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# “We’re Here Because You Were There”: Britain’s Black Population

By  
Louis Kushnick

The existence of a black population in Britain is the result of Britain’s imperialist history. The conquest of large parts of the world and their incorporation into a new world system dominated by Britain and other European nations not only created the economic basis of the capitalist system, but also set in motion massive movements of—and, indeed, constructions of—peoples. The creation of the African-American and African-Caribbean peoples are examples of this phenomenon: “We’re here because you were there.”

The hundreds of years of the slave trade and plantation economies involved the enforced movement of hundreds of millions of people from established societies with their own cultures and patterns of marriage and created new peoples whose cultures and languages were born in the fight against slavery and resistance to racism in all its forms.

Asians, as well as Africans, were part of these historical processes of migration—not as slaves, but often as indentured laborers brought to Trinidad, Guyana, and the Cape colony in South Africa. Others were recruited to work as functionaries or merchants in Britain’s African colonies. In addition to the construction of new cultures and peoples, the cultures left in place in the British Empire were also influenced by colonial rule and its consequences. It was from these populations, all affected by imperialism and its supporting racist ideology, that Britain’s black population originated.

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There were, of course, blacks living in Britain before the construction of this worldwide system.<sup>1</sup> The largest part of this population, however, owes its presence to Britain’s recruitment of labor during the two world wars and particularly during the post-World War II period. Blacks were brought to Britain to fill in the gaps created by the exigencies of war and the needs of reconstruction. They were often brought in through the direct efforts of



certain governmental bodies: Among them were the Ministry of Labour’s recruitment efforts in sixteen colonies and former colonies in 1948 on behalf of the newly created National Health Service; the efforts of London Transport during the 1950s to recruit African Caribbeans to work in London; and the recruitment efforts of such industry bodies as the catering industry in the Caribbean or the foundry industry in the Indian Subcontinent that also took place during the 1950s.

Blacks were recruited as “cheap labor”—that is, workers who would be willing to do the worst jobs at the lowest pay. This depended, of course, not upon any real characteristics of blacks which made them “cheap,” which made them willing to do the worst jobs at the worst pay, but upon the existing popular culture of racism, which had been inculcated and reinforced by the education system<sup>2</sup> and by the range of institutions shaping popular culture including theater, music hall, melodrama, and children’s literature.<sup>3</sup> For example:

Some plays from the early nineteenth century did display class tensions. By the end of the century such class antagonism had disappeared from melodrama. By then, imperial subjects offered a perfect opportunity to externalize the villain, who increasingly became the corrupt rajah, the ludicrous Chinese or Japanese nobleman, the barbarous “fuzzy-wuzzy” or black, facing a cross-class brotherhood of heroism, British officer and ranker together. Thus imperialism was depicted as a great struggle with dark and evil forces, in which white heroes and heroines could triumph over black barbarism, and the moral stereotyping of melodrama was given a powerful racial twist.<sup>4</sup>

## The Creation of a State Racism

This popular racism was reinforced and relegitimated by state racism taking the form of a series of racist immigration laws enacted between 1962 and 1971, passed by both Conservative and Labour governments—bipartisanship in action—and justified on the grounds that it was the number of blacks entering the country which created problems and poor race relations. Such an approach would, supposedly, create good race relations by allaying white fears over the number of blacks immigrating into the country. In fact, such legislation, and the use by politicians of the racist logic behind it, has reinforced popular racism and militated against good race relations by continuing to define black people as *the other*, as *outsiders*. Thus, the level of racial violence in Britain in 1993—thirty-one years after the passage of the Commonwealth Immigration Act, twenty-eight years after the Labour Government's 1965 Immigration White Paper, twenty-five years after Labour's Kenyan Asian Act, and twenty-two years after the Conservative's second piece of legislation, the 1971 Act—is higher than in Germany where racial violence has been in the news.<sup>5</sup>

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Racism appearing in many forms in all areas of society—in the workplace, in the housing market, in the schools, and in the criminal justice system—produced certain consequences identified by Sivanandan: "Because of the undifferentiated racism meted out to us in the community and in the workplace, we came together at a particular moment of time as blacks and not solely as Afro-Caribbeans, Asians, and Africans. Black was the colour of our politics, while Asian, African, etc. was the colour of our culture."<sup>6</sup> The question now facing us is to what extent black political identity has remained central to Britain's black community—or whether the cultural identities have become central.

