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Malcolm X, Smethwick, and the Influence of the African American Freedom Struggle on British Race Relations in the 1960s

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In February 1965, Malcolm X visited Smethwick, a small U.K. town that had recently elected Peter Griffiths as its Member of Parliament on a borderline racist anti-immigration platform. His comments there caused a minor furor in the British press. An examination of the events leading to his visit reveals crucial differences between racial attitudes in the United Kingdom and the United States; his arrival threatened to erase these differences. Malcolm X's appearance in a town near Enoch Powell's Wolverhampton constituency played a key role in the development of the racial atmosphere that peaked in April 1968 with Powell's notorious "Rivers of Blood" speech, which expressed profound discomfort at the development of race relations both in the United States and the United Kingdom. Malcolm X's comments also offer further evidence of his broadening conceptions of race and racism, offering suggestive pointers as to the increasing importance of Islam to his thought.

Keywords: *Malcolm X; Smethwick; African American radicalism; British racism; Peter Griffiths; Enoch Powell; 1960s electoral politics; immigration; British race relations*

In the afternoon of Saturday, April 20, 1968, Enoch Powell rose to address the annual general meeting of the West Midlands Area Conservative Political Center at the Midland Hotel in the center of Birmingham, fully aware of the explosive potential of his prepared speech. As the 85 Tories and numerous television cameras in the audience settled, Powell insisted that the "supreme function of statesmanship is to provide against preventable evils."

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British immigration policy, which would result in the immigrant population of the United Kingdom reaching 5 to 7 million in 2000, was “literally mad” and represented the spark that would ignite the United Kingdom’s tinderbox. With immigration from Kenya at record levels—a result of Jomo Kenyatta’s “Kenyanization” policy—Powell’s speech was designed to jolt the British liberal consensus by an attack on its weakest point and climaxed with his notorious allusion to Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which dominated the news reports and arguably defined his life. Les Back and John Solomos claim that Powell’s oration was a “major symbolic stage in the politicization of immigration and race in British political culture” (Shepherd, 1996, pp. 346-347; see also Back & Solomos, 1992, p. 329). The speech tapped into latent fears of dark strangers that characterized the thought of large swathes of the West Midlands population—that continue to inform Midlands politics and society to this day—but according to Paul Foot (1969), its roots can only be traced to Powell’s reaction to the election campaign of Peter Griffiths, who contested the nearby Smethwick constituency in the 1964 general election and whose victory demonstrated that the immigration issue was a vote-winner (Atkinson, 1999; “The Big Ron Affair: Your Views,” 2004; Bowler & Bains, 2000, pp. 60-62; Cohen, 2004, p. 25; “The Devil Is in the Detail, 2002; “Labour MP Gets Set to Fight St George’s Corner,” 2004, p. 5; “Le Pen Warned Over BNP Visit,” 2004, p. 2; “Why Big Ron Is No Racist,” 2004, p. 33).¹ In 1967, after predicting a “recrudescence” of the emotions surrounding the immigrant issue in Smethwick, Powell vowed to intervene, puzzled that his Wolverhampton constituents—and indeed most Britons—were unconcerned at the present wave of immigration (Shepherd, 1996, p. 328).

The speech was also a result of Powell’s recent trip to the United States. In October and November 1967, Powell and his wife Pamela spent 2 weeks in New York City, a place that held fond memories for Pamela, who had worked at the United Nations building in the 1940s. The Powells, however, were not prepared for the New York of 1967. The rise of Black militancy in Harlem, summer riots in nearby Newark, the Spring Mobilization against the Vietnam War, and continued racial tension in the city combined to make it seem as though New York City was experiencing the End of Days. Integration was apparently reducing U.S. cities to cauldrons of racially polarized tension and violence, confirming to Enoch Powell that integration was a myth perpetuated by liberal elites. He became convinced that the United Kingdom—and Birmingham in particular, which was regularly presented in the press as a British version of Harlem—was facing an eerily similar future. The series of riots that cut a swathe through more than 100 American cities in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., on April 4, 1968, focused his

mind on the threat to the peace that non-Whites represented. Hence, his April speech placed considerable emphasis on “that tragic and intractable phenomenon which we watch with horror on the other side of the Atlantic” as a reason for tightening controls on immigration (Back & Solomos, 1992, p. 329; Solomos & Back, 1995, p. 47; Shepherd, 1996, pp. 338, 349). Powell’s New York City experience tapped into his deepest fears that immigration and a consequent tide of riots would soon rise in the United Kingdom, mirroring the United States’s long, hot summer of 1967. It also stimulated his opportunist tendencies when it came to exploiting racial tension for electoral gain.

