

Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider, Satnam Virdee

I am completing this piece in a month that has seen large anti-Muslim demonstrations in Germany and even larger anti-racist counter-demonstrations, yet another abandoned ship full of desperate migrants found adrift in the Mediterranean and the terrifying murder of twelve (at time of writing) people at the offices of Charlie Hebdo. In the United States, after massive mobilisations against police killings, 2015 began with a bomb attack outside the offices of the NAACP in Colorado. If ever there was a time to despair, this feels like it. This work is a corrective to this paralysed fascination with the immediate present. Instead, through a series of analyses of key moments of struggle and realignment, Virdee seeks to persuade the reader that we must consider struggles over the terms of belonging as a long battle, best understood when regarded over several centuries.

This work is not a straightforward celebration of the achievements of the 'racialised outsider' in class politics, although there are elements of this and some figures who seem to be presented as exemplary pin-ups for the anti-racist leftist. The overall message is to remember the centrality of matters of racism and the role of racialised actors in class formation and politics over what Virdee terms the 'longue duree'. The resulting discussion is wide-ranging and ambitious, reaching from the impact of the French Revolution on workers' movements to an account of the place of racialised activists in the ascendance of the new unionism of the late nineteenth century to a revisiting of debates about anti-racism and anti-fascism and the contribution of black self-organisation in the later twentieth century. At the outset, Virdee acknowledges the necessary loss of 'thick description' that arises from this broad sweep (p2) but argues, with some justification, that what we gain is 'the development of an innovative argument about the significance of race in English society over the *longue duree*' (p2).

In fact, this is an astonishingly wide-ranging work, both retelling key moments in the 'official' history of the labour movement with an eye on the often unacknowledged contribution and influence of racialised activists and a reconsideration of the context of key moments of class politics and formation that includes the role of imperialism and nation-building as an explicit element of the terrain of struggle. To assist the reader in navigating the contours of this varied work, Virdee offers a road-map of the organising questions: the relations between minority groups and the English working class, 'including the part played by the elites and the state in mediating such relations' (p3); how racism has structured relations within the working class at various moments; what gave rise to 'episodes of class solidarity and anti-racism' (p3) and the central role of racialised activists in mobilising such solidarities.

Taken together, these three themes piece together a previously hidden history in the accounts of British class politics - the place of 'race' in variously mobilising, dividing and radicalising the working class in England. It is this overarching narrative that promises to reinvigorate our understanding of the place of 'racialised outsiders' in mobilising social solidarity and it is this frame that promises most in the way of resources for meeting the challenges of our time. To continue this discussion, here I want to touch briefly on two questions: what has been the impact of the erosion of the welfare compromise on the role of the 'racialised outsider' and how might we understand the influence of racialised activists without over-focusing on high-profile individuals.

Racism and the Bifurcation of the Working Class

Chapter Six opens with a quote from Sivanandan arguing that the impact of working-class racism 'relegates their black comrades to the bottom of society. In the event, they come to constitute a class apart, an under-class: the sub-proletariat. And the common denominator of capitalist oppression is not sufficient to bind them together in common purpose.' (Sivanandan, 1977, 339 quoted in Virdee, 98). This important insight frames the last chapters of the book and the manner in which the white working class became increasingly incorporated into an exclusionary national narrative based around the welfare settlement.

Virdee questions the widespread celebration of the moment of post-war settlement around the terms of welfare capitalism in the UK to argue that 'such undoubted gains for one section of the working class were accompanied by systematic racism and discrimination against another section of the working class' (98). It is in this context that the struggles for black self-organisation in the labour movement emerge.

The argument of the book is that the white working class became integrated into the project of nationalist belonging and imperialist war in large part due to the manner in which longstanding working class demands could be accommodated within a narrative of national identification. Whereas there are moments when white working-class racism arises in response to perceived economic or political threats, including alleged undercutting of wages or bypassing of union agreements, more often we are told a tale of how the white working class come to regard their interests as part of a process of national progress when class gains are made (for some) but in the name of nation.

For our moment, the challenge is the creeping erosion of many of these gains of the twentieth century. If there is a bifurcation now, it is coded as the split between home and migrant workers (perhaps as it ever was). However, there are few incentives to fold working class interests into any rearticulated national

project. Few if any gains are being granted to the (white) working class. In fact, many of the losses of austerity fall upon these groups who enjoyed the most tangible material benefits and gains in status associated with welfare capitalism (for some discussion of this see Wahl, 2011). Although such losses have been linked in some populist accounts with debates about migrants and the need to limit entry and access to resources, there is little sense today that the white working class can be wooed by a narrative of national inclusion and progress. The crumbling of recent compromises around welfare and national belonging raise some urgent challenges and opportunities and the resultant abyss has opened up space for new/old visions of both fascism and liberty. Although this can and does include a return to popular and sometimes violent racisms, these sentiments are presented as in opposition to political elites. In our time, this re-framing of racism as an anti-elite protest demands some rethinking of tactics. The pretence that anti-racist ideas are an expression of elite interests is old but attractive to some. Somehow our responses must address this distaste for mainstream political institutions and mainstream political representatives.

