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Race Relations in Britain Since 1945

Harry Goulbourne

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*For SM
who, whilst suffering the chill of early wintry wakenings,
provided support*

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None the less, after taking account of the variety of influences which go into the completion of a book, I remain responsible for all the shortcomings as well as the views expressed in the discussion that follows.

Preface

In a recent polemical article the political theorist Bernard Crick argued that because there 'is no such thing as race, only the destructive and false belief in the concept' it behoves us to 'throw the R-word away' (*New Statesman*, 18 November 1996, p. 49). Struck by Crick's certainty and by the brevity and sharpness of the piece rather than the force of the argument, I decided to use it as the basis of a discussion at a third-year sociology seminar on the notion of a field of race relations. The essential question was whether the notion of such a field of social and historical study is universally shared by social scientists and historians. To my surprise, most of the students agreed with Crick's position and turned on writers who, like me, are inclined to use the term, albeit with all the necessary qualifications. Like Crick, the students were of the view that there is no such thing as 'race', apart from the human race, and they therefore felt that the concept has no place in social life or explanatory value in sociological and historical analyses of human affairs. Moreover, like Crick the students suggested that by utilising the dangerous concept of race in national legislation and in popular and academic discourses, Parliament, campaigners for racial equality and academics contribute to the longevity of a palpable fallacy against which they purport to fight. By the end of the seminar I knew that there was a democratic majority of the group who opposed my argument and supported Crick and others who proffer a view that seems to me to run in the face of reality.

This reality is not that humanity can be properly divided into racial categories. Rather, it is that however false the claim to natural racial differentiation within the human species may be, it is a sociological fact that people's beliefs, attitudes and behaviour, as well as the socio-economic and political structures we establish, are informed by such differentiation. To say that this differentiation is merely perceptual is beside the point. After all, it is our perceptions which inform and significantly structure the forms of social action we engage in on a daily basis. It is not necessary to employ the argument by analogy to clarify the point. But for social analysts and historians not to seek to understand, and law-

makers not to legislate about, the relations which arise between groups of people perceived to be racially differentiated in a social order would be similar to saying that since men and women are all members of humanity their differential status and treatment in society are of no relevance. We know that this form of argument is absurd. But when it comes to racial differential status and treatment by society, it is a little surprising that it is often people who regard themselves to be socially and politically progressive who express the desire to bury their heads in the sand – perhaps because of their well-intentioned egalitarian hearts – and ignore what is painfully obvious to those who suffer the inequalities and the burden of racial differentiation. Groups and individuals placed on the deficit side of the racial or colour-line can have little sympathy with the absurdities of the supposed colour blindness on the part of those who, structurally if not through individual choice, benefit from being placed on the privileged side of the colour-line.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the distinguished African-American sociologist, intellectual and Pan-Africanist W. E. B. DuBois ended the second chapter of the most famous of his many books, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), with the prophetic words ‘The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour-line.’ For a time in the 1980s the work of William Julius Wilson (1978) and others seemed to suggest that this was no longer the case, at least in the USA. But it is instructive that Bill Clinton, the last elected US president this century, also chose to stress in his Inaugural Address in January 1997 that the future of American society is still pivoted – notwithstanding significant changes over the last forty years or so – on the ‘colour-line’.

The argument advanced here is that there are such things as race relations, and that in Britain these are best understood against a background of empire and decline and within a context of migration and the development of what is generally regarded as a British multi-cultural society. The stress is placed on post-World-War-Two migration from the colonies to the United Kingdom and the catalytic role black and brown people played in the process of Britain redefining her identity and place as a post-imperial nation-state. Thus, whilst the focus is on the last four or five decades, the background to the period is the colonial/imperial past which is larger than the story of Island Britain. The discussion is informed by what is not a popular view amongst those who would wish to argue that there have always been race relations in Britain. My general view is that whilst relations between different European groups or between different groups of white people gave rise to patterns of discrimination, the emergence of the notion of racial differentiation

and the subsequent race relations or relations between races arose out of the dramatic contact and integration of Africans and Asians in the world that Europe, and in this instance Britain, built. Some of the forms of discrimination exercised against the Jews and the Irish were often as vicious, and sometimes more so than those forms of discrimination and oppression established by dominant whites (Anglo-Scots in the first instance) against peoples of different pigmentation with origins in Africa and Asia through slavery, indentureship and colonialism. But, as will be shown in Chapter 1, whilst exclusion on the basis of colour or race shares much with exclusion on the basis of nationality, culture or religion it may be a mistake to collapse them together, as is sometimes done with the best of intentions. The point may be expressed in another way: more often than not, attempts to collapse together all forms of injustice in society lie in the desire to effect a basis for unity of opposition or resistance to oppression. Such unity is, of course, necessary and desirable, but it does not require analytical compromise.