That Powell was able to make such an inflammatory speech was not only down to his refusal to submit the prepared text to Conservative Central Office prior to its delivery. The West Midlands, including Powell’s Wolverhampton constituency, had been at the frontline of the immigration debate for a number of years. Nearly 4 years previously, the election of Peter Griffiths as Member of Parliament (MP) for Smethwick, much to Powell’s approval, provoked much scorn in the liberal press. Less to Powell’s taste was the subsequent visit from one of the central figures of the 1960s who symbolically brought “that tragic and intractable phenomenon” right to Powell’s and Griffiths’s doorsteps. Malcolm X’s appearance in Smethwick during February 1965—a direct result of Griffiths’s election—was somewhat surprising given the town’s relative unimportance in terms of Malcolm X’s ongoing campaign to embroil the United Nations in the Black liberation struggle and discredit his former guru Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. It has received scant attention from Malcolm X’s biographers—Peter Goldman suggests that its significance lies in it being the last day when Malcolm X truly had fun and Bruce Perry offers only the merest detail of the event—and is generally considered to be a minor diversion in Malcolm X’s journey toward spiritual enlightenment, and ultimately his death, not least because there was no connection between Smethwick and his assassination (Goldman, 1973, p. 255; Perry, 1991, p. 352; Clark, 1992, pp. 65-67). Yet it offers evidence of the broadening of Malcolm X’s conception of racial discrimination in the wake of his African tours and illustrates how the international political dimensions of the American civil rights movement played in foreign climes. It once again demonstrates Malcolm X’s genius for attracting press attention that inflated his own significance and influence far beyond its natural limits. Most significantly, it reveals how American dialogue on race influenced the debate in the United Kingdom, shedding important light on the relationship between African American radicalism and British politics. The transformation of the British debate on race

is brought into sharp focus by Malcolm X's appearance in Smethwick. He provoked a dialogue on British race relations that was suffused with fear—fear of Britain's situation becoming similar to that of the United States, an attitude which so profoundly influenced Enoch Powell. His visit thus offers further contextualization for Powell's "rivers of blood" outburst some 3 years later.

Smethwick's Background

Built on industrial foundations during the Industrial Revolution, Smethwick has attracted migrant workers since the 1830s. By 1964, there were 800,000 immigrants in the United Kingdom, a large figure in isolation but one that represents a mere 1.5% of the total British population and that is contextualized by the fact that the country was losing just as many bodies to emigration as it was taking in. Of the 800,000, 70,000 resided in Birmingham. Roughly 30,000 more lived outside Birmingham in the West Midlands, of which 4,500 lived in Smethwick, 54% of whom were Indian, 37% West Indian, and 9% Pakistani within Smethwick's population of more than 67,000. Although less than 1% of the United Kingdom's immigrant population resided in Smethwick, this figure represented 6.7% of the local population—much higher than the national average although a figure that reflects Smethwick's industrial identity and the character of its employment market. As the political analyst Michael Hartley-Brewer (1965) notes, "the northern part [of Smethwick] is dingy with factories, smoke, and old housing, while the south is smarter, more residential, and middle class. The north is dominant" (p. 78), which—not coincidentally—was where the majority of the immigrants lived and hoped to find employment (Hartley-Brewer, 1965, p. 78; Foot, 1965, pp. 10-11). With a council house waiting list of more than 4,000, the issues of race, immigration, and housing were closely related in the town, helped by the class distinctions inherent in the local housing structure.

Since 1961, primary school headmaster Peter Griffiths—who lived in the more affluent and White south of the constituency—had been leading a demagogic campaign to unseat Smethwick's Labour MP, Shadow Foreign Secretary Patrick Gordon Walker. Appalled at the level of immigration into his local town, he favored a ban on all immigration for at least 5 years and advocated deportation for any unemployed immigrant or one who had a criminal record. He sponsored a plan for separate school classes for immigrant children who struggled with English and opposed the rehousing of anybody who had lived in Smethwick for less than 10 years. He even warned local teachers to tell their schoolchildren not to enter houses occupied by immigrants, for they would be in "grave moral danger." Invariably, he linked immigration with

violence, crime, and disease and maintained that Smethwick's supposed race problem was far worse than that of other British towns. Aiding Griffiths's campaign was the local weekly newspaper, the *Smethwick Telephone*, which was delivered to the vast majority of Smethwick homes. A large proportion of its space was devoted to stories about British immigrants, most of a derogatory nature; a letter-writing campaign by the Birmingham Immigration Control Association (BICA) also received generous coverage. Although the *Telephone* did not make explicit editorial statements, its transparent stance on Smethwick's non-White population helped to place race and immigration at the center of a potentially volatile political atmosphere. Matters were not helped by Walker's relative lack of interest in his local constituency, a result of his political ambitions and friendship with the Labour leader Harold Wilson (Hartley-Brewer, 1965, p. 81; see also *Birmingham Evening Mail and Despatch*, 1964; Foot, 1965, p. 32; Singham, 1965, p. 364).

