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John Downing

RACIAL OPPRESSION AND THE BRITISH STATE INTO THE EIGHTIES

I WOULD LIKE TO begin with two acknowledgments. First, to thank the Five College Black Studies Executive Committee for inviting me to speak at this symposium. Second, to thank the Program to Combat Racism of the World Council of Churches—the unit which since 1970 has given financial aid to the liberation movements of southern Africa—for commissioning me to do the research on which this talk is based.* In particular, to its outgoing Chair, the Reverend Wilfred Wood, of London, England, who has been tirelessly and totally involved in black people's struggles in Britain since his arrival there from Barbados in 1962.

To this audience, there will be many things which do not need time to explain. The British invented racism, as Andrew Young correctly reminded us a couple of years ago, so it will be no surprise to anyone to find that the culture of Britain is still a racist one, whether in many school textbooks or in many mass media presentations. You know already that black people are on the bottom of the ladder in British society, except for a tiny minority within a minority—typically, these are business persons in the Asian community, state officials in the Caribbean community (and these latter are normally somewhere within what we call "the race relations industry").

What you may not know is how this oppression operates. It does not work in the same manner exactly as in the USA, although there are some important parallels. What I have set myself the task of doing, therefore, is to provide a very rapid run-down of the developing mechanisms of the British state's oppression of black people in particular, but also of their growing economic oppression. I am not going to talk about the movement in Britain, despite its crucial impor-

* For the detailed version, see my *Now You DO Know*. (War on Want, 467 Caledonian Road, London N. 7, England, 1980; £1.25 sterling incl. postage.)

tance, for one single obvious reason. You are going, then, to hear about just one pole in the dialectic of racial oppression.

Let me just acquaint you all with some necessary data. There are perhaps two million black people in Britain, or about 3-1/2% of the total population of 56 millions. *This small percentage means it is a population in acute need of international solidarity. Not patronage, solidarity.* The majority are from the Caribbean or south Asia (i.e., India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka), in roughly equal proportion to each other. There is a much smaller African population, overwhelmingly transient students or their dependents. The Arab population is far smaller still, and overwhelmingly very wealthy indeed, living far from black settlement areas. There are no black ghettoes in Britain, in the sense of large areas of cities, composed three-quarters to a hundred percent of black people or any other group (except for the white English). The nearest would be Southall, near London's Heathrow airport, with perhaps a 50% Asian presence. Brixton, London, is at most a 30% black area; similarly Handsworth, Birmingham. There is, as I have already said, very considerable economic poverty among black people in Britain—only in that sense does the term "ghetto" ring at all true, as applied to black people.

Lastly, with the exception of a few seaports, such as London, Liverpool and Cardiff, the black population of Britain is essentially of post-war origin, drawn in to enable the long boom of the 1950's and 1960's.

Now—what are the trends in racial oppression in Britain into the 1980's? To answer this question, it is necessary to focus on two basic points: the economic position of black people in the class structure; and the growing sophistication and ruthlessness of the British state's repressive mechanisms. Let us take each of these in turn.

The economic position of black people in the British class structure is one of providing cheap labour in very poorly paid, unpleasant and often physically hazardous work; and of constituting a large slice of the reserve army of labour, i.e., the people whom capital generally maintains in unemployment as a way of disciplining those actually in jobs. Black people are therefore particularly vulnerable to economic crisis; and as you may be aware, the British economy has been dealt some body-blows by recent government policies, especially under Margaret Thatcher's administration.

Let me be more precise. Black people in Britain work mostly in the nationalized health service, at all levels except the top; in transport; textiles and garments; foundries; the building industry; catering; food manufacture; the postal service; parts of the auto industry and the engineering industry; and junior clerical work. Or they are unemployed.

The combined effect of economic crisis, government policies which make it worse, and the use of the computer "chip" to destroy jobs, is making sharp inroads into black people's employment. Cuts in public spending destroy jobs in health and in transport (also nationalized) and in the postal service. The microprocessor is destroying junior office jobs at extremely high speed. And the general, global crisis of capitalist production has not been any kinder to British auto production than it has to Detroit. I could multiply the examples without effort. One important point is that women have been losing jobs faster than men. Because of low black incomes, there is a necessity for most black women to work in wage-labour. The loss of their income will plunge many black families into severe poverty.

