

3. Some Thoughts on the Theory, History and Politics of Race and Class, or, Why Class Analysis Must Take Race Seriously

Satnam Virdee

University of Glasgow

It is perhaps fitting that we begin this dialogue on race and class at the LSE. As many of you know, the London School of Economics was established in 1895 by four leading members of the Fabian Society – Beatrice Webb, Sidney Webb, George Bernard Shaw and Graham Wallas – with the explicit aim of bettering British society by focusing research on issues of social inequality. You also probably know that these individuals provided much of the intellectual stimulus for the newly founded Labour Party. What is perhaps less well-known is that they were the chief proponents of a perspective that attempted to make a hitherto uninterested, unskilled working class more conscious of ‘its’ Empire and the role it needed to play in its defence. And they did so by re-interpreting the original demands of the new unionism – of economic and social justice for the working class – as not an end in itself, but rather as a means of maintaining Britain’s imperialist ambitions abroad.

This kind of reasoning can be traced right up to the post-war consensus, where we find state attempts to integrate the working class into the nation through the twin principles of ‘citizenship’ and ‘social welfare’ was at the same time deeply entwined with discourses of race. William Beveridge – LSE Director between 1919 and 1937, a Liberal, but someone who was profoundly influenced by the Webbs – wrote in *Children’s Allowances and the Race* (1942):

Pride of race is a reality for the British as for other peoples ... [In] Britain today as we look back with pride and gratitude to our ancestors, look back as a nation or as individuals two hundred years and more to the generations illuminated by Marlborough or Cromwell or Drake, are we not bound also to look forward, to plan society now so that there may be no lack of men or women of the quality of those early days, of the best of our breed, two hundred and three hundred years hence?

Given how class was racialized in the field of politics, that is, to think about the working class was to think about it with regard to questions of race, Empire and national belonging, it seems all the more curious how infrequently race and racism have featured in

academic accounts of class in Britain. Such erasure combined with occlusion is no longer acceptable if we are to take racism seriously in class analysis. So, what kind of theoretical resources might help us conceptualize notions of race and class in articulation?

Theorizing race and class

My theoretical starting point is Stuart Hall because he helps to transform our theoretical understanding of race and class through a critical engagement with the structuralist-Marxism of Althusser and the Marxist-humanism of Gramsci; a ‘Marxism without guarantees’ that is both attentive to history and the significance of contingency in the field of politics. One of the most important insights emerges from his re-thinking of the concept of ideology. For Hall, ideology cannot be reduced to a form of false consciousness, a thinly constructed mask of false ideas or beliefs, but should instead be understood as a sort of unquestioning imaginary that represents the real world, and that provides individuals in society with what he terms:

... those systems of meaning, concepts, categories and representations which make sense of the world, and through which individuals come to ‘live’ ... in an imaginary way, their relation to the real, material conditions of their existence. (Hall, 1980: 334)

So, we can no longer think of the idea of race as something superficial, an unwelcome accretion on an otherwise healthy British polity. Rather, it is an idea that has a long history, one that suggests it forms an intrinsic component of the fabric of British society, including working-class culture. How could it be otherwise in a nation-state that was the imperial hegemon of the world-system and whose Empire – which encompassed a quarter of the world’s land surface and a fifth of its global population – was legitimized through such discourses, both abroad and at home?

Hall also draws our attention to how parts of the British working class can often interpret their class-based subjugation through the lens of ‘race’, and sometimes seek to mobilize on this basis to maintain their economic and political security such that race

becomes ‘the modality in which class is “lived”, the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and “fought through”.’ What marks out Hall’s analysis as so innovative is the way he further develops his conception of ideology to analytically capture questions of identity formation and resistance to domination. For me, this is where first Gramsci and then post-structuralism allow Hall to break free from the Althusserian understanding that only dominant ideologies can be reproduced, and which therefore precludes the possibility of individuals resisting the process of interpellation. For Hall, there is a struggle over meaning, including over ascribed racist interpellations such that, under certain conditions, these racist identifications can also be appropriated by the racialized, and infused with a new ideology of resistance to counter racism and discrimination:

The racist interpellations can become themselves the sites and stake in the ideological struggle, occupied and redefined to become elementary forms of an oppositional formation ... The ideologies of racism remain contradictory structures, which can function both as vehicles for the imposition of dominant ideologies, and as the elementary forms for the cultures of resistance. (Hall, 1980: 342)

A historical sociology of race and class in Britain

Informed by these kinds of theoretical considerations, my book *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider* represents an attempt to stretch the concept of class so that it can both accommodate the ethnic diversity of the English working class, and allow me to assess the significance of racism and anti-racism within it, over two centuries. Or, to put it another way, I have tried to recover the social experiences of the racialized minority worker from the condescension of sociologists and historians of class and work who, by systematically ignoring their presence, have effectively ‘whitewashed’ that history.

So, what are the analytic returns? We can no longer underestimate the deep, structuring power of racism within the English working class and its key institutions. Let me illustrate this with an example from the late nineteenth century, where socialist-inspired collective action in pursuit of economic and social justice for those parts of the working class excluded from the mid-Victorian reforms justified their claims with reference to a racializing socialist nationalism that could not accommodate migrant workers like the newly arrived Jews escaping pogroms in the Tsarist empire. Ben Tillett – the

dockers’ leader – was a typical case in point. His support for Jewish workers attempting to organize themselves remained lukewarm at best. It was shaped by a pragmatic, instrumental collectivism which recognized the need to curtail expressions of overt antisemitism only because it risked fatally undermining the broader class solidarity forged in opposition to the employers. When referring to the Jewish workers, he declared: ‘yes, you are our brothers and we will stand by you. But we wish you had not come’ (cited in Virdee, 2014: 50).

My argument is this. The idea of the nation operated as a power container, limiting the political imagination of even those who considered themselves to be representatives of the most exploited and oppressed. While the conceptions of national belonging that underpinned the vision of socialist activists like Tillett were undoubtedly broader than those forged by the elites of the time, and in that sense sought to democratize society, they nevertheless attempted to do so by identifying new racialized others. In this case it was the Jews, who could not be imagined as English by virtue of their alleged race and religion.

Indeed, this expanded understanding of national belonging gained growing legitimacy among the unorganized working class precisely because it was able to portray elite conceptions of national belonging as unjust due to the exclusion of those like themselves who were also English and Christian, and therefore deserving of fair and equal treatment. As a result, each time the boundary of the nation was extended to more members of the working class, this was accompanied and legitimized by a racialized nationalism that excluded more recent arrivals. This dual process of democratization and racist exclusion was to be repeated throughout the twentieth century, with different migrant groups and their English-born children in the firing line each time.

If one part of my book (Virdee, 2014) highlights the powerful structuring force of racism in English society over two centuries, the other focuses on those few but nevertheless important moments of multi-ethnic class solidarity when parts of the working class collectively suppressed expressions of racism. Critical to this process of class formation which went through race, not around it, was a social actor that I have termed the racialized outsider – who in different historical periods happened to be Irish Catholic, Jewish, Asian, African and Caribbean. Reading English labour history against the grain, with these racialized outsiders written back into the narrative, transforms our understanding of the broad contours of that history. We find, for instance, that it

was minority men and women – against whom the dominant conception of English/British nationalism was constructed – who helped to universalize the militant, yet often particularistic, fights of the working class precisely because they were more able to see through the fog of blood, soil and belonging that forms such a constitutive component of racializing nationalisms. These racialized outsiders were the linchpin – the key mediating agent – that helped to align struggles against racism with those against class exploitation.

Our understanding of those defining moments when the working class in England emerged as a class-for-itself, including the 'heroic age of the proletariat', Chartism, the new unionism, and the anti-systemic strike wave of the 1970s and early 1980s, look strikingly different from the conventional accounts when we write race back into that story. By reading that history through the lens of race, through the eyes of racialized minorities who were present in every one of those moments, we find that race and class were mutually constitutive in the making of the English working class.

References

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