

# Poverty is the new Black

*An introduction by A. Sivanandan*

Racism has always been an instrument of discrimination. And discrimination has always been a tool of exploitation. Racism, in that sense, has always been rooted in the economic compulsions of the capitalist system. But it manifests itself, first and foremost, as a cultural phenomenon, susceptible to cultural solutions such as multicultural education and the promotion of ethnic identities. Redressing the problem of cultural inequality, however, does not by itself redress the problem of economic inequality. Racism needs to be tackled at both levels – the cultural and the economic – at once, remembering that the one provides the rationale for the other. Racism, in sum, is conditioned by economic imperatives, but negotiated through cultural agency: religion, literature, art, science, the media and so on.

Which of these agencies, though, holds sway in a particular epoch is itself dependent on the economic system of that epoch. Thus, in the period of primitive accumulation, when the pillage and plunder of the new world by Spanish conquistadors was laying the foundations of capitalism, it was religion in the form of the Catholic Church that gave validity to the concept that the native Indians were ‘sub-homines’, the children of Ham, born to be slaves, and could therefore be enslaved and/or exterminated at will. In the period of merchant capital, when the monarch was no longer subordinate to the Church and the bourgeoisie was in its ascendancy, the racist ideas of the earlier period became secularised in popular literature, political discourse and education and served to rationalise and justify the trade in black slaves.

With the development of industrial capitalism and its corollary, colonialism, the racist ideas of the previous epochs congealed into a systemic racist ideology to condemn all ‘coloured’ peoples to racial and cultural inferiority. By the end of the nineteenth century, at the height of the imperial adventure, the ideology of racial superiority began to take on a pseudo-scientific validity in the Social Darwinism of Gobineau and Chamberlain – which in turn further popularised the view of racial hierarchies.

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Today, under global capitalism which, in its ruthless pursuit of markets and its sanctification of wealth, has served to unleash ethnic wars, balkanise countries and displace their peoples, the racist tradition of demonisation and exclusion has become a tool in the hands of the state to keep out the refugees and asylum seekers so displaced – even if they are white – on the grounds that they are scroungers and aliens come to prey on the wealth of the West and confound its national identities. The rhetoric of demonisation, in other words, is racist, but the politics of exclusion is economic. Demonisation is a prelude to exclusion, social and therefore economic exclusion, to creating a peripatetic underclass, international Untermenschen.

Once, ‘they’ demonised the Blacks to justify slavery. Then they demonised the ‘coloureds’ to justify colonialism. Today, they demonise asylum seekers to justify the ways of globalism. And, in the age of the media, of discourse, of spin, demonisation sets out the parameters of popular culture within which such exclusion finds its own rationale – usually under the guise of xenophobia, the (natural) fear of strangers. Such a term, it is thought, would include white refugees and asylum seekers streaming in from eastern Europe, whereas the term racism strictly refers to people of a different race and colour. Xenophobia, besides, is innocent, racism culpable.

But the other side of the coin of ‘the fear or hatred of strangers’ is the defence and preservation of ‘our people’, our way of life, our standard of living, our ‘race’. If it is xenophobia, it is – in the way it denigrates and reifies people before segregating and/or expelling them – a xenophobia that bears all the marks of the old racism, except that it is not colour-coded. It is a racism that is not just directed at those with darker skins, from the former colonial countries, but at the newer categories of the displaced and dispossessed whites, who are beating at western Europe’s doors, the Europe that displaced them in the first place. It is racism in substance but xeno in form – a racism that is meted out to impoverished strangers even if they are white. It is xeno-racism.

Xeno-racism is a feature of the Manichaean world of global capitalism, where there are only the rich and the poor – and poverty is the new Black. Where the national state works primarily in the interests of multinational corporations, where the national bourgeoisie collaborates with international capital, where the middle class is effete and self-serving and the working class, disaggregated and dispersed by technology, has lost its political clout.

That is the context within which we have got to adjudge the changing nature of racism and from that, conversely, adjudge the nature of the society we live in.

In Britain, with its long tradition of racism over five centuries and three continents, racial prejudice has become an intrinsic part of

popular culture, racial discrimination has come to inhere in the institutions of society and racist laws and policies have characterised state intervention at the point of economic need. But today, the state is much more regulatory and interventionist – in the interests, ironically, of an unregulated market – though wanting to appear open and democratic. Thus, in its avowedly liberal mode, it is prepared to go along with the Macpherson recommendations and dismantle institutional racism, especially in the public sector, but in its self-justifying regulatory mode, it brings institutional discrimination back into the system through the Immigration and Asylum Act, with its dispersal schemes, its voucher system and detention camps. And it is this demonisation of refugees and asylum seekers rather than the move to dismantle institutional racism that has caught the public's attention, resonating as it does with its misgivings about the 'alien invasion' – and so stoked the fires of popular racism. In the course of which, the fight against institutional racism itself has taken a beating.

