

The poor against the poor?

Race, class and anti-fascism

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The British Left has for years bought itself a quiet life by ignoring the link between the resurgence of far-Right groups across Europe and the steady growth in support for the British National Party (BNP) in the UK. Occasionally this attitude of 'see no evil' would take a knock, with the BNP winning a seat on a local council or an Anti-Nazi League (ANL) stall getting overturned, but for the most part the rise of the far Right has been seen as a problem for the Continent. The street fighting that exploded in Oldham, Bradford and Stoke-on-Trent last summer, and the strength of the BNP's vote in the general election, have put paid to that. BNP leader Nick Griffin took 16.4 per cent of the vote in Oldham West and Royston – the largest vote ever for a fascist party in a general election in the UK. In Oldham East and Saddleworth the BNP took 11 per cent; in Burnley it took 11.25 per cent. Given the dismal performance across the board of the Socialist Alliance, the idea that all is well on the parliamentary road has come to look like the pipe dream it always was.

What happened in Bradford appears to be clear enough. A group of white men – probably BNP and National Front (NF) supporters – hurling racist abuse at demonstrators who had mobilized to stop a proposed NF demonstration, came under attack by a large group of Asian youth, who then fought pitched battles with the police when the police sought to drive them out of Bradford town centre. All who believe in working-class self-determination ought to recognize the right of the Asian community to self-defence against the mobilization of fascist groups, racist attacks and police brutality. But in order to recover the ground stolen within white working-class communities by the far Right, we have to begin to understand how we ended up here.

One reason the BNP has a white working-class audience is because the Left in most of its variants has actively abandoned that constituency. This abandonment has been contemporaneous with a tendency to eschew class analysis in favour of a liberal multiculturalism. Such a move has meant giving up the attempt to forge active solidarity based on the recognition of a shared reality of poverty and exploitation in favour of an emphasis on other forms of social difference and demands for their recognition. Not only has this done little so far to advance the goal of working-class emancipation; it has also helped create the very ground on which the far Right currently flourishes, for two reasons.

First, the celebration of ethnic identities cedes the argument to a far Right only too eager to assert the 'difference' of the white working class from its Asian or Afro-Caribbean neighbours and demand some 'recognition' for its 'identity' as a *white* group. Second, it concedes political ground to those 'community activists' who have sought to build a power base for themselves by bidding for resources for 'their' community at the expense of others in the battle for the ever dwindling pot of local authority gold, while

a share in this pot is precisely the basis on which the BNP seek initially to mobilize white working-class communities. This is precisely the logic behind the current propaganda put out by the BNP. The party's monthly journal, for example, is called *Identity*, and its website claims, 'we don't "hate" black people, we don't "hate" Asians ... they have a right to their own identity as much as we do. All we want to do is to preserve the ethnic and cultural identity of the British people' (www.bnp.org.uk/faq.htm).

Virtually all of the discursive tropes and political techniques of identity politics are present in the current thinking of the far Right: statements of self-affirmation and pride, assertions of difference, the production of identity tokens, certain forms of body fetishism, a theory of its 'oppression' by the state and established groups within civil society, and the belief that pursuing the relevant identity will be the basis for an emancipation from such oppression. In talking the language of 'identity' the BNP consciously steals the clothes of the multiculturalists. The intention and the rhetoric of 'difference' and 'recognition' as used by the Left may be anti-racist; the logic, however, allows the politics to run equally well in the opposite direction.

For some on the Left, anti-racism has become no more than an essay in cultural politics, as A. Sivanandan noted some time ago (*Communities of Resistance*, Verso, 1990). The fight against racism has thus become a fight for 'culture'. But 'culture' is here evacuated of its economic and political significance to mean lifestyle, language, custom and artefact, all subsumed under the label 'ethnicity'. And since local authority funding is largely geared to 'ethnic need', a thousand ethnic groups can suddenly bloom. 'We're all ethnic now' becomes the only slogan left. 'Ethnicity' becomes central to a logic of separatism. Historically, this has blunted the edge of black struggle by disconnecting West Indian from Asian, from African, and, ultimately, from working-

class white; at the same time, it has allowed the nascent black bourgeoisie to move up the system. Worse, the logic of separatism is also the logic of the far Right.

