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“Class Before Race”: British Communism and the Place of Empire in Postwar Race Relations

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ABSTRACT: The Communist Party of Great Britain, as the largest organization to the left of the Labour Party and an influential body within the trade union movement, occupied an important position in the anti-racist and anti-colonial movements in Britain from the 1920s until the 1970s. As black immigration from the Commonwealth flowed into Britain between the late 1940s and early 1960s, the CPGB was involved in campaigns against racism and for colonial independence. However it continually encountered the difficult task of situating its anti-racist activities within the wider class struggle. At the same time, the Party’s traditional Marxist understanding of the issues of racism and colonialism were altered significantly by the decolonization process and the rise of new social movements. The CPGB viewed the issues of “race” and racism, within a Marxist framework, and this had implications for the practical issues in the struggle against racism. At the core of this problem was overcoming the traditional view on the white left of black workers as still “colonials” or “outsiders,” whose problems had been subsumed within the wider class struggle.

“Race prejudice is a conscious part of the policy of the most reactionary sections of British capitalism — the backers of fascism in all its forms.”

—Phil Bolsover, *No Colour Bar for Britain*, CPGB pamphlet, London, 1955, p. 10

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“Today’s racism was not inevitable, nor was it the outcome of conscious ruling class manipulation to divide and therefore control the working class. . . . While it is true that one of the effects of racism *has* been the creation of a major area of division within the working class, the growth of racism has to be seen in a more complex way.”

—CPGB, *Power & Prejudice = Racism*, CPGB Discussion Pack, London, 1981, Unit 2, p. 3

THE ABOVE QUOTES DEMONSTRATE the significant shift in the views of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) on “race” and racism between the 1950s, at the height of post-war black immigration,¹ and the early 1980s, as Margaret Thatcher claimed that Britain “might be rather swamped by people with a different culture” (Thatcher, 1978). The CPGB occupied an important position in the anti-racist and anti-colonial movements in Britain from the 1920s until the 1970s. As black immigration from the Commonwealth flowed into Britain between the late 1940s and the early 1960s, the CPGB became increasingly involved in the struggle against racism. A defining factor in the Party’s understanding of “race” was the colonial legacy of the British Empire; its corresponding anti-racism had first been developed as part of its support for national independence within the British Empire. This viewpoint, however, underwent a substantial transition from the somewhat distant notion of colonial freedom to the everyday issue of racism. The perception of racism as a colonial problem was pervasive among the older Party ideologues, as the Party adhered to the Marxist theory that racism evolved out of capitalist expansion into the colonies. This changed as black activists and intellectuals, both inside and outside the Party, expanded the concept of “race” away from the simple aspect of class organization. Moreover, within the Party itself younger members, influenced by the new social movements, such as anti-racism, feminism, environmental issues and gender politics, advocated their own evaluation of the

1 The word “black” is used in this article to describe both Afro-Caribbeans and Asians as in most studies of the period this is the term used, although it is recognized that the use of this term does not allude to a homogenous community of non-white Britons. Quoting Kalbir Shukra, “I retain ‘black’ not to bestow any authority on it, but because it is the term most commonly preferred by those who were the focus of this project” (Shukra, 1998, 125). See also Fryer, 1984, xi; Ramdin, 1987, x; Ramdin, 1999, x; Gilroy, 2002, 36.

CPGB's focus on class politics, which they claimed had been at the expense of other forms of oppression.