After unsuccessfully challenging Walker in the previous general election, Griffiths was adopted by the Conservative Party as its candidate for Smethwick in the 1964 election. The BICA swiftly offered its backing. A nefarious and bitter election battle followed in which Griffiths, presenting himself as a moderate, lower middle-class conservative, used every opportunity to whip up racial antagonism. He told local conservatives at his adoption meeting that

we believe that unrestricted immigration into this town has caused a deterioration in public morals. We have no objection to a man who happens to have a coloured skin, who looks after himself and his house decently, and who works. But this town is not to be the dumping ground for criminals, the chronic sick, and those who have no intention of working. (Hartley-Brewer, 1965, p. 84)

He renounced the term *integration*, preferring the vague and loaded phrase *peaceful coexistence* (Griffiths, 1966, p. 17; Singham, 1965, p. 364). His use of the immigration issue clearly chimed with local voters: At Conservative Party meetings throughout the campaign, 40% of the questions from the floor concerned race relations and immigration (Hartley-Brewer, 1965, p. 88). But the campaign was not simply notorious for Griffiths's language and his promise to enact strict immigration controls. Conservative canvassers spread malicious and unfounded rumors that Walker's son-in-law was Black and that he had sold his Smethwick house to immigrants. Graffiti appeared on local walls warning Smethwick voters, "If you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Labour," and badges were distributed by Colin Jordan's National Socialists with similar wording. Leaflets with similar phrases were distributed to local

homes and even found pasted to the notice board of Smethwick's Gospel Hall. Griffiths refused to repudiate the slogan, asserting that it was a manifestation of popular feeling and not a party-political message. What he did not say was that, as his campaign rhetoric suggests, he was inciting and exploiting this feeling (*Birmingham Evening Mail and Despatch*, 1964; Foot, 1965, p. 49; Griffiths, 1966, p. 171).

In a high turnout election, Griffiths overturned a Labour majority of more than 3,000 to become Smethwick's first Conservative MP since World War II, with the largest swing toward a conservative in the entire country. The new prime minister, Harold Wilson, was so disgusted at the defeat of his friend by such an odious campaign that he used his maiden speech to attack Griffiths, whom he denounced as a "Parliamentary leper." Since Griffiths had not yet made his maiden speech in the House of Commons, he was not able to respond to Wilson's charges—another factor that allowed him to present himself as an ordinary Englishman oppressed by the liberal elite. Somewhat predictably, Enoch Powell assailed the liberal press for its demonization of Griffiths, acidly reminding readers of the *Sunday Telegraph* that the Smethwick election confirmed his belief that immigration was the salient issue of the day (*Hansard* 701, November 3, 1964, p. 71; Crossman, 1975, p. 46; Powell in *Sunday Telegraph* 18 October 1964, as cited in Dean, 2000, p. 265).² The Smethwick furor continued to rumble in British politics throughout winter 1964 and 1965. Walker's decision to contest the London constituency of Leyton in the wake of his defeat brought Colin Jordan, recently released from another spell in prison, back into the fray. A series of meetings in Walker's doomed campaign were interrupted by Jordan and his cronies, who accused the Labour candidate of being a traitor to his race and urged him to leave the country. Walker's defeat was a boon to Griffiths, who claimed it to be a vindication of his own campaign. The tumult even compelled Oswald Mosley to attempt another humiliating comeback—the former Smethwick MP's first since the 1950s—in London's Shoreditch constituency the following year (*Birmingham Evening Mail and Despatch*, 1965a, 1965b, 1965c).³

The controversy was further heightened by the Conservative-run Smethwick council's decision to buy up properties in Marshall Street, a rundown terrace in the town's northern section. This policy was explicitly calculated to prevent immigrants from purchasing the houses one by one, which local Whites believed would depress house prices. Griffiths, who designed the plan, claimed that it would prevent the road from becoming a "coloured 'ghetto,'" words designed to appeal to the base instincts of his electorate and calculated to suggest that the immigrants would defile the local community. The council's decision to request a government loan led to discussions at the Cabinet

level. Griffiths and a council delegation visited the Labour Minister for Housing and Local Government, Richard Crossman, to make a personal appeal but received only a lecture from their host—to whom Griffiths's politics were grossly offensive—and a refusal of the loan. Crossman felt that government approval of the Marshall Street plan was tantamount to an endorsement of Griffiths's campaign but wished the refusal of the loan to be seen as part of a "positive strategy" toward immigration. Unconvinced by Crossman's justification and undeterred by the Labour government's lack of sympathy for their plight, a group of Marshall Street housewives agitated for a further meeting, which materialized in April. This meeting was also inconclusive, and the women's frustration at the Labour government's prevarication led to it descending into a shouting match between them and Bob Mellish of Crossman's office (Crossman, 1975, pp. 149-150, 167, 168, 174, 195; Griffiths, 1966, pp. 121-128; *Smethwick Telephone*, 1965a, p. 1).