Social Movements and Favoured Activists

The great majority of this book focuses on the intersection of workers' and anti-racist struggles. This includes battles for enfranchisement, but linked always to a strong consciousness of class mobilisation. The one chapter that strays into somewhat different territory is the discussion of Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League and here the debate is about the manner and extent of the influence of these popular movements in creating an anti-racist consciousness that could inform class mobilisations. Perhaps unavoidably, parts of this discussion become focused on the particular network of roles of key activists, with these intersecting involvements being offered as proof in themselves of the wider aims and consciousness of these movements. While I appreciate the desire to continue the theme of the role played by racialised 'white' activists in forging an anti-racist consciousness in the labour movement, the outcome is to underplay the role of black people in such movements and, I would suggest, to over-estimate the importance of high-profile individuals in any struggle. The focus on named individuals - of course, the only approach that could substantiate the contribution of racialised activists in earlier phases of labour movement mobilisation - becomes less comfortable as we edge closer to the present-day (and personalities who may be known to some of us and/or still around). In particular the misuse of a suggestion of representative identities by both revolutionary groupings and trade unions in order to put forward favoured individuals as spokespeople in relation to this or that community or issue has soured trust for many involved in such initiatives. In these contexts - contexts where we can see more complexity because we have access to a greater range of material and, perhaps, direct experience - the privileged contribution of some 'racialised outsiders' becomes more questionable.

This raises the question of the place of biography in the history of social movements. We know that only some voices are recorded by history and such voices tend to be the most privileged in any grouping. In addition, those 'racialised outsiders' who might be favoured by larger organisations or given access to public platforms due to their networks of association are more likely to leave documented traces of their activity and these documented traces may tell us more about the political affiliations of those individuals than anything else. While I welcome the return to historical work as an essential component of understanding the formation and dynamics of contemporary racism, I wonder whether there are other ways to tell the story of our movement/s. Can we imagine a historical sociology of racialised consciousness while avoiding the tendency to individualise or personalise our account?

After NALGO Black Workers ...

The overarching message of 'Racism, Class and the Racialised Outsider' is to remember the influential role of concepts of racial difference and racism in class formation and politics in Britain 'over the longue duree'.

Although it is not a prescriptive work, the strong implication is that such a reminder remains relevant, and perhaps urgent, today. Somewhat frustratingly, the book ends with a consideration of black trade unionism in the 1980s. The reader is left to draw their own conclusions about what happens next.

The last paragraph includes the sentence,

'the elaboration and support for emancipatory projects that seek to transform our existing social relations and free us from exploitation and oppression remain marginal, especially in the West.' (Virdee, 166)

Yet this sentiment seems out of keeping with the chapters that have gone before. Virdee has been keen to uncover the significant influence of racialised activists and of the politics of race more generally in key moments of working class mobilisation, including significantly when such alternative voices were very much in the minority and/or when battles on these issues represented significant ruptures within the movement.

There is always a danger that our memories will trick us and the moments central to our own political and personal formations may take on a heightened significance. In part, progressive movements rely on this self-romanticisation and the heady energies (and memories) of youthful zeal - these are the human factors that keep people going and that animate the affective spaces of a political life that, all too often, can be dull or dispiriting. As a corrective to this, and as an opportunity to include elements of my own self-romanticised past, it is

instructive to cast our minds back over some key moments of anti-racist and anti-imperialist mobilisation since the late 1980s.

The 1990s saw the emergence of a wider movement centred around family campaigns, including against racist murders, police inaction, racist attacks, deaths in custody. I would argue also that anti-deportation campaigns should be included in our understanding of family campaigns in this period. The linking factor was the focus on a single family or group of families and the organisational authority given to the family. Although this approach had been prominent among black community organisation in previous decades, notably in the response to the New Cross fire

(<http://www.blackhistorystudies.com/resources/resources/the-new-cross-fire/>), the wider understanding of the family campaign as a distinct mode of organisation and mobilisation came to be understood by the labour movement in this decade. In part, the refocusing on institutional racism and violence as it impacted on particular families represented a retort and defence against the colonising aspirations of the revolutionary and reformist (white) left. As a result, the groups that recognised some agitational potential in the concerns of black communities became part of campaign networks that were, in effect, led by an agenda determined by black families who had faced the brunt of state racism. Anti-racist trade unionists, including importantly activists from the newly established black members' sections of unions, supported such initiatives and as a result both resources and political support flowed from the mainstream trade union movement into a variety of small and often very local family campaigns against racism. In part, it was this context of wider mobilisation that enabled the rise to prominence of the Stephen Lawrence Campaign. Central to this was the role of key black trade unionists and their support of the campaign with invaluable resources, experience and contacts in the early period.