Other studies have analyzed the Communist Party's anti-colonialism in the interwar period and the role of black activists in the Party up until the 1950s,² as well as the impact of the new social movements on the Party in the 1960s and 1970s,³ while the Party's anti-racism has been a neglected area of study. Several recent studies of the local "grass-roots" level of the CPGB begin from the premise that the history of the CPGB is about "real" people.⁴ The most recent of these (Morgan, *et al.*, 2007) contains a detailed analysis of the different areas of CPGB membership, and includes some discussion of the Party's anti-colonial work and the nationality branches set up in the 1950s. The study, however, is primarily focused on the 1930s and 1940s, which the authors describe as "the heyday of British Communism" (Morgan, *et al.*, 2007, 26). The Party's anti-racist activities in the postwar period have been neglected in academic studies, barely mentioned in any of the histories dealing with the post-1950s period. Examining the CPGB's anti-racist work is not merely "history for history's sake"; it aims to uncover an important part of the Party's cultural history and its practical role within the anti-racist movement in Britain. Between the 1950s and the 1980s, the Communist Party was involved in various anti-racist activities: campaigning against immigration controls; working for the introduction (and strengthening) of legislation against racial discrimination; building anti-fascist activism against the National Front; and attempting to forge links with black workers and the wider black communities through broad-based political and community organizations.⁵ However, the approach of the CPGB towards issues of "race" was based on a tradition of anti-colonialism, which was an important issue for the Party, but still a foreign concept to most white Party members. The emphasis on anti-colonialism, while important in understanding the pervasive nature of racism in 20th-century capitalism, served to reinforce the "foreignness" of immigrant

2 See: Sherwood, 1999; Adi, 1998; Schwarz, ed., 2003a; Callaghan, 1995; Adi, 1995; Sherwood, 1996, 137–163; Callaghan, 1997–98, 513–525; Adi, 2006, 22–45.

3 See Andrews, 2004; Cross, 2003. For a review of recent scholarship on the Communist Party in the 1970s, see Smith, 2006, 16–32.

4 See Fishman, 1995; Thorpe, 1998; Worley, 1999; Thorpe, 2000; McIlroy, Morgan and Campbell, eds., 2001; Worley, 2002.

5 For a more detailed analysis of these individual aspects of the Party's anti-racist activities, see Smith, 2005.

workers and subordinated immediate matters of fighting racism in Britain to a much longer term program of colonial freedom and socialist revolution. This article examines the Party's literature and documents held in the CPGB archives in the National Museum of Labour History (NMLH) in Manchester to analyze how, beginning from a foundation in a Marxist understanding of class-based politics, the Party's concept of "race" and racism changed during the post-colonial era, and how this affected its practical anti-racist activism.

Anti-Colonialism in the Interwar Period

At its inception in 1920, the Communist Party of Great Britain was a member of the Communist International. As one criterion for its admission to the Comintern, the CPGB had to abide by the conditions set out by that organization, which included a clause stating:

8. A particularly explicit and clear attitude on the question of the colonies and the oppressed peoples is necessary for the parties in those countries where the bourgeoisie possess colonies and oppress other nations. Every party which wishes to join the Communist International is obliged to expose the tricks and dodges of "its" imperialists in the colonies, to support every colonial liberation movement not merely in words but in deeds, to demand the expulsion of their own imperialists from these colonies, to inculcate among the workers of their country a genuinely fraternal attitude to the working people of the colonies and the oppressed nations, and to carry on systematic agitation among the troops of their country against any oppression of the colonial peoples. ("Conditions of Admission to the Communist International," 1971 [1920], 170.)

As Great Britain was the largest imperialist power, theoretically the CPGB was in a position to promote the world socialist revolution through advocating the anti-imperialist struggle. From the mid-1920s onwards, the CPGB continued to assist the colonial struggles by itself and through the Comintern. During the interwar period, the Party was deeply involved in the independence movement in India, with coverage of the international struggles regularly reported in the Party press. The most significant figure in the CPGB's anti-colonial work was R. Palme Dutt, who worked as a liaison between the CPGB, the Communist Party of India and the Comintern, mainly from Europe between 1924 and 1936, as well as editing the journal *Labour Monthly*,

which frequently included articles on the atrocities of the British Empire and the struggles for independence from it (Callaghan, 1995, 5; 19).⁶