Malcolm X Goes to Smethwick

On February 5, 1965, the same day that civil rights protests led by Martin Luther King resumed in Selma, Alabama, Malcolm X flew from New York City to London. He was intending to attend the Council of African Organizations meeting before heading to Paris for a scheduled speech. Met by a posse of immigration officers and police at Orly Airport, he was informed that his presence in France was undesirable and shortly after was deported. Rumors had it that assassins were waiting in France, and the French government had no desire to have his blood on its hands. Rather than returning to the United States, Malcolm X instead flew to the United Kingdom, where he addressed the members of the Africa Society at the London School of Economics, continuing his tradition of speaking before university audiences (his previous visit to the United Kingdom, in December 1964, included speeches at the Oxford Union and Manchester and Sheffield Universities, the latter two at the invitation of the Federation of Student Islamic Societies). This speech focused on colonialism in Africa. Much like Che Guevara, Malcolm X viewed American involvement in the Congo with suspicious eyes. He also referred to the gathering storm in Vietnam and outlined his own modification of Cold War domino theory, applying it to Black revolutionary movements in Africa and Asia, maintaining that a continental liberation movement would soon gather momentum. He discussed the role of identity in these anticolonial struggles before offering his familiar interpretation of the American civil rights movement and a critique of the Black Muslims, who

were then intimidating his family partially as a result of his expulsion from their ranks and subsequent criticism of the organization and partially because he was still living in a Nation of Islam–owned house. He made one comment about how the state linked immigrants with crime in London but offered no consideration of the Midlands or Griffiths (Clark, 1992; Sherwood, 2002; Richard Gibson, personal communication, January 23, 2004).

The following day, however, he arrived in Smethwick to meet up with a BBC television crew led by local reporter Julian Pettifer. The BBC hoped to engineer a meeting between Malcolm X and Peter Griffiths, which would be broadcast on the *Tonight* show later in the week. Griffiths—perhaps aware of Malcolm X’s stellar debating skills and the potential for embarrassing himself on national television—withdrawed at short notice, leaving Malcolm X and the BBC with a few hours to kill. They visited Marshall Street, where Malcolm X inspected the “for sale” signs and commented that oppression such as that which was taking place there would inevitably precipitate a “bloody battle.” He then visited a local pub at which, legend has it, the strict Muslim sat down for a pint of bitter and a chat. Luckily, it was one of Smethwick’s pubs that did not operate a color bar. Malcolm X’s charisma and wisdom had a profound effect on Pettifer, now a foreign correspondent for BBC. The two conducted a short interview in front of Smethwick’s town hall in which Pettifer asked Malcolm X of his reaction to a new Black newspaper, *Magnet*, that had started up recently and of his impression of the West Midlands and Smethwick in particular (“Civil Rights Leader Visits,” n.d.; *Daily Express*, 1965b, p. 1; Julian Pettifer, personal communication, May 21, 2003).⁴ Scattered remarks from his visit remain. When asked why he had come to such a minor town, Malcolm X replied, “I have heard that the blacks . . . are being treated in the same way as the Negroes were treated in Alabama—like Hitler treated the Jews” (*Birmingham Post*, 1965a, p. 15). His advice to the local colored population was that they should not wait for Smethwick’s fascists to erect gas ovens before it organized itself. He reminded the Black community of Britain that assimilation was a doomed exercise for its underlying assumptions concerning the inferiority of the minority group and called on the British non-White community to “be itself” and “develop all of its own natural potential” rather than simply aping the Anglo-Saxon community. Smethwick’s mayor, Clarence Williams, was shocked at Malcolm X’s arrival in his peaceful town and was clearly aware of the international implications of the visit: Citing the traditional Middle-England response to outrage, he claimed that “it makes my blood boil that Malcolm X should be allowed into this country. The whole news-getting side of the English world is endeavoring to turn Smethwick into Birmingham

Alabama" (*Birmingham Post*, 1965a). Worried about Malcolm X's impact on racial antagonism in the town, Williams declared that the presence of this "algebraic character" constituted a breach of the peace (*Smethwick Telephone*, 1965).

After Pettifer and the BBC crew left to chase another story, Malcolm X gave a press conference in Birmingham at which he repeated his gas ovens threat. He also complained about the uproar that he had caused to the Wolverhampton *Express and Star*:

From what I understand, Colin Jordan can go to Smethwick and strut up and down Marshall Street and other streets preaching "if you want a nigger neighbour vote Labour" and that's all right. As long as it is the Fascists and Nazis, it seems everything's O.K. but when I go to Smethwick there are protests. Britain has a colour problem and I give white Britons credit for realising it. . . . I am just shocked that there are some people like this Mayor of Smethwick who object to my being there. (*Express and Star*, 1965a, p. 15)

He then appeared before Birmingham University's Muslim students, where he talked of the importance of his faith and reiterated his uncompromising stance on self-defense, telling the students that because racists only understood the language of brute force, antiracists "must reply in the same language; there will be more communication and understanding if we do," another familiar theme within his rhetoric (Clark, 1992, pp. 66-67). After this meeting, he returned to London before flying to the United States on February 13.

