BRITAIN'S BLACK POPULATION
The Runnymede Trust and The Radical Statistics Race Group
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LABOUR AND RACISM
Annie Phizacklea and Robert Miles
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Race is a political raw nerve — best avoided, rather than touched. The Tory government's proposed British Nationality Bill is the latest in a long line of racist immigration policies that, we are told, has nothing to do with race. It's the same old game — but with different categories: define degrees of 'Britishness' that bear an uncanny resemblance to black and white skins and call it 'nationality'. Sidestepping the issue of race is not new, it provides a way around the emotional minefield of race relations.

Runnymede Trust (and the Radical Statistics Race Group) are prepared to tackle the issue head on. Britain's Black Population cuts a hard, statistical path through the minefield to provide a factual picture of the position of black people in this country.

The opening chapter sets the groundwork for the ensuing discussion of racial disadvantage and the Government's response, by providing a detailed demographic account — size, births, deaths, age, sex — of the black population. The stereotype that all black people are immigrants is quickly exorcised, to give the reader in the following chapters, a detailed account of the material disadvantages black people experience in comparison to whites in the fields of employment, housing, education and social services. Well written and illustrated, this sober account provides a useful antidote to the myths of racist propaganda. (A wealth of further publications and statistical sources relating to race are included in the appendices for those wishing to develop a more comprehensive picture.)

Race and statistics is, however, an explosive mixture. This point is not lost on the authors, who are aware that statistics can serve more than one purpose. The final chapter faces up to the problem — a statistical picture of the disadvantages experienced by ethnic groups can be used just as easily by the Right to reinforce racist stereotypes of black people as a 'problem', as it can be used to inform government policy in combating racial disadvantage. Justification for such fact-gathering lies with the state's record in achieving such reform. A casual glance at that record reveals that the interests of successive governments, both Labour and Tory, in racial statistics have stemmed from preoccupations with control, rather than concern. The statistical coverage of black people and health, housing or education is sparse in comparison to the research undertaken into population flow (read immigration control) and employment patterns (read labour requirements). Where social policies concerned with social disadvantage have been implemented, they have tended to take the form of blanket area policies (the Urban Programme, the Community Development Projects, Partnership schemes etc.), rather than a recognition of the specific problems black people face in a white society.

The abuse of statistics is well known. In part it stems from the factual level of the framework itself. Within a statistical framework it is impossible to explain adequately racism and racial disadvantage. How, for example, could such a framework tell us why black labour rather than white was recruited by British industry in the 1950s, why racism is embedded in the white working class, or why black labour is over-represented, in comparison to white, in the worst paid and least desirable jobs? Statistics may offer useful insights which help to explain these patterns, but they cannot deliver the whole or even a quarter of the story. Such questions can only be answered within a broad historical framework that looks at race from a different angle, through the prism of capitalist production and class relations.

Labour and Racism attempts to set up such a framework. Annie Phizacklea and Robert Miles' explicit aim in this book is to understand the position of black labour in Britain's political process within a class and a racial context. In adopting this approach they are representative of recent trends in Marxist literature upon race which attempts to steer a delicate course between the twin pitfalls of a simplistic class analysis of race which ignores the colour of a worker's skin and only looks at production relations, and an equally one-sided racial analysis which only looks at power relations between black and white. The authors, correctly, attempt to show the interconnections between the two spheres — how racial oppression limits and shapes class oppression and vice versa.

This is a difficult path to tread and the early chapters of the book are not altogether successful in charting the links. The migrant status of black labour is taken as the starting point to explain how black labour was inserted into manual occupations at the bottom end of the class structure, by the demands of the British economy in the 1950s and 1960s. Ideological relations are seen to reinforce and maintain this economic position through the practices of racism and racial discrimination, thus constituting black labour as a subordinate fraction of the working class.

But the links between economic and ideological relations are not clearly drawn in the text. The reader is left with the impression that class relations exhaust the economic sphere, whilst racism forms an additional extra at the level of beliefs. Racism however, is rooted in the economic relationships of colonialism. It is the legacy of such relations that justifies the use of black labour today as a source of cheap labour. The stereotypes of superiority — inferiority embedded in colonial relations between white and black are drawn upon to justify contemporary racial divisions. Racism therefore, should not simply be seen as a postwar phenomenon which began with the arrival of black migrants in the 1950s, it underpinned and reinforced past economic relationships. Economic and ideological relations are thus historically linked and should not be analysed separately.

The book however, is more concerned with the present than with links to the past, in particular, with the relation between working class consciousness and racial consciousness among black and white workers. Based upon interviews with male and female English and West Indian (migrant), semi-skilled workers in the North West London area, the authors produce evidence to dispel the notion that racism is the only force that structures black consciousness. Black labour does indeed confront racism at the workplace, but it does not structure all situations black people meet at the point of production. Their role as wage labour was found to produce a restricted class consciousness (based upon limited awareness of wage exploitation and lack of control over the work process) among both black and white workers. The high level of trade union membership among black workers, just over 50% nationally, compared to just under 50% for whites, can be cited in support of this point.

Membership of a trade union however, does not imply active participation within it. The presence of racism within the unions acts as a limiting factor upon black participation in union affairs. Such findings are behind the TUC's recent appeal, in the form of a 'Black Workers' Charter', to remove the barriers that restrict black representation at shop steward, regional and national levels of the unions.

Surprisingly, the extent to which racial
discrimination encourages an ethnic as opposed to a class response is not well documented in the book. The point is made through the classic examples of the strikes at Imperial Typewriters and Mansfield Hosiery Ltd, but the extent of ethnic reaction goes far beyond these incidents. Most forms of reactions have occurred outside of the workplace, but are not unrelated to black experience within it.

In fact, the shortcomings of the study can be traced to the slender evidence upon which the authors hang their findings. Differences within Britain’s black population in terms of class, ethnicity, age and skill are not sufficiently covered in the study to warrant generalisations about labour and racism. Asian reaction to the structures of class and racism, and how they differ from West Indian responses are not taken up. The role of the Indian Workers’ Associations in promoting class interests and racial unity is a moot point here. A further omission is the absence of skilled West Indian workers from the sample, when they constitute a majority of the West Indian workforce.

Lastly, and perhaps more importantly, the book’s preoccupation with black migrant labour glosses over the 40% of Britain’s black population (cited by Runnymede Trust) who were born in this country, and do not necessarily share the same experiences or possess the same orientations to British society as their migrant counterparts. For example, the second generation, evident in the riots of Bristol and Brixton have shown themselves less willing than the migrant generation to accept the status of cheap labour or second class citizen.

Phizacklea and Miles failure to take account of divisions and differences within the black population stems from their overconcern to show the class basis of black migrant labour. Whilst a class analysis is essential to grasp the dynamics of race relations, it should not be accomplished at the expense of simplifying the complexities of black experience. The struggle against racism involves more than a grasp of the economic and ideological conditions that foster its growth among white workers, it also requires a knowledge of how black groups experience the effects of racism. To that end, *Labour and Racism* represents a limited advance in the field.

John Allen
The first Jews in Britain were brought to England in 1070 by King William the Conqueror, while Roma in Britain have been documented since the 16th century. Sociologist Steven Vertovec argues that whereas "Britain's immigrant and ethnic minority