist murders at Manchester's MEN Arena. Transparently Islamophobic, and published at a time of heightened community tensions, it was unforgivable. 'In modern Britain everyone seems petrified to officially say what we all say in private,' he dog-whistled. 'Politicians tell us they are unafraid, but they are never the victims,' he added, conveniently forgetting the murder of MP Jo Cox by a fascist. Taking objection to Theresa May's defiant claim that the terrorists 'will not break us', he argued she 'means that the tragedy will not break her, or her policies on immigration. The young people of Manchester are already broken - thanks all the same, Theresa.' Blaming immigration policy for terrorist attacks on the UK is both inflammatory and ill-considered, given that most such attacks are conducted by UK citizens.

His support for Brexit had nothing in common with the socialist arguments for withdrawal from the EU, but was basically aligned with Nigel Farage, with whom Morrissey was nearly 'impressed' enough to vote UKIP. He later gave an interview appearing to accuse the establishment of conspiring to prevent the election of the Islamophobic Anne-Marie Waters from being elected as leader of UKIP, demonstrating both his racist sympathies and the paranoia of a conspiraloon.

So news that Morrissey's new album *Low In High School* (released in November) was to be his most political work to date, and was even to contain a hymn of praise to Israel, made me fear the worst. Could I even bear to listen to it?

Well, I did. The sweeping epic melancholy of the music and Morrissey's warm vibrato put me offguard - arousing my old sympathies. As befits a songwriter of Morrissey's calibre (I still recognise his talent, despite his toxic politics) it is a complex weaving together of lyrical strands. Israel is figured as a homeland prior to a fall into a repressive Christian sexual morality, before the tradition of 'virgin priests' of Morrissey's Catholic upbringing told people to hate their bodies and carnal longings. Leaving aside the accuracy of this tendentious theological genealogy, we can note that 'Israel' in this sense is projected into the future as a promised land of liberal sexual ethics where the

body can be enjoyed, and individuals are free to express themselves.

But perhaps the most problematic element of the song is the depiction of Israel as a land surrounded by hostile forces in 'other climes' who 'bitch and whine because you're not like them, Israel'. Moreover, because the 'sky is dark for many others, they want it dark for you as well, Israel'. Now, the danger of ISIS and reactionary political appeals to Salafist Islam is indeed a threat to the people of the Middle East, and would impose a murderous intolerance of homosexuality. No doubt the Western left is also in danger of being insufficiently critical of the attitudes of the likes of Hamas on these questions. But to argue that Israel is beset with 'dark' hostile forces seems to conflate the very existence of Arab and Muslim populations with the most extreme forms of Islamist ideology. The legitimate grounds for Palestinians to feel oppressed or denied justice by the Israeli state are conjured away, or represented as inherently life-denying forces.

A further sleight-of-hand is conducted when Morrissey distances himself from the repressive brutality of the Israeli state: 'I can't answer for what armies do/ They are not you'. So on the one hand, the Israel of the song is apparently the Zionist ideal, not the actually-existing Israeli state. But then he identifies with the abused pariah state: 'they who reign abuse upon you/They are jealous of you as well/Love yourself as you should, Israel'. This is rather like Tories dismissing socialism as 'the politics of envy'. Do the Palestinian people not have every right to feel aggrieved at their dispossession? The Israel told to 'love yourself' is not just the bearer of an emancipatory ideal, but the target of international criticism, presumably the present state of Israel.

Morrissey's ill-informed panegyric to Israel misses that many of those inspired by a socialist Zionist vision to create the nation sought reconciliation and dialogue between Arabs and Jews. For Morrissey, the legitimate demands of Arab and Muslim opinion in the region are denied, and millions of people only represented as dark impersonal forces, motivated by hate and jealousy. It's a deeply racist and reactionary line of thought. Perhaps life in California gave him too much time to watch Fox News? It wouldn't come as much of a surprise given how readily he regurgitates the most lazy reaction spewed from such outlets; most recently coming under fire for defending notorious abusers Harvey Weinstein and Kevin Spacey. His paint-by-numbers ethnonationalism was quoted by Tommy Robinson, former leader of the EDL.

Morrissey's image is a hollowed out version of working-class culture, which, wedded to a ethno-nostalgic idea of the white working class, quickly collapses into reaction - particularly fuelled by Morrissey's millions. Perhaps this wasn't a fall from grace, but simply a sloughing off of the image of a rager-against-the-machine, an image that was no longer useful. 'I'm non-political, I always have been,' he said in a recent interview, 'I've never voted in my life.' But the man's private convictions weren't always what mattered: of more importance was how much he meant to working class kids who saw in him a role model for rebellion, for art that was spiky, verbose, who wouldn't be told no.

I was once the kind of fan who can remember an old Morrissey B-side, 'Get Off the Stage', which evoked a singer who had outlasted his welcome and turned into an embarrassment: "Oh, you silly old man/You silly old man/You're making a fool of yourself/So get off the stage'. I never thought the day would come that I wished Morrissey would heed his own advice. But sadly it has.

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