Malcolm X's Impact

Malcolm X's visit affords insight into local Midlands attitudes to the outside world: According to the *Birmingham Post*, many locals were curious about "the tall cosmopolitan and slightly exotic figure in their much maligned street." When told it was Malcolm X, many failed to recognize the name and were blithely unaware of the controversy that his visit threatened to bring. Mrs. Alice Groves, however, used the incident to remind locals of the threat to the White majority that immigrants constituted, claiming that "the trouble [with colored people] is that they seem to wear their colour as a challenge. They lose their individuality by crowding together so much in the one street." Groves, a resident of Marshall Street, was at the center of the housing quarrel. Already fearful of racial pride among immigrants, she was unsettled at the

implications of Malcolm X's visit for the local immigrant community and was anxious to prevent the immigrants from becoming a unified force. Several letters were sent to the *Smethwick Telephone* complaining about the incident, but the pressure of space led to them being held over until the following week's edition (*Birmingham Post*, 1965, back page; *Smethwick Telephone*, 1965b, p. 5).⁵ Peter Griffiths used the visit to boost his parliamentary profile, raising questions about immigration in the House of Commons in an attempt to deflect Malcolm X's attack on his political stance. Taking advantage of the *Telephone's* friendly stance, he told his constituents that Malcolm X's appearance was "an affront . . . a direct provocation," to their sensibilities and to Smethwick's peaceful reputation (Shepherd, 1996, p. 338). He also took a swipe at the irresponsibility of the BBC for its implicit support of Malcolm X's stance and called on outsiders to "shut up" and look elsewhere to "direct [their] spite" (*Smethwick Telephone*, 1965b, p. 5).

Mayor Williams's comment reveals that many Midlanders outside Marshall Street were aware of the impact of the civil rights movement on the international standing of the United States and suggests that they feared an explosion of violence on the streets of the Birmingham conurbation. It also urges a comparison of racial attitudes between the United Kingdom and the United States. The manifestation of racism in the United Kingdom was very different from that in the United States during the 1960s. Across the Atlantic, the debate—to simplify—pitted Black Americans against White Americans, a debate that had moved beyond repatriation to the question of national identity. In the United Kingdom, the debate concerned "immigrants" rather than Black or Asian Britons. In certain senses, the British debate was at a similar stage to that of the United States in the mid-19th century. Luckily, there was no Justice Roger B. Taney to declare that immigrants were not entitled to citizenship rights, but there were quite some people—including Griffiths—who desired as much. The 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act sought to clarify the status of those immigrants from within the Commonwealth that deserved British citizenship. All those who were not born in the United Kingdom or who held British-issued passports or were on the passport of somebody who was British by birth were obliged to apply for an employment voucher. These came in three types: Type A, for those who had a specific job to go to; Type B, for those who had a recognized skill or qualification in demand in the United Kingdom; and Type C, for other immigrants, with priority in this section going to those who had served Her Majesty in World War II. As John Solomos (2003, pp. 81, 97) points out, this act was widely seen as being specifically aimed at Black migrants. Characters such as Powell and Griffiths took advantage of the government's

timidity on this subject to whip up hysteria about this supposed Black invasion. Debates concerning the end of slavery in 1850s America included similar fears in the South of being swamped by a mass of freed Blacks; the Fugitive Slave Act and the Dred Scott decision must be interpreted within this context, as they were designed in part to inform African Americans that they were not welcome as U.S. citizens. Many Americans, including Abraham Lincoln in his early career, advocated repatriation as a solution to the burgeoning race problem (Enoch Powell later took up the repatriation banner). It took the Civil War to settle this debate and the Fourteenth Amendment to enshrine Black citizenship (Powell was happy to state that the Civil War would only have solved the race problem had it resulted in the partition of the South into rival states resembling Liberia and apartheid-era South Africa) (Shepherd, 1996, p. 338). Although there is no suggestion that the United Kingdom faced a civil war on the issue of race, that the debate still surrounded the status of Blacks in the country is an indication of a certain correlation between 1960s Britain and 1850s America. When Malcolm X brought a supposedly new conception of the racial divide to Smethwick, it brought an uncomfortable realization to many that these “immigrants” might be here to stay. Malcolm X gave no indications that he considered immigration to be the issue. For him, people of color deserved British citizenship rights—hence his talk of colored people getting together before the gas ovens were built rather than before the *Empire Windrush* was returned to service in the opposite direction. This tone caused such a controversy because it moved the debate a stage further than many British politicians, newspapers, and indeed people wished it to. Malcolm X threatened to bring the race debate bang up to date in Smethwick, something that frightened the forces of conservatism.

