

The meaning of "black"

Paul Gilroy discusses the politics of anti-racism, the meaning of "black" and the black British experience*

IT IS CRAZY that there is not one single, organised voice for anti-racism. Why is this not possible? Why can people not reach the sort of minimal agreement which is necessary?

I hope that younger people with a little bit more clarity will come forward, as they did in the past, and a new activism will emerge, rooted in local communities.

Most of all, the political language of anti-racism must be regenerated. And that is not the same thing as wheeling out the bogey of the Nazis again. We need to be able to discuss racial violence without continually reducing it to a group of young, white men who shout Sieg Heil one minute and demand the return of Winston Churchill the next.

I am not trying to say that what the Nazis do is irrelevant. If you are on the wrong end of their abuse it is *very* relevant. The thing is not to look at the issue of racism only through the Isle of Dogs.

I do not feel that white supremacy has to be defeated only by black leaders. I would be perfectly happy to see white people play leading roles in defeating white supremacy. I would not want anyone to be intimidated away from taking responsibility in that fight. This can lead to all sorts of cynicism and tokenism.

If we take up the issue in this way racism becomes our issue — just the property of black people. That would be a disaster. Racism is not our issue, any more than economics is just an issue for an idealised version of the white working class.

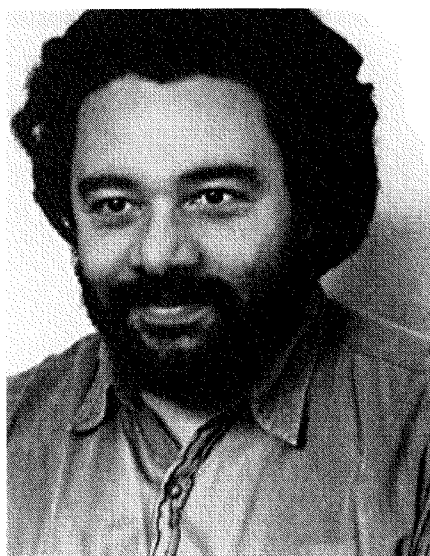
The real issues in the struggle are: what strategies do people propose? what do people do?

We have seen a "black leadership" parachute into bits of South London. The next week they turn up somewhere else — the dog barks, the caravan moves on.

These are simple matters to solve — the only strange thing is how enduring these issues are.

I WOULD not want to let the ideologues of a certain type of anti-racism off the hook. Anti-racism was made into a political ideology of a narrow type — good in all situations, for all people. During the 1980s this narrow ideology migrated into the local state — into the boroughs. There it was further shrunk and truncated and we were left with a very bureaucratic anti-racism.

That was a tragedy. And it was also a



peculiar thing to happen — given the amount of energy that existed at the time, outside the local state structures.

Activists went to the local state for funding, but by doing so they sacrificed a certain measure of their independence and political creativity. A client relationship was formed and the activists became brokers who had to deliver for the local state.

Nevertheless, I would not explain the breakdown of fragile coalitions and the rise of ethnicity just by the effect of local government. Partly it was anti-racism as an ideology that precipitated this disastrous outcome — the attempt to go back to a very economistic Marxism generated and shaped the hunger for a pure truth that only ethnicity can provide. If the desire for a kind of belonging is just dismissed in favour of the dry categories of economistic Marxism, people may well react and look for a more comfortable place to be.

I THINK THE idea of a commonality of black experience does work. But it only works to explain a small number of communities. It may well explain past events in Handsworth. It may help us understand how a rap singer like Apache Indian emerged. Or the situation in parts of West London.

It is in the attempt to generalise the idea that problems arise. It is not a universal recipe.

Black? What relevance does it have? Yet, if we do not find a way of addressing people in a way that notes their response to the categories in which they experience subordination, we will simply not be able to talk to them.

There has certainly been a specific black community in the past. I do not see why there can not be again.

The term "black" can be used and developed. What I am against is the idea that the black community exists in advance of our efforts to create it.

I like the notion of "black" because it is

not ethnically coded and does not have a specific cultural content. It is certainly better than these clumsy, long-winded phrases like "people of African descent."

"Black" is a transitional term which we can use with care, pending its abolition. One day all that colour-coding and symbolism will be seen to be redundant.

In order to avoid mystification we also have to be able to give weight to the differences within the category "black". So, yes, "black" is shorthand. And I am not talking about an undifferentiated sameness. I am talking about a coalition and about the power of racism to shape people. I am not suggesting that there is some sort of essence of blackness that people can plug into.

PEOPLE MIGRATE to the actually existing structures. So people join the Labour Party. Then the next thing that happens is that they say — right, let's organise as black people. It is not that I disagree with their right to do this. But it is an attempt at a short cut. The actual issue is: how do we develop a political presence which is respected? This means facing some very hard questions — to do with the way that class and economic divisions stop and fragment the possibilities of community.

The central issue is this: where the divisions of history, experience and ideology exist within the community, we have to actually admit their existence. Beyond that we should examine why some people go into a form of denial about the significance of those divisions.

In the *Guardian* in the past few days their series on the state of black Britain has continually shown how the class question filters through.

There are those who say there is no black middle class. And spokespeople for that black middle class try to mystify and confuse their relationship to the black poor. The poor are counted — at best — as clients. At worst they are objects of middle-class power.

Some of the issues being raised in black politics are surfacing in response to the dilemma of the black middle class. It is parasitic on the black poor. In effect it is employed as translators, brokers to deliver the black poor for whatever institution they work for.

Of course it would be an advance to discuss poverty *as such*. Then to discuss the way poverty disproportionately affects black people. If we do this the whole way we view the issue of racism will be changed.

In addition to all other factors racism is an issue. But both matters must be considered. Just discussing racism will not address or solve the other issues. ■

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