It is clear that political unity among communities of color was not in the interests of the British state. In fact, state strategies, supported by major sections of the British media, operated to break such a unity. Asians were portrayed in the media as being hard-working, as having strong families and cultures as well as a clearly differentiated class structure which could be slotted into the existing class system. The leaders of the Asian community, the elders, could thereby control the politics of the masses of Asians. The African Caribbeans, on the other hand, were not only seen as lacking the characteristics of hard work, ambition, commitment to education, and strong families and cultures, but, worst of all, from the point of view of the state's need to control them, they had no clearly differentiated class structure.

Thus, as Lord Scarman argued in his "riot report" of 1981, following the uprisings in Brixton and other centers of black population:

The encouragement of black people to secure a real stake in their own community, through business and the professions, is in my view of great importance if future social stability is to be secure . . . A weakness in British society is that there are too few people of West Indian origin in the business, entrepreneurial, and professional class.<sup>7</sup>

As the reality of British capitalism made expansion of the West Indian entrepreneurial middle class unlikely, the emphasis of state action became the creation of a functionary stratum within the African-Caribbean community.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the characteristics once presumed to be beneficial of a strong Asian culture and family life eventually became a threat to British society as a result of illegal immigration, arranged marriages, and the refusal to integrate. The West Indians continued to be defined in negative terms while intellectuals and decision makers brought language and concepts from the United States to justify these negative stereotypes: for example, the term *mugging* appeared in general usage and served to racialize street crime<sup>9</sup>—as if there had never been street crime before African Caribbeans appeared on the scene—and Scarman imported Daniel Patrick Moynihan to locate the roots of alienation and crime in the matriarchal, broken West Indian family.

The various state strategies employed during the 1970s and 1980s, for example, hit the component parts of the black community differently and encouraged distinct and specific responses. The attack on African-Caribbean youth as "muggers" focused that community's energies in defense of its youth. The state's attack on the Asian community as illegal immigrants, or the potential sponsors of illegal immigrants, focused that community's energies in a series of antideportation or family reunification campaigns. Without effective and far-sighted leadership identifying the common roots of these attacks along with the need for common strategies to combat racism, the divisions that were present became more central.

In addition, there was state and media encouragement of these differences. State funding of ethnically or religiously defined groups was more forthcoming than for black or racially defined groups. Careerist, petty bourgeois individuals were encouraged to grab hold of the variety of cooptation responses by the state to the 1980, 1981, and 1985 uprisings and to the attempts to construct the functionary stratum of the West Indian middle class. The media encouraged conflicts between the different groups, privileging first one group, then another. The most outrageous examples occurred following the September 1985 uprising in Handsworth.

After Handsworth the press took readers on a tour of enemy territory, providing them with a

“know your blacks” guide to the weird ways of rastafarians, the intra-ethnic rivalries of the Asian community, the hatred of black from brown, the stark contrast between the intrinsic lawlessness, laziness and incapacity of the former, and the law-abiding industriousness of the latter. Only the *Guardian* made room for local testimony which emphasized that Asian and Afro-Caribbean communities in Handsworth were “united by poverty” and the common experience of white racism and police harassment. The daily press generally was more interested in the supposed “imported” hostilities and jealousies which riddled the “immigrant community.” When “racism” was mentioned at all as a contributory cause of the “riots,” it was the “racism” of “bitter blacks” who “hate the Asians.” Handsworth was, accordingly, an “uprising against Asians” by “wild, undisciplined” West Indian youths, jealous of their economic success.<sup>10</sup>