Malcolm X’s Smethwick comments give further evidence of the broadening of his *Weltanschauung* toward the end of his life. The choice of Smethwick, rather than a community with a high West Indian population (such as Brixton), is on the surface peculiar. In many respects, it would have been more logical for him to remain in London. He might have taken the opportunity to examine the continuing difficulties that London’s Black community experienced in cementing its identity and position in British society and culture. Yet he chose to venture into the heart of England and to perhaps its most racist locality. That he was prepared to head into an area with a predominantly Asian immigrant population confirms his conception of a worldwide struggle that united all oppressed people of color. While in Smethwick, he once again demonstrated his skill at manipulating his own publicity. By agreeing to travel with the BBC, Malcolm X maximized his own exposure.

Although he wryly protested to the *Birmingham Post* (1965a) that “I have avoided anything that could create an incident[,] I have been as inconspicuous as possible in seeking to nourish my interests” (back page), his comments put him on the cover of all the local newspapers and in the pages of most of the national press. Whereas the similarities between the American situation and that in the United Kingdom—Black oppression, housing segregation, ghettoization, and White racism—were perhaps most resonant for him personally, he was clearly aware that the local situation would best be highlighted by a link to a more provocative issue. Given that Griffiths had painted himself as a lower middle-class conservative, his Hitler gibe was well aimed. Throughout the 1964 Smethwick campaign, Griffiths focused attention on the immigration issue, ruthlessly targeting working-class White fears, couching his rhetoric in supposedly more accommodating language and using his own background as evidence of his respectability. Walker’s lackluster and complacent campaign—characterized by the candidate’s patronizing and paternalist disdain for local electioneering—simply assisted Griffiths’s antiestablishment and essentially antiparty persona. Although he was the Conservative candidate, his campaign rarely touched on the central issues of the 1964 Conservative manifesto, concentrating on local issues and using this focus to highlight Walker’s failure as a constituency MP and the establishment’s failure to recognize the particular problems in Smethwick and the concerns of its electorate. Griffiths’s campaign focused on the threat to the status of lower class Whites in the Midlands, pandering to their economic and racial fears. The unskilled workers of Smethwick were given an easy target on which to vent their frustrations and fears of unemployment. Status anxiety was one of their key considerations. Immigrants—particularly from the Indian subcontinent—were herded into overcrowded, low-quality housing in Smethwick, and the best job that they could hope for was a low-pay, low-skilled position, which threatened the job security of local working-class White men. Given that Walker’s campaign failed to mobilize the trade union vote, it is hardly surprising that Smethwick’s voters acted on their worst racial instincts. That this was not the first step toward a final solution in the Midlands was not necessarily the point for Malcolm X. His gas ovens comment was carefully calibrated to tap into the memory of World War II, which retained a powerful hold over the British mind. (Indeed, during the 1964 campaign, Griffiths was sarcastically questioned about his stance on the gas chambers.) With the reappearance of Colin Jordan, Griffiths’s questionable stance on race relations, and Smethwick’s history as the constituency which brought Oswald Mosley into Parliament, Malcolm X suggested that fascism was threatening to reappear in Smethwick. He hoped

that this fear could override the latent fears of a rising tide of immigrants that Griffiths had exploited and create a new political force in the constituency that was dedicated to eradicating the racism that Griffiths peddled and that incorporated the local immigrant population (see also *Birmingham Post*, 1965a, back page; Hartley-Brewer, 1965, p. 87).⁶

In attempting to widen his understanding of international politics, Malcolm X was also placing himself at the frontline of events in the United Kingdom. Although he was clearly in little physical danger from Smethwick's extremists, his appearance does represent another shift in his conception of his own responsibility to the Black freedom struggle and his awareness of the symbolic meaning of his physical presence. He might have been nourishing his own interests in Smethwick, but he was also symbolically bringing the African American freedom struggle to Marshall Street. He was a representation of Black pride and uncompromising opposition to racism in all its forms, an image that filled Griffiths and Powell with fear, compelling them to raise the stakes in the British debate over immigration. His appearance in the British Midlands confirms suggestions that his speech in Selma, Alabama, in the first week of February 1965 might have been the first of many appearances in the frontline of civil rights demonstrations in the United States: It would have been easier for him to remain in London, but he chose to venture into the heart of England, far away from what might have been considered his natural home in the Black community of the capital (Perry, 1991, pp. 348-349).

Perhaps more worryingly for Powell—who was watching developments in Smethwick intently—and Griffiths, Malcolm X represented the potential for a new phase in the story of British immigrants. The British immigrant population was particularly small and divided. Its fragile position within the populace militated against an aggressive response to its plight—and to attacks on its tenuous status (Holmes, 1975, pp. 115-117, 121; see also Lindsey, 1993, pp. 83-84). Figures such as Powell and Griffiths were free to comment on race relations safe in the knowledge that a significant minority leader would not challenge them in Birmingham and that their only foes in national politics would be the mendacious and hypocritical establishment that they despised. Although in the United States Malcolm X was a divisive figure even within the civil rights movement, the symbolism of his arrival in the United Kingdom suggested that immigrant political consciousness could coalesce into a British civil rights movement. His decision to broaden his remit to examine the situation that faced Asian immigrants represents a bridge between this group and the Afro-Caribbean population—a larger protest group that had the potential to become an

important voting bloc. His rhetoric in Smethwick is particularly notable and offers a tantalizing view of the potential for multiracial cooperation in the Midlands. In making no distinctions between the various immigrant groups in the Midlands, Malcolm X was not only reflecting Griffiths's rhetoric but suggesting that these very groups unite in opposition to the oppression that they all faced. Although the 1964 campaign graffiti mentioned only "niggers," its implication for Smethwick's Asian population was clear; Malcolm X reversed this homogenization of the immigrant population: The racism that was used to demonize them could unite them and give them power.