Marika Sherwood and John Callaghan have previously debated the anti-colonial activities of the CPGB during the interwar period in *Science & Society*, with Sherwood declaring that the “history of the CPGB, colonials in the UK and the colonies is a sorry tale.” Particular importance was placed upon the CPGB as a revolutionary agent at the center of the British Empire, but according to Sherwood, the Party was “imbued with racial prejudice and indifference to the colonies.” With the “ample information . . . of oppression [of blacks] in Britain and in the colonies,” Sherwood charges that the CPGB “as a whole . . . did nothing” (Sherwood, 1996, 160–161). Replying to Sherwood’s argument, Callaghan finds her use of racial prejudice as an explanation for the faults in the Party’s colonial work “baseless and extremely misleading.” Callaghan acknowledges that the Party was not completely rid of racial prejudice, but making this the “major explanation of the Party’s undoubted shortcomings as an anti-imperialist force” is ill-founded. For Callaghan, the real reason for the CPGB’s limitations in the colonial struggles was the fact that the Party had “its overworked tentacles in every likely field of colonial contacts,” but was actually “not very good at recruiting any section of the population in inter-war Britain” (Callaghan, 1997–98, 513; 520). While membership numbers and limited resources constituted problems for the Party’s anti-colonial work, there was also the issue of timing. The fact was that the independence movements were given great encouragement by the weakening of the colonial powers at the end of the Second World War, a factor that had simply not been present in the interwar period.

The devastating economic position that confronted Britain in the immediate postwar period meant that it was economically unviable to maintain administrative and military control of the colonies. Alongside

6 This can be compared with the argument made by Marika Sherwood that the “CPGB’s journals in the 1920s seldom printed anything about Africa and Africans in the diaspora,” noting that between 1921 and 1935, only 11 articles or book reviews were featured in *Communist Review*. Callaghan argues that Sherwood “ignores the international content of CPGB publications such as *Workers’ Weekly*, *Labour Monthly*, and the *Daily Worker*,” and that the main focus of the Party’s anti-colonialism during the interwar period, India, has been “tendentiously conjured away from the arena of Communist colonial work in Sherwood’s account” (Sherwood, 1996, 149; Callaghan, 1997–98, 521; 514).

this, with the acute labor shortage faced by massive reconstruction, British industry and the government looked to the colonies for workers to address the shortage. The Communist Party, boosted by the popularity that it enjoyed during the War, entered the postwar period with great optimism and had high expectations for both the working class in Britain and for the colonial struggles in the wake of a weakened British Empire. As British domestic issues stabilized in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Party focused “much of its energies and propaganda upon foreign and colonial affairs” (Thompson, 1992, 97). As Dutt wrote, “the cause of the colonial peoples is today more than ever indissolubly linked with the cause of the working class and of socialism in Britain” (Dutt, 1957, 415). However, the traditions of imperialism and the corresponding notions of racial superiority still found much support among all classes within British society, including the working class.⁷ CPGB member John Mahon wrote in 1953 that it was still believed in the labor movement that “British workers must take part in the exploitation of the colonial workers to retain their standards of life” (Mahon, 1953, 223).

Before the establishment of the CPGB in 1920, racism and support for British imperialism could be found within sections of the labor movement. Stuart MacIntyre wrote that it was “a common habit of the British labor movement to justify racialism by pseudo-socialism” and even “Communists were not completely immune” (Macintyre, 1975, 11).⁸ The contradictory alignment of imperialism and socialism began as “the British empire entered what proved to be its final phase of expansion” with the “widespread support that the new imperialism appeared to attract,” termed “jingoism” (Taylor, 1990, 974). The effect of imperialism on the British working class has been described as “disastrous”; the British Empire “created both material and psychological privileges among British workers.” Barry Munslow claimed that “cheap food produced by slaves contributed to improv-

7 For further analysis on the origins of racism and European imperialism, see Miles, 1982, 95–120; Young, 1995, 90–98; Young, 2001, 36–41.

8 In 1922, the CPGB weekly *The Communist* published an “Urgent Appeal to Englishmen” from a German protest against French colonial troops occupying the Rhineland, claiming that an “awful crime against the white race . . . is being perpetrated by the French in using black and colored troops for the occupation of German territory.” *The Communist*, under the editorship of R. W. Postgate at the time, stated, “It is part of the normal brutality of Imperialism to ignore things like those set out herein on the ground that the protest comes ‘from Germany.’ Such a pretense only adds to the iniquity” (“Outcry Against the Black Horror,” 1922, 4; cf. Klugmann, 1968, 215).

ing living standards in Britain and even the lowest ranks of British society could feel superior to the highest members of the colonial societies." It is true that "racism born of empire *helped to create a sense of superiority* [emphasis added] among the British working class" (Munslow, 1983, 196; 193), but it is much less discernible that British workers benefited materially from colonial exploitation.