In the years since the demonstrations by Muslims against publication of Salman Rushdie’s controversial novel, *Satanic Verses*, and following the Gulf War, attacks on Islam, fundamentalism, and on Muslims themselves have increased, with the word *Muslim* becoming a term of abuse. This has reinforced what Martin Barker has called “The New Racism”—a racism focused on the presumed cultural differences of the *outsiders* which makes them unsuitable for integration into *our* society.<sup>11</sup>

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### Conclusion

The challenge facing those in the black community in Britain who want to fight against state racism and the popular racism which feeds on it is the need to reconstruct the black political identity. Such a reconstruction would have to take account of the new forms of European racism<sup>12</sup> in order to develop a more inclusive identity that would “make common cause with refugees and asylum seekers, who are the new blacks if you like.”<sup>13</sup> Such a black politics would then be at the center of the struggle for social justice and democracy for all in Britain and Europe.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Peter Fryer, *Staying Power* (London: Pluto Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup>See Pamela Horn, “Children of the Empire,” *The Times Educational Supplement* 3648 (30 May 1986): 19; and J. A. Mangan, ed., *The Imperial Curriculum: Racial Images and Education in the British Colonial Experience* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>3</sup>See John M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880–1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>5</sup>See Colin Brown, *Black and White Britain: The Third PSI Survey* (London: Heineman, 1984); Commission for Racial Equality, *Racial Attacks—Survey of Eight Areas of Britain* (London: 1987); Jeremy Cooper and Tarek Qureshi, *Through Patterns Not Our Own: A Study of the Regulation of Racial Violence on the Council Estates of East London* (London: New Ethnicities Research and Education Group, 1993); Liz Fekete, “Racist Violence: Meeting the New Challenges,” *Race and Class* 30, No. 2 (October–December 1988): 71–6; Glyn Ford, *Fascist Europe: The Rise of Racism and Xenophobia* (London: Pluto Press, 1992); Norman Ginsburg, “Racial Harassment Policy and Practice: The Denial of Citizenship,” *Critical Social Policy* 26 (Autumn 1989): 66–81; Greater London Council, *Racial Harassment in London* (London: 1984); Independent Committee of Inquiry into Racial Harassment, *Racial Harassment in Leeds, 1985–86* (Leeds: Leeds Community Relations Council, 1987); Institute of Race Relations, *Policing Against Black People* (London: IRR, 1987); London Borough of Waltham Forest, *Beneath the Surface: An Inquiry into Racial Harassment in the London Borough of Waltham Forest* (1990); Sheffield Racial Harassment Project, *Because Their Skin is Black* (Sheffield City Council, 1988); Keith Tompson, *Under Siege: Racism and Violence in Britain Today* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1988); Dave Walsh, *Racial Harassment in Glasgow* (Glasgow: Scottish Ethnic Minorities Research Unit, 1987).

<sup>6</sup>A. Sivanandan, “Black is a Political Colour,” *Labour Briefing* (February 1993): 8–9.

<sup>7</sup>Lord Scarman, *The Brixton Disorders, 10–12 April 1981, Report of an Inquiry* (London: HMSO, Cmd 842d7, 1981), 107.

<sup>8</sup>See Louis Kushnick, “Parameters of British and North American Racism,” *Race and Class* 23, Nos. 2/3 (Autumn/Winter 1981–82): 187–206.

<sup>9</sup>See Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978); Institute of Race Relations, *Policing Against Black People* (London: IRR, 1987); David J. Smith, *Police and People in London*, 4 volumes (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1983).

<sup>10</sup>Nancy Murray, “Reporting the Riots,” *Race and Class* 27, No. 3 (Winter 1986): 86–90.

<sup>11</sup>See Martin Barker, *The New Racism: Conservatives and the Ideology of the Tribe* (London: Junction Books, 1981).

<sup>12</sup>See Louis Kushnick, *Race and Politics in Europe*, Occasional Paper No. 21 (Boston: William Monroe Trotter Institute, University of Massachusetts, Boston, 1993) and “Parameters of British and North American Racism”; Glyn Ford, *Fascist Europe*.

<sup>13</sup>Sivanandan, “Black is a Political Colour.”

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