Following from his homogenization of the immigrant population, the Smethwick diversion underscores the continued importance of Islam to Malcolm X's thought, which was arguably the crucial factor in enabling him to see beyond the White-Black binary. His experiences in Mecca during his hajj and his travels in Africa during 1964 revealed to him the folly of racial essentialism and led him toward a twin attack on American racism through the Muslim Mosque Inc. and the Organization of African American Unity. His awareness of the salience of racism in contemporary political discourse compelled him to stress the need for minorities to unite around their minority status rather than their racial identity, a policy that was implied by his visit to the relatively diversified minority population of Smethwick and his deliberate use of racially homogenized terminology during his visit. His hybrid identity as an African American Muslim represented a vision of a unified non-White community and his understanding of the need for a common response to White racism might have addressed one of the fundamental problems that beset Birmingham's Black and Asian communities. This identity enabled Malcolm X to appeal both to the United Kingdom's Black population and to the increasing number of Muslims whose families originated from Asia and the Indian subcontinent. The failure to heed Malcolm X's message—that a union of Blacks and Asians could aid both communities—indirectly led to the Black-on-Asian tension that peaked in 2005 with violence on Lozells Road in inner-city Birmingham (Back & Solomos, 1992, pp. 343-345; Vulliamy, 2005, pp. 8-13).

Conclusion

When Malcolm X was murdered 9 days after the Smethwick visit, Clarence Williams commented that Smethwick's name would be associated with the man for some time to come. Despite his animus toward Malcolm X, he declared himself shocked at the violent manner of his death. Only one letter

pertaining to the assassination appeared in the *Telephone*. Rather surprisingly, it praised Malcolm X for not “even fluttering an eyelid of provocation” during his visit to the Midlands and instead condemned the “over-dramatised” response of locals such as Griffiths, chastising the press and the MP for their attempt to censor outside views. For Griffiths, the assassination was a form of divine justice for Malcolm X’s approval of a violent response to oppression. The *Express and Star*’s eulogy included a thinly veiled attack on Griffiths’s glib assessment of Malcolm X’s significance: “Those who were prepared to listen to Malcolm X saw behind his angry intensity and intellectual ardour, a man outraged by the crimes inflicted on his race” (*Birmingham Post*, 1965b, p. 1; *Daily Express*, 1965b, p. 1; *Express and Star*, 1965b, p. 12; *Smethwick Telephone*, 1965c, p. 5). This outrage he brought to Smethwick, helping to create an atmosphere in which Enoch Powell was able to talk of rivers of blood flowing in British streets as a result of racial tension in the inner cities. Yet when 1960s commentators such as Powell talked of the racial situation becoming similar to that in the United States, they were using the unrest as a smokescreen. In his hypocritical, confused, and offensive treatise (which was published after he was ousted from his Parliamentary seat), *A Question of Colour*, Griffiths (1966) warns of the United Kingdom developing its own Harlems and Alabamas and talks of the “many parallels” between American and British race relations. He makes no mention of Malcolm X’s visit to Smethwick, hoping for his readers to forget that Malcolm X had been drawn to his hometown just in case they were reminded of the racism that undergirded his brand of populist politics. Griffiths even cites Martin Luther King’s dislike of American ghettos to bolster his argument, as if to deny Malcolm X’s importance even further (a foreshadow of the American Right’s attempt to co-opt King into its attempt to discredit affirmative action). In particular, Griffiths places great emphasis on how the civil rights movement had its roots in the acceptance of Black Americans as Americans, rather than as an immigrant group, a clear reference to the dangers of the Immigration Acts conferring Britishness on British immigrants. This fear of change was at the center of Griffiths’s stance: In July 1964, he wrote to the *Smethwick Telephone* to insist that he rejected any thought of Britain becoming a multi-racial society, which became a central pillar of his electoral appeal (Hartley-Brewer, 1965, p. 83; *Smethwick Telephone*, 1964, as cited in Hartley-Brewer, 1965). His book’s argument, which calls for an end to all civil rights demonstrations, stresses the role of the movement in the rise of lawlessness, White-on-Black violence, and political disintegration in the United States, repeating the contentions of American segregationists such as George Wallace and Strom Thurmond.⁷

