

Racism@UK

An altogether everyday thing

Solidarity Federation

Summer 1999

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There's more to racism than nailbombs, knifings and the odd fruitcake.

What does racism mean to you? Here's 3 possibilities; individual prejudice; institutionalised discrimination, or; the erasure of the point of view of people who are not white.

Actually, it is used to describe all of these, but the first gets a disproportionate amount of attention. As a result, the reality of racism is often painted as merely a product of ignorance and prejudice (and therefore predominantly working class). Nothing could be further from the truth.

It is no coincidence that it was the Daily Mail, hate sheet of the middle classes, who first named the suspected murderers of Stephen Lawrence. As the media circus arrived in town, racism was once again firmly framed as being about evil people. Furthermore, the style and attitude of the suspects was identifiably working class, which also helped distance “racism” from the Mail readership.

Now, the antics of the racist working class and their effects on those who are subject to their hatred are not in doubt. The occasional (and it is occasional, fortunately) overt violence they use causes horrendous damage to people's lives. But even this pales into insignificance when compared to the sheer scale of institutionalised discrimination, which permeates all capitalist countries, not least ‘multi-racial’ Britain.

Bear with me for a moment, while I slip into cultural studies jargon to describe how racism operates – I do this simply because culture is a critical part of social control:

‘An ideological mechanism serves to distort reality in order to displace racism from the institutions of power onto the white working class. In a culture dominated by the assumption of individual responsibility and will, there is a tendency to regard the motive as more important than the consequences of any action. The unspoken assumption is that the subject of the action is all-important, and that the object is of significance only in relation to its subject’.

To put it another way, here is an example of what is meant by ‘subject’ and ‘object’, and how ‘everyday’ racism works.

witch-hunt

The story starts back in 1990, when workers and union activists in the Housing Department of Hackney Council in East London began to complain about a witch-hunt against black, and particularly African workers by management. This witch-hunt turned out to be called an ‘anti-corruption campaign’ initiated by the Director, Bernard Crofton. Crofton was adopted by liberals as the hero of the piece, an ‘anti-corruption campaigner’. He was the ‘subject’.

The black and African workers targeted by the ‘anti-corruption campaign’ were the ‘objects’ of the exercise. Predictably, the media adopted the subject's point of view – that it was indeed an anti-corruption drive. They ignored the alternative point of view – that black workers were subject to obsessive scrutiny of their professional (and private) conduct with the intention of finding enough dirt to sack as many as possible of them on trumped up charges (for example, alleged mortgage irregularities).

Because it was an ‘anti-corruption’ drive, it must have been uncovering corruption, and therefore its opponents must have had something to hide. Thus, from the start, attention was firmly placed on the so-called ‘corruption’, involving such issues as black housing workers allegedly colluding in the mounting council rent arrears. The wider question of why these workers (plus

squatters and tenants) should be blamed for Hackney's housing crisis instead of the government, the council and the (white) management for underfunding and the mismanagement of resources never really surfaced, even in the anti-Crofton camp.

For those who accused Crofton (and his campaign) of racism, the media attention was on his motivation, not the way the 'investigation' of black staff was carried out. The technique of using a unit of 'untouchable' ex-police, and its focus solely on (black) workers rather than management was ignored. For the defence, Ken Livingstone, among others, was wheeled out to testify to Crofton's record of anti-racism and commitment to equality. Having absolved Crofton of 'racism', as they defined it, the council was conveniently blind to the institutionalised racism going on through the very practice and conduct of the 'anti-corruption campaign'.

class hunt

Class makes a difference in how non-white people experience racism. The lower down the social hierarchy you are, the more restricted the definition of what 'appropriate behaviour' is for you, and therefore the wider the scope for disciplinary action. In other words, you cannot get away with as much deviation from the norm as a middle class person can. Another practical problem is that, if you are the bottom of the pile, there are far more people above you. This means there are far more people with the power to discriminate against you.

On the other hand, the further up the hierarchy you are, the more likely you are to be useful to your superiors, and therefore get their support. Crofton came unstuck when he made the mistake of targeting someone who was part of, or useful to, the ruling clique in the local Labour Party, when he accused Personnel Director Sam Yeboah of obstructing an investigation into failures to check references of West African job applicants. Racial discrimination is OK, but not if it affects the allies of power.

As an aside, Yeboah himself strengthened structural inequality and discrimination, by presiding over restructuring and overlooking procedures designed to prevent promotion through such 're-organisation', which is an easy way for managers to promote themselves or their friends — corruption! Restructuring of Library services, for example, almost eliminated professional and supervisory grades, destroying opportunities for low-paid workers to advance through the system. This disproportionately affected the prospects of low paid, black workers, serving to keep them in a position where they can be most easily subjected to the more extreme measures taken by Crofton's ilk.

It might seem contradictory that an individual who later became a victim of racial discrimination was also part of the structure of discrimination, but reality is like that. Just as thirty years ago sociologists started trying to convince us that class no longer existed because it was possible to attain high socio-economic status from the humblest of origins, so the existence of a black middle class is cited as evidence of the erosion of racism. In reality, social mobility can co-exist with an oppressive class structure. Equally, individual black self-advancement can co-exist with institutionalised racism.

job hunt

So, Crofton's comeuppance came when he seized on failures to check references of West African job applicants, and he took on Yeboah. The give-away of his racism was in the fact that he focused only on the West African job applicants, and the fact that Yeboah is a West African name. His triumphant exclamations followed — here was evidence of the corruption he had been looking for. As the media gullibly joined in, we were treated to the story of the “West African mafia” helping itself to jobs in a lucrative racket. If only Crofton had looked at a few non-West African cases, he would have found that what he had ‘uncovered’ was not corruption, but simple incompetence. Hackney Council's recruitment procedures are crap. Nothing new.

In typically incompetent fashion, the ruling clique sacked Crofton. He promptly went to the media, who swallowed his ‘anti-corruption campaign’ pitch whole. A couple of allegedly corrupt West Africans was all that was needed to sanction racism. The ‘object’-centred view prevailed. Eventually, Crofton was reinstated by the Council, amidst much posturing over the supposed latent ‘loony left’. Crofton emerged as the media's moderate liberal, and hero of the story.

In August 1998, Yeboah won record damages for constructive dismissal and racial discrimination against Crofton and the Council. Post-Steven Lawrence, the media's attention is now finally drawn to the “new” (sic) concept of institutional racism. But I will eat my hat if the BBC does a special investigation into institutionalised racism in Hackney Council. And as for special investigations into all the other tiers of government and control, or even in the liberal media itself...?!

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