Furthermore, the language of difference obscures the fact that racial identities are, in a real sense, constructs of the state, through which the state seeks to administer civil society and the struggles generated therein. The debates around the question of 'citizenship' and 'coloured immigration' in the post-1945 period, for example, and the more recent manufacture of a 'crisis' around the issue of asylum seekers, have been engineered by the state (though admittedly not solely by the state) as a mechanism for generating the racial categories through which the population is administered and comes to perceive itself.

In adopting such categories and stressing the discourse of ethnic difference, much of what once seemed obvious about racism has been forgotten by some sections of the Left. If the



point of the 'race card' when deployed by politicians is to get the working class to take its eye off the ball – to look at what the family next door or the family on the 'Asian estate' has, instead of the steady surge of wealth from workers to bourgeoisie under both the Tories and New Labour – then to focus on ethnic difference is to fall into the very trap we need to escape. Recent opinion polls, for example, have shown that 'race relations' is a more pressing concern for the majority than 'poverty' or 'unemployment'. Such prioritizing of the differences between races is the point of playing the race card in the first place: questions which are really about class are blamed on the 'multiracial experiment' and white working-class voters are offered a 'racial' identity instead of an identification on the basis of class. Rather than working-class dissent focusing on the role of New Labour in maintaining the system of oppression experienced by the working class in all its myriad forms, such anger has collapsed in on itself. In place of conflict between classes we have the beginnings of what the Italian fascist Gianfranco Fini calls the 'war of the poor against the poor'. Far from being the radical opposition they pretend to be, the BNP are a pressure valve, a useless outlet for anger which might be directed at government policies.

There is, though, more to it than that. While New Labour has, with repeated success, deployed the race card (particularly in the guise of 'asylum seekers') as a diversion from its anti-working-class agenda, it isn't the case that BNP voters are motivated solely, or even mainly, by race. What in part separates the BNP from the premier league parties is its pretence of an anti-systemic stance. As the BNP's website makes clear, the Party purports to be against a *system*: a system which imports cheap labour, a system which 'forces' immigration on us, a system which tries to stop 'us' from thinking things 'we' wish to think – always a system. Like traditional fascist groups, the BNP appropriates this anti-systemic stance from the revolutionary Left. But in so doing it has outflanked the revolutionary Left because it takes seriously what should be part of the Left's natural constituency, at the very time when the Left and working-class communities have never had less contact.

The BNP succeeds, then, in part, simply because it addresses the white working class. It is one of the few political forces currently bothering to talk to such communities, while liberal anti-fascism is reduced to the defence of the rotten con of local 'democracy'. *Searchlight*, for example, has called for Oldham Council to make a 'concerted effort to integrate different communities', to show 'greater transparency', and for wider financial assistance to regenerate riot-hit areas. Yet there is no mention of council estate sell-offs and profiteering, the evictions of tenants because the privatized housing benefits system breaks down, the decades of disrepair, or the local corruption (real and perceived) that feeds social resentment in the first place (to which the BNP returns time and again).

It will not be possible to defeat the BNP by patching up the status quo, or by cobbling together an alliance between the Left and the Labour Party on a broad, liberal anti-fascist ticket. It will not be possible to defeat the BNP other than by reclaiming the working class as the constituency for a politics of fundamental social change. It will not be possible to defeat the BNP unless the Left proves itself in practice to be a radical opponent of a *system* which offers working people of all ethnic groups no future save cheap labour and permanent despair. That it has failed to do so is one reason the BNP can pretend to be a radical alternative to the enduring miseries of capitalism. In short, militant anti-fascism must identify with the needs of a class rather than the defence of the status quo.