Powell, too, used many features of Wallace's appeal to poor White Americans. Happy to voice the fears and resentments of lower middle- and working-class Whites, Powell developed a populist antiparty persona, much like the Alabamian firebrand. Like Wallace, Powell received messages of support from all classes of White people throughout the nation—as, indeed, did Griffiths—many of which expressed a profound fear of the changes that the racial situation was wringing on the country and a bitter disappointment at the reaction of the mainstream parties to this problem. Powell's grassroots support within the Conservative Party afforded him the opportunity to pull Conservative immigration policy to the right from an outsider position, much as Wallace was able to do to the Republican Party's stance on racial equality. And Malcolm X assisted in creating the atmosphere in which Powell became determined to do so (Carter, 1995; Crossman, 1977, pp. 22, 28, 29; Holmes, 1975, pp. 121-122; Layton-Henry, 1980, pp. 61-63; *Sunday Mercury*, 1964). Between 1964 and 1968, with the Conservative Party softening its stance on immigration, Powell used the issue to boost his support in the nation. A rebuke from Ted Heath in 1966 led to a moratorium on Powell's statements but the summer 1967 riots in various American cities returned race to the national agenda. Powell's intention in his April 1968 speech was to provoke people to think of the Detroit and Newark riots, of Watts, Chicago, and Mississippi, where racial tension had erupted into violence and death. But deeper than this, Powell feared the terms of debate shifting. He, like many British politicians, was concerned about the tacit acceptance of the United Kingdom's Black and Asian population and their transformation from immigrants to Black and Asian Britons, one which might create the psychological and social atmosphere in which these people could begin to unite and agitate for equality. In 1958, an anonymous West Indian man commented to the *Birmingham Post and Gazette*: "In America I should be accepted as a coloured American in ten years. If I stay in England for 40 years I shall still be a foreigner" (*Birmingham Post and Gazette*, 1958, as quoted in Solomos & Back, 1995, p. 50). Powell—and Griffiths—hoped for this to remain so; although Malcolm X would have disputed that matters were so simple in the United States, he brought the threat of this attitude with him when he arrived in Smethwick. The roots of Powell's 1968 speech were arguably laid down by Griffiths's campaign in Smethwick, but the nebulous fears that Griffiths wrought on local politics were brought into sharp focus by Malcolm X's appearance in the same town in February 1965.

Notes

1. Former West Bromwich Albion football manager Ron Atkinson's notorious racist quip, captured on an ITV broadcast in April 2004, returned casual Midlands racism to the front pages. Atkinson—who was raised in the Midlands and still lives in Birmingham—could not comprehend that his offensive comments about Black French footballer Marcel Desailly were racist and relied on his track record for promoting Black footballers at West Brom, namely Laurie Cunningham, Brendon Batson, and Cyrille Regis, as evidence of his colorblind attitude (“What I Said Was Racist—But I’m Not a Racist. I Am an Idiot,” 2004). Dave Bowler and Jas Bains, in *Samba in the Smethwick End: Regis, Cunningham, Batson and the Football Revolution* (2000), suggest that his transcendence of 1970s racism was a result of the footballers’ talent rather than any Damascene conversion (Atkinson, 1999; “The Big Ron Affair: Your Views,” 2004; “Why Big Ron Is No Racist,” 2004).

2. Griffiths’s racist attitudes became obvious with the publication of *A Question of Color?* in 1966, shortly after Smethwick’s voters had removed Griffiths from his Parliamentary seat, which includes statements such as ‘It seems clear from historical evidence that urban civilization is natural to Caucasian and Mongoloid peoples. It is most certainly not the natural environment for Negroes’ and ‘Pakistanis are Moslems and very few of the [Pakistani] immigrants [to the UK] are more than barely literate.’ Griffiths, *Question* pp. 22, 35; pp. 171-172 for the slogan issue.

3. During the campaign the *Evening Mail* reported that Jordan’s wife was fined and bound over for assaulting a Jewish taxi driver from Wolverhampton after he refused her entry to his vehicle. Upon discovering the man’s identity, she commented, ‘if you are a Jew, what are you doing out of the ovens?’ *Birmingham Evening Mail and Despatch* (1965c).

4. Unfortunately, the curse of 1960s BBC cataloguing has befallen the interview, which seems to have been lost in the dustbin of history. The Public Record Office only contains a note on Malcolm X’s death, making no mention of either of his visits to the UK; the published FBI files are similarly blank on the UK trips. It is certain that Malcolm X was under surveillance and likely that any MI5 or MI6 papers are still sealed.

5. This postbag was never published – a consequence of the assassination of Malcolm X the following week.

6. Clarence Williams was quite possibly correct in stating that ‘it is most regrettable that this additional blaze of publicity should be brought to the town by ill-informed people who seem to want to make Smethwick a public platform for their own particular views.’ *Daily Express*, 13 February 1965a, p. 7.

7. The section on U.S. race relations is largely erroneous in matters of fact and interpretation.

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