

COMMENT

Racism - a Problem for Action and Thought

St Pauls, Brixton, Southall, Toxteth: these explosions can tell us a lot if we know how to listen. Politicians' attempts to present them as 'mindless hooliganism' don't seem to work very well. For these events are at least signs that black communities are no longer prepared to put up with the day-to-day oppression of which they are the butts - police harassment, racist attacks, discrimination in employment, the risk of deportation. But it isn't enough to see the day-to-day problems and responses. We need to keep in mind the shape that racism has taken in Britain over the last twenty years.

Without that history we can be taken in by recent events. Since Margaret Thatcher's 'swamping' speech in 1978, there has been a decline of overt racist electioneering by the Tory party. Instead overt racism has appeared increasingly as a form of expression of the mad, Fascist Right. You might think that racism today consists mainly of thuggish attacks by skinheads and the like. But the National Front and the British Movement seeking to reassert white superiority is not the main form of racism today - however nasty it may be. If you think of racism like that, you will not see how it is present in the background of St Pauls, Brixton and the rest.

For racism in another form now permeates beliefs and practices, so that we rub shoulders with it in our work, or may even find it in the grounds of our studies. Let us take an example which should give radical philosophers pause for thought from the excellent report of the Brent Community Health Council, *Black People and the Health Service* (available from Brent Community Health Council, 16 High Street, London NW10): the reaction of the Health Service to the problem of rickets among Asian children. The addition of vitamins to chapatti flour, which would obviate the problem, was not authorised, even though the same vitamins are added to white flour. Instead, Asian rickets was seen as a problem arising from Asian culture, requiring changes of taste or diet, or education. Or let us take another case. In June of this year a report was issued which considered why black children fail at school (The Schools Council, *Education for a Multi-racial Society*). One strong current in the report was to blame the black family structure, suggesting that it was in some way malformed, ill-adapted to support the efforts of the schools. In both these cases a real problem for the lives of Asian and black people was re-defined as a problem of immigrant cultures - or, more exactly, of

immigrant 'problem' cultures.

Blacks and Asians have a long experience of finding themselves on the receiving end of institutionalised practices which in dealing with a 'problem' turn people themselves into a problem. There is the well-known problem of illegal immigration, necessitating measures ever more restrictive of the rights of black people - virginity tests for Asian brides entering the country; 'fishing' expeditions by police and immigration officials to immigrants' homes in the small hours to unearth illegal immigrants in the minority communities; checks on resident status by employers; the assumption of guilt in immigration appeals; and, of course, the hypocritical struggle to write into law, via a concept of patrial and non-patrial, a definition of nationality that will make it so much more obvious that the overseas British really aren't British at all. (For briefings on the Nationality Bill and the campaign against it write to: Action Group on Immigration and Nationality, 44 Theobalds Road, London WC1.) Then there is the problem of visitors free-loading off an overstretched National Health Service (already weakened by government cuts and the drain of resources into the private sector). Such a pity that the hospitals cannot tell 'foreign-looking' British citizens from the genuine foreign article. Perhaps more attention should be given to the philosophical problem of problems, or, in more ordinary terms, what a society thinks it worth worrying about.

These increasingly commonplace racist practices need to be clearly thought about and understood. For they make nonsense of any simplistic alternative to racism based on the idea of multiculturalism, something that is all too common in educational circles. Multiculturalism is only a viable response if racism is seen as a set of prejudices based on ignorance of other cultures, which people can be educated out of. That is all well and good. But what if racism is the effect of a power relation built into the operation of our state institutions? And suppose, just suppose that it takes the dominant form of expressing this racism in terms of cultural difference. In that case, multiculturalism, in focussing on differences between cultures, is at best irrelevant to the real problem, and at worst mischievous in reinforcing the idea that the problem has to do with culture.