Ron Ramdin has argued that "the exploitation and degradation of the colonial working class was an indispensable requirement in maintaining the standard of living of the British working class," based on arguments by both Labour and Conservative MPs that "the Empire was the essential economic base on which the British working class would be saved from starvation" (Ramdin, 1987, 63). Exploitation of the working class in Britain, according to Alex Callinicos, should not be defined by comparing the "absolute impoverishment" of the colonies with the living standards of workers in Britain; it should be understood in terms of the "relationship between the wages workers receive, reflecting the value of their labor power, and the amount of surplus value they produce for the capitalists" (Callinicos, 1992, 23). Material benefits for the working class were unquantifiable, but what imperialism offered the British working class was identification with the world's leading power, the British Empire. "Patriotism, the myth of empire, nationalism, social Darwinism and scientific racism blended together to create one important strand in modern British culture," Munslow wrote, which he described as "its underlying racism" (Munslow, 1983, 196). The tradition of British imperialism was at the heart of the CPGB's historical analysis of racism, but the dismantling of the Empire in the postwar period also gave the Party a firmer argument that the living standards of British workers would not be lowered by colonial independence or that racism was not in the material interests of the British working class.

For the Communist Party, its directives on colonial matters were handled by the International Department, and because of the Party's important stature in anti-colonial work it was this department that first dealt with the concerns of migrants from the New Commonwealth. Alongside Dutt, several other long-term International Department members were involved in anti-racist activism, including Kay Beauchamp, Tony Gilbert, Idris Cox, and the Secretary of the Department, Jack Woddis, who also held leadership roles in the Movement for Colonial Freedom (MCF). The authors of all the Party's

pamphlets on racism in the 1960s were members of the International Department: John Moss in 1961, Harry Bourne in 1965 and Joan Bellamy in 1968 (Callaghan, 2003, 153). They had first become involved in the struggle against imperialism in the interwar period, and the arrival of black immigrants from the Commonwealth led to the construction of an anti-racist program based on the already existing anti-colonial framework. Although black CPGB members, such as Asquith Gibbes, Vishnu Sharma and Winston Pinder, had articles published in the Party press, the Party's standpoint was usually elaborated by Beauchamp and Bellamy. As Marika Sherwood's biography of Claudia Jones has demonstrated, the black members of the CPGB were given praise and lip-service by the Party leadership, but were rarely given positions of authority or the means to dictate Party policy.

Postwar Anti-Colonialism and Racism as a Domestic Issue

During the 1950s, the CPGB still viewed the issue of racism and the plight of immigrants in Britain very much in the context of the colonial struggle. In the 1958 edition of *The British Road to Socialism*, the line concerning racism in Britain was attached to the section dedicated to Colonial Freedom (CPGB, 1958, 16). The Party reported in its weekly paper, *World News*, that the "presence of colonial workers in Britain has, over recent months, become an important political issue and a serious subject of public discussion." The reason for West Indians coming to Britain was rising poverty and unemployment in the Caribbean, but the CPGB highlighted that "these conditions are the inevitable result of imperialist rule, with the extraction of huge super-profits from the natural resources of the colonial territories" ("Talking Points . . .," 1955, 238). For the Communist Party, the problems faced by the newly arrived black immigrants in Britain were intrinsically linked to the exploitation of the colonies in the British Empire. The Party's London District Committee acknowledged in a pamphlet that "colonial workers" (not British subjects working in Britain) faced discrimination in housing and jobs, and still faced hostilities within the trade unions, but dealing with the immediate problems of housing and employment was linked to "righting the wrongs of British imperialism with the colonies themselves" (CPGB, 1955, 12).