There are other changes in the law, too, which, though affecting the population in general, impact more harshly on black communities and further institutionalise racism in the criminal justice system. Thus the proposal to abolish the right of defendants to elect to be tried by a jury for offences such as minor theft, assault and criminal damage, will affect black people more adversely because they are over-represented in those areas – not least because they are stopped and searched, arrested and charged more often than white people. To remove their right to request trial by jury, therefore, and put them up for summary trial before magistrates, who are perceived to be on the side of the police, is to deny them one of the few remaining legal safeguards against unfair treatment.

So too the Terrorism Act 2000, which gives the home secretary powers to proscribe any organisation which, according to him, threatens violence to advance 'a political, religious, or ideological cause' criminalises the liberation struggles of those who have fled the tyrannies of their own countries and, in the process, stigmatises them as terrorists.

In sum, the laws, the administration, the criminal justice system – the whole state apparatus in Britain – is rife with racism and gives the lie to the government's pretensions to counter institutional racism and the culture which gives it a habitation and a name. At first glance, British racism would appear to have three faces – state, institutional, popular – but, in effect, it has one face with three expressions, the face of the state. To put it another way, institutional racism and popular racism are woven into state racism and it is only in unravelling that that you begin to unravel the fabric of racism.

Except that now there is another problem compounding racial conflict: poverty – the systemic poverty of a society which, at the dictates of

a free market economy, is becoming increasingly polarised between the haves and the have-nothings. This has often been characterised as the North/South divide, with the North belonging to dead industries and the South to the modern economy. But there are pockets of poverty both in the North and the South, where mills and mines, docks and ship-yards, steel and textiles have disappeared or been relocated by technology and the global factory. What is more to the point, however, is not so much the geography of decay as the composition of the working class in these industries and its subsequent disaggregation and segregation.

Some of these industries, such as mining, dock-work and shipbuilding, had a workforce that was almost wholly white, whereas the steel and textile mills of Yorkshire and Lancashire, and textiles in particular, had also recruited labour from the Indian sub-continent. And it was these mill towns that the government, either by default or design, failed to bring into the modern economy, through investment or retraining, when the old industries had died. The white workers were able to move out to other jobs elsewhere, but racism and family ties (which was the only 'network' available to them) pointed Bangladeshis and Pakistanis towards restaurant work and mini-cabbing – and the sense of solidarity and comradeship between white and Asian workers that had been engendered on the factory floor was lost. Segregation in housing, resulting from local government policies, separated the communities further and led to the segregation in schooling of the next generation. Multiculturalism, which was really a sop to white racism (people don't need to be given their cultures, only their rights) and its updated Scarman model, ethnicism, deepened the fissures between ethnic groups. And ethnic funding, instead of improving the local economy as a whole, helped only to improve the personal economy of a few – some of whom made it into the town halls and Tammany Hall style politics, where the currency of corruption was not money so much as communalism and religion.

All of which served to brand the Bangladeshis and Pakistanis as self-segregating and better served by local authorities than the local whites. That the former were mostly Muslim Asians, as distinct from other Asians, served to focus white hate on Islam. And it was that potent combination of racial and religious hatred that provided the breeding ground for the electoral politics of the British National Party, on the one hand, and the *goonda* politics of the National Front, on the other – and provoked the uprisings of young Asians in Oldham, Bradford, Burnley, Leeds, Stoke.

What were the youth to do? They had been born here, schooled here, grown up here, had been media-maddened by all the good things in life that could be, should be, available to them – and yet all around them were 'the rocks, moss, stoncrop, merds' of the industrial wastelands

of derelict Britain. Whatever leadership there was had either retreated into the safety of religion or defected to the service of local and central government, from where they condemned the youth while feathering their own nests.

No economic infrastructures or hope of socialisation through work. No political parties, no ideology, no political culture – to unite the fragmented communities, to develop an alternative politics, to emerge as a political force – all that had died with New Labour. Locked into their degradation and defeat by a racist police force, vilified by a racist press and violated, finally, by the true fascists. What were the youth to do but break out in violence, self-destructive, reactive violence, the violence of choicelessness, the violence of the violated?