And the truth is that since the mid-1960s this is the form that racism has taken. And especially since

Powell's 1968 speeches, this has been the approach that has organised Tory responses. The fact that it is not shouted out loud at the moment should not fool us. For it is there within common-sense thinking all the time, and it is to be found at work in the critical places. Also in June of this year, the Scarman inquiry into the Brixton 'festival of the oppressed' opened. Interviewed beforehand about what he had learned from a visit to Brixton, Scarman commented that he had learned something he had known all along: 'Black people and white people as individuals can get along perfectly well, it's when they get into groups, when the herd instinct takes over, that trouble starts.' Can you see the connection between this casual statement, and the discussion above of multiculturalism? If it isn't obvious, then we have

not done our job properly. For Scarman was unthinkingly expressing a pure Powellite position in which blacks and whites formed opposed herds - and hardly anybody noticed.

For many years now, black people have increasingly faced official racism in every situation where they are defined a *problem to be coped with*. As teachers, students and intellectuals on the left, we should not shun the obvious contribution we can make in *thinking racism properly*.

Martin Barker and Noel Parker

(Martin Barker's book, *The New Racism - Conservatism and the Ideology of the Tribe*, is due to be published in September 1981 by Junction Books, London.)

Nuclear Disarmament

Democracy and Internationalism

Martin H. Ryle

Many *Radical Philosophy* readers will no doubt have seen the TV debate (Panorama, September 1980) between the multilateral 'disarmers', led by 'Lord' Chalfont, and, representing CND, Edward Thompson, Mary Kaldor and Bruce Kent. Many, too, may have shared my regret that Thompson and Kaldor found themselves drawn, in the early part of the programme, into a debate on force levels and NATO/Warsaw Pact strategic intentions which offered a fine parade-ground for Chalfont's brand of 'rationality' to go through its manoeuvres. It was clear that the pro-H-bomb lobby, once they had been able to fix those terms for the debate, were in their element.

The other day, the representative of a local nuclear disarmament organisation, asked by Radio Brighton whether her position was not 'airy-fairy' given the levels of Soviet weaponry, replied: 'To disarm will, I admit, be an act of faith.' This answer kept her clear of the strategists' labyrinth, and invoked the essential dimension of moral choice (if ever an issue showed the absurdity of trying to disinfect politics of moral 'contamination', nuclear disarmament is that issue). But to many listeners it must have seemed a bald response; seemed, too, an opting out of political debate. I felt, as I had done when watching Panorama, that the nuclear disarmament movement, refusing the corrupt terms of its adversaries, must develop forms of argument which, while retaining the force of moral conviction, also shift the discussion onto new political terrain. It is time we set up, and made explicit, our *own* premises for future argument.

In doing so, we are certain to invoke democratic ideals. We are going to appeal over the heads of the

elites to the mass of the people - certain victims of any nuclear war. Recent disclosures have highlighted the extent to which the nuclear decision-making process has evaded such measures of democratic-parliamentary control as do exist (I am thinking of Callaghan's Gang of Four approving the Chevaline programme, and of the cruise missile decision made 'on our behalf', but behind our backs, in Brussels). It is also clear (see *New Statesman*, 2 and 9 October 1980) that 'Home Defence' plans are being developed which will allow our political-military leaders to help themselves, if war seems likely, to the most frankly totalitarian measures: appointment of unelected Controllers, use of troops to crush demonstrations, strict state management of all news and information, and retreat of Top People to heavily guarded secret bunkers where they will be able to implement the holocaust without being inconvenienced by the mob whom it will destroy. The distinction between the rulers and the ruled, problematic though it may be in principle, will here be given the most absolute and concrete expression.

But to publicise this possibility is also, as we are seeing, to evoke a resurgence of democratic forces against its realisation. The arguments of the disarmament movement must appeal to, and foster, this democratic consciousness.

Another theme of the coming struggle will be the creation of a European solidarity in resistance to the threat of nuclear war. The politics of disarmament are implicitly internationalist - nowhere more so than in relation to the *unilateral* nuclear disarmament which the movement in Britain will be striving to impose on its own government.