The central involvement of the trade union movement in the Stephen Lawrence Campaign followed into the discussions informing the Race Relations Amendment Act. This enshrining in law of the duty to combat institutional racism was regarded, quite rightly, as a trade union victory. However, the outcome was a transformation of the terrain of anti-racist struggle, diverting extensive hours of trade union and activist energies into negotiating processes designed to fulfil the obligations of the Act. For some, this represented an attempt to resurrect and extend history of the Greater London Council, which remained an iconic example for anti-racists in local government.

At the same time, the anti-globalisation movement sucked in new activists with a focus on innovative and often international forms of protest and new approaches to politics developed through the European Social Forum and World Social Forum, both heavily supported by trade unions in co-operation with community groups and NGOs (see Bieler and Morton, 2004; Patomaki and Teivainen, 2004).

In different ways, both of these activities further embedded anti-racist and anti-imperialist ideas in the wider movements for social justice.

After this, the impact of 9/11 can seem like a moment of rupture that displaces all previous norms of political engagement, and certainly the tenor of earlier anti-racist demands for inclusion in a national narrative shifted in this moment. Yet the rapid remaking of political space in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks also led to massive anti-war mobilisations that reinvigorated an anti-imperialist consciousness in progressive movements. In this moment too, the often unacknowledged contribution of the trade union movement underpinned the wider movement, for example Stop the War benefited from subsidised office space in NATFHE headquarters.

More recently, the 2014 bombardment of Gaza has energised and politicised a new generation, many of whom are too young to have participated in any previous street protest. More recently we have seen new approaches to protest in the wake of the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner - and, in this country, Jimmy Mubenga. These last instances have brought large numbers of young - and sometimes very young - Asian, Caribbean and African people into movements inspired by anti-imperialism and larger struggles for global justice. The traces of the anti-war and anti-globalisation movements and Occupy inform their consciousness and reading. And although there seems to be little linkage with the mainstream labour movement, these mobilisations reference the struggles of migrant workers, including for union recognition.

Where does this long detour leave us? One of the more unfortunate aspects of leftist thinking and writing can be the perpetual search for the true heirs of the proletarian revolution. Resistance is judged by how closely it approximates to our textbook understanding of working-class mobilisation (in the right manner and for the right objective, of course). Actions that don't fit our model are disrespected or ignored altogether.

To return to the central arguments of the book, I would suggest that the mobilisations of young people of colour around issues of social justice globally are impacting on the consciousness of that generation, of all ethnicities. In Britain such movements do not have the reach of those in Greece or Spain - but the ripples of such activity may reach further than we think. The increasing overlap between a reinvigorated student movement, solidarity work with migrant workers, a new generation of feminism, green movements that favour direct action, renewed agitation against state racism and violence, all against the backdrop of the assorted initiatives to resist austerity, creates the contours of a popular movement that may be influenced by the racialised consciousness of a generation of activists steeped in the conviviality of lived multiculturalism.

Throughout these phases of activism, there has been a close relationship between elements of the trade union movement and key activists in these movements. Often there has been an overlap of membership and a reliance on the infrastructure and resources brought by the trade union movement. What has been lacking, however, is an explicit link to industrial struggles.

What ever happened to the black working class?

The moment of ascendant black self-organisation in the 1980s that informs the final chapter seems long ago. Although there was a consolidation of the achievements of NALGO black workers, not least in the reach of black members' groups in their successor union, UNISON, the broader impetus behind black members' structures appears to have been forgotten by the wider trade union movement. The push to recognise and challenge workplace racism has become less apparent in the last decade. Although trade unions have continued to play a central role in resourcing and propagating broader campaigns against racism, the link to workplace racism is stressed less frequently. Some very established black members' structures have been reviewed and sometimes renamed or reduced in the wake of trade union mergers or financial crises. While there have been initiatives to recruit and organise migrant workers, such initiatives can overlook the place of racism in structuring the working lives of migrants (for one example of this sort of initiative, see Mustchin).

Yet the urgent challenges of working life continue to be shaped by the politics of race and racism segments the workplace in ways that highlight key concerns for the whole trade union movement. The belated attention of trade unions to precarity in work ignores the long history of insecure work for those who face racism or other structural barriers in the labour market. The impact of the crisis has brought the experiences of the racialised outsider, the experiences of dispossession, insecurity and hyper-exploitation, to the whole community. If there is a role for the racialised outsiders of our time, perhaps it is to remake the labour movement to address this shared predicament.

References

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