Another potentially contentious underlying assumption here is that this discussion is not a comprehensive or exhaustive account of British race relations. As I suggest throughout the discussion that follows, the impressive body of literature that has developed around a common set of social problems generally described as race relations makes it unnecessary for another account setting out the empirical details of this sub-field which have become fairly familiar to students, policy-makers and others. Thus, whilst it is usual in books on British race relations to have whole chapters on each of the more problematic areas of national life such as education, employment, housing or the judicial system, in this discussion these and other problem areas are treated in a single chapter. Another example of a departure from normal practice is the relative absence of an uninterrupted chronology of events, and I am aware that for those who see history mainly in chronological terms this may be unacceptable. My response is that the detailed chronicle of the emergence and development of the issues of British race relations may be found elsewhere, and from time to time I point the enquiring reader in the appropriate direction; the comparative bibliography at the end of the book will also be useful to the newcomer to the subject as well as to most who are well versed in British race relations from an exclusively island perspective.

What this discussion offers is a broad view of a number of salient aspects of race relations as they have developed and the discussion sets these within a wider context than has been the case in many recent studies of the British situation. To begin with, the sub-field of race relations

studies in Britain as elsewhere is multi-disciplinary in nature, and contributions to the understanding of these relations have come from sociology, politics, psychology, social geography, policy studies, literature, and law as well as from history. Indeed, Chapter 6 is a discussion of how this sub-field of study started in post-imperial Britain within the social sciences, particularly sociology. This is an area awaiting further research. The discussion in Chapter 1 highlights the multi-disciplinary nature of race relations analysis. Drawing on discussions in sociology, social anthropology, and political analysis the chapter commences the analysis of British race relations with a recognition that the definition of the sub-field is a matter of contestation. Chapter 2 draws largely on the historical literature, but also on social geography and migration studies to arrive at a general depiction of the imperial and post-imperial backgrounds to contemporary British race relations theory and practice. There is here more than the usual genuflection to these aspects of the background by a handful of writers who, unfortunately, have not gone on to take the trouble to acquaint themselves with the relevant literature in the post-colonial world as they do with the writings of their colleagues in Britain. In Chapter 4 I draw a distinction between long-standing problems in race relations (such as education, employment and housing) and what are relatively new problems (such as care for the elderly, health issues and the adoption of children). The old problems which characterised the period of immigration from the 1950s have not been resolved, nor have they gone away. But different problems are emerging as new minority ethnic groups are integrated into British society and problems of the multi-cultural society become more 'normal' in the sense that the new minorities experience much the same problems as members of the indigenous population. Given the central role that the law and Parliament have played in defining and determining the scope of race relations, Chapter 5 concentrates on some of the strengths and weaknesses of the law, principally the Race Relations Act 1976. This measure may now require overhauling, as lawyers and others have argued. It remains, however, to be seen whether in the last years of the century the reforming New Labour government of Tony Blair and Home Secretary Jack Straw will be as radical as the old Labour government of Harold Wilson and Home Secretary Roy Jenkins who, with his advisor Anthony Lester, had the farsightedness and courage to tackle what some see as a major cancer of British society.

In the USA, President Clinton has highlighted the need for Americans of all colours to overcome the divide or cancer of the 'colour-line' as the twentieth century comes to an end and a new millennium beckons

(see, for example, *The Times*, 16 June 1997, p. 13). This has been seen by some of his critics to be nothing more than a president in his second term groping for an issue over which to make a lasting mark on his country's history. But in this instance motive can be set aside if the desired result is achieved. Similarly, the vision of a multi-coloured society in which the colour-line is not the determinant factor in the pattern of relations between groups of people may be Utopian, but in British race relations a degree of this Utopian optimism may again need the support of the state at the highest level. The last chapter picks up, therefore, the general theme of this book, namely the need to see the patterns and direction of British race relations within a broad historical perspective.

HARRY GOULBOURNE