In the literature published by the CPGB at the time, the Party attempted to explain why black immigrants had come to Britain. Phil

Bolsover wrote that they “do not emigrate from their sunny and beautiful islands for fun” and, quoting the Mayor of Lambeth, that the immigrants were “good, honest, working people who have come here because there is no work in their own country” (Bolsover, 1955, 4). The Party declared in *World News* that the “real solution to the problem [of race relations] is to free the colonies and end imperialist exploitation, so that colonial workers can freely build up their own countries and reap the benefits of the wealth which they produce” (“Talking Points . . .,” 1955, 238). This statement lends to the notion, pervasive in the 1950s, that black immigrants were the “problem.” By favoring struggles in the colonies, the CPGB avoided making any serious suggestions for tackling the problems faced by these immigrants in Britain, and “in doing so confounded the issues of racial discrimination and the effects of imperialism” (Sherwood, 1999, 65).

Before 1945, most of the blacks that came into contact with the CPGB in Britain were students at British universities, including a substantial number of Africans connected to the West African Student Union (WASU). In West Africa, no Communist Parties existed and the CPGB was viewed as a training ground for “Marxists” to take the skills learned within the CPGB back to Africa to assist in the colonial struggles, particularly in Nigeria and Ghana (Adi, 1995, 179; 181). In her study of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement, Christabel Gurney wrote, the International Department “had sub-committees covering every area of Britain’s former empire . . . to which, where possible, it recruited members from the territories concerned,” with its role being “producing and circulating information which could be used to stimulate solidarity action in the wider labor and trade union movement” (Gurney, n.d.). In 1950, a “mass influx” of Nigerians joined the Party. Hakim Adi notes: “The basis on which so many Nigerians were admitted into the Party remains something of a mystery” (Adi, 1995, 181). To accommodate these new members, the International Department established a number of “Robeson branches,” which were not based on residence or workplace, but on national grouping, something that in general was against Party rules.⁹ It was hoped by the CPGB that these new recruits would assist in the “development of a Communist movement in West Africa,” but the interest

9 These branches were named after Paul Robeson, the famous African-American singer and political activist.

in Marxism did not translate into the creation of “disciplined revolutionaries” and the Marxism–Leninism of the Communist Party had to compete with other revolutionary ideologies, such as Pan-Africanism or “deviant” forms of Marxism, such as Titoism. (Adi, 1998, 161–162). The Robeson branches were dissolved as recruitment of colonial “agents” did not seem to yield the benefits the Party hoped for (Adi, 1995, 181), but still a series of committees, such as the West African Sub-Committee and the African and West Indian Advisory Committee, were created by the International Department, as well as various publications, such as the *Africa Newsletter* (edited by Desmond Buckle from 1950 to 1954, before it was replaced by the “more ambitious” *Africa Bulletin*) and *Colonial Liberator* (Adi, 2006, 33; Gurney, n.d.; Adi, 1995, 180).

Hakim Adi has noted: “It is worth remembering that many of the leading African and Caribbean political activists in Britain, both before and after World War II . . . were either CPGB members or had at some point in their lives been closely connected with the international communist movement” (Adi, 2006, 23). The Communist Party continued to recruit significant numbers of black members during the 1950s, such as Billy Strachan and Trevor Carter, who were active in the London branch of the Caribbean Labour Congress (Schwarz, 2003a, 27) and Claudia Jones, an exile from the Communist Party of the United States, who founded the *West Indian Gazette* and assisted in the beginnings of the Notting Hill Carnival.¹⁰ However, its ability to retain many of its black members was not as successful. In his article on the nationality branches, Andrew Flinn writes that the West Indian branches were dissolved during the 1950s, but their fate is “somewhat obscure.” Flinn estimates that the branches were dissolved in 1955, but the West Indian Committee continued to exist, although an enquiry by the Executive Committee into the WIC underlined a split within the West Indian Party membership (Flinn, 2002, 58). The split was between those who followed leading West Indian figure Billy Strachan and other members, with Carter suggesting that the reason behind this division was the question of class before race (Carter, 2000, tape 04).

One of the few successful