In addition, and simultaneously, the levels of welfare are to be cut back three times in three successive years from 1980. A new army of welfare fraud investigators has been appointed—practically the only growth-sector in the British economy! This, in a situation where at least 300 million pounds a year of welfare benefits to which people are entitled, go unclaimed. And meanwhile, the normal mass media chorus against "welfare abuse," "social security scroungers," continues to stimulate the anger of many working people, whilst simultaneously terrorizing many others.

As the 1980's proceed, not only will black people suffer from higher and higher levels of unemployment, due to this combination of factors. They will also almost inevitably be typecast by the media in the familiar role of workshy, parasites, lazy. There are dangerous implications here for a policy of black deportation, already the demand of a number of Conservative parliamentarians, as of fascist groups with a popular base. (The word they use is "repatriation.")

Thus, to try to understand the British situation purely in terms of racism, is to miss a number of the factors which are oppressing black people. This is not to let British racism off the hook: it is to be aware of the *full* dimensions of black people's oppression; of dimensions which do not have their roots simply and solely in white racist prejudice, but are locked into other central mechanisms of the British political economy.

Nowhere is this interlocking set of processes more obvious than in the chief instrument of political oppression of black people in Britain: the state.

Here I intend to focus on four basic questions: immigration control, the police, the courts and prisons, and the relation of fascist groups to the state. Naturally, this list is not exhaustive: state education, housing and health policies are very important as well, but would take too much time to discuss now.

Of all the issues, immigration control has been the one which has dominated British public debate about black people. So much so, that the term "immi-

grant" is synonymous with "black person" in Britain, to the extent that the media will sometimes refer to "immigrant babies *born* in Britain"—a contradiction in terms. The impression has been built up over the sixties and seventies, by politicians of both major parties, by the major media, as well as by fascist groups, that Britain enjoys an extremely large black persence, with no real controls over their entry.

The reality is cruelly different. Not only was any version of large-scale Third World immigration stopped from 1965, fifteen years ago, but the actual treatment of black immigrants has often been degrading and horrible. Examples include internal examinations, especially on young Asian girls in their teens, supposedly to verify they were indeed virgins on their way to be married. Cases include putting British citizens of Asian descent from East Africa back onto the world's airlines, knowing they were otherwise stateless, and allowing them to be shuttled about the world for three or four weeks at a time. There is the case of a woman insisting she was in labour, the officials forcing her back on to the plane as an illegal immigrant, eventually conceding the baby was on the point of being born, and allowing it to be born—dead. Less horrific, but nearly as frightening, is the practice of refusing re-entry to black people with non-British passports who had traveled abroad simply for short holidays.

These cases, it must be emphasized, do not constitute license taken by racist immigration officers—though that happens too. They are fundamentally the natural product of the type of immigration laws passed by the British parliament in 1962, 1968, 1971 and 1973 (the Pakistan Act), as well as a whole series of other government decrees in 1965, 1969, and 1979. These laws, as they have developed, and despite their carefully non-racist wording, have been calculated to keep black people out; to humiliate and terrorize them at their point of entry; and to control their political resistance after entry. Let me just illustrate this last point by an example. The 1971 Immigration Act cancelled the right to citizenship of so-called Commonwealth immigrants after five years' residence. It sounds innocuous, perhaps, until you recognize the Act also allows the police to stop and search people, or enter houses without a search-warrant or a charge, if the police suspect they are in any way connected to illegal immigration. For the police, this has been a legal license to harass black people in the street, in the middle of the night in their own homes, and at work. Which, needless to say, they have enjoyed using.

The police. We all know what to expect from the police. Except, what you may not know, is that today, and any day, on the streets of London there may be up to 200 *armed* police. The tradition of an unarmed police force has been quietly whittled away by means of arming special sections only. The most

notorious sections are called the Special Patrol Groups. The first most people knew of their existence was when two Pakistani teenagers with imitation guns, succeeded in holding up the staff of the Indian Embassy in London, in 1975. They were shot dead, rather than immobilized, by SPG snipers. (One of the snipers received a decoration from the Queen for his bravery!)

The Special Patrol Group has been deployed countless times in the "saturation" policing of black areas. They have cordoned off streets, stopped and frisked all passers-by, smashed their way into houses and brutalized the inhabitants. The image of the kindly, unarmed British bobby should be laid to rest now in an obscure museum somewhere.

If I had the time, I would expand on the increasing use of computers, helicopters and public relations by the police in their entrenchment of control in Britain. I will just refer, however, to one other aspect of policing which may interest you. A very high proportion of black youths in any one year are arrested and charged with "suspicious behaviour"—"sus" as it is usually known. The law in question is the 1824 Vagrancy Act; and it allows the arbiter of what is "suspicious behaviour" to be—the police! This blatantly unjust situation, which in these decades has been used against black youth, and in the 1930's was used against the white unemployed, still is on the statute-book despite a mountain of protests from a variety of quarters. It is, despite its age, the ideal contemporary discretionary law for the police to use to terrorize the black community.

Very little work has been carried out on courts' and prisons' treatment of black people in Britain. What I was able to discover was evidence that in no way contradicts the experience of black people at the hands of the U.S. judicial and prison system. That is to say, that an increasingly high proportion of black people are being locked up in custodial institutions, both young people and adults; and an increasingly large number are being processed in some fashion through the courts.

Let me be as precise as the evidence will allow me. In Birmingham, Britain's second city, a 1979 study showed a third of those in borstals (long-stay juvenile prisons), a quarter of those in detention centres (extremely harsh short-stay juvenile prisons), and a quarter on parole, were black. In Wolverhampton, a large city not far from Birmingham, over half those sent to detention centres were black. These percentages are astronomical in relation to the number of black youth available for this experience—between 200% and 500% higher than their presence in the population would warrant.

When in these institutions, there is no doubt that they are treated even worse than white prisoners. For example, there is one borstal prison, Gaynes Hall, the so-called "Eton" of the borstal systems, in which juveniles can take their normal

school examinations, up to the age 18 "Advanced Level" national examinations. Rarely is a black face to be seen there. At the other end of the spectrum, it is usually far harder for a black prisoner to get parole when it is due, than for a white prisoner—all other things being equal.

What must not be underestimated in this process is *how early it starts*; how *many* black kids are taken away from their families into so-called "care," usually "community homes"—how warm and inviting it sounds!—many, many miles from their families, usually in all-white areas. In these, by the government's own admission, schooling is particularly rotten, with the result that numerous black children are growing up emotionally and educationally blitzed. The path to the courtroom when they are older is often not a long one. A whole life's career is being structured for many black children, from their experience of birth in inadequate hospitals on through their life-cycle.

The fourth and final topic I wish to address is the question of fascist groups, such as the National Front. Sometimes these are defined as the basic problem, with their aggressive marches through areas of black settlement, their vicious propaganda (2 million unemployed—2 million blacks), their physical violence against black people. Other times they are dismissed, perhaps as a lunatic fringe. What you might not know is that, for example, in 1977 their national organizer declared he was going to do a one-man march through a Manchester suburb. The police turned out to defend him, *en masse,* helicopters and all, to the tune of over a million dollars in taxpayers' money! What you might not know, is that NF membership, not to mention sympathy, is extremely widespread among the police and prison guards. What you might not know is that the NF has been making successful attempts to get its members elected to office in labor union locals.

Thus, it is the *relation* between the state and the National Front, and other fascist groups, which is the issue. In every instance of fascism that I know of, this covert use of fascist groups by the state's agencies, the interpenetration of police and fascist group members, is a central feature. It is like hiring a vicious Alsatian dog to guard a shop. The owner and the dog have a tense, but effective relationship. The dog terrorizes people for its owner; if it does turn on its owner it can always, the owner reasons, be put down.

I must conclude by saying this: development of State repression in Britain has been tried out to a large extent on the black population. But it is labour unrest, and the Republican rebellion in Northern Ireland, which have been most immediately in the public policy-makers' minds as they sharpened up their instruments of repression. Ironic as it may seem, serious black rebellions are still to come. The Notting Hill Carnival each August is a kind of setpiece; it was the up-

surge in Bristol this year which was the first real foretaste of what is likely to come.

To conclude: I am not preaching any defeatism. As well as newsworthy upsurges, like Bristol, there is a mass of patient, painstaking organization taking place in the black community. It is unspectacular, like black self-help nursery groups, and so on. Black people are not, of course, simply an inert mass. And there are elements of serious anti-racist activity among white people as well. Nonetheless, given the degree of preparedness of the State's repressive mechanisms, and given the fact that black people are only 3-1/2% of the population, there is profound need for *meaningful* solidarity actions internationally. These actions, and an alertness to the British situation, are essential to lend power to black people in Britain in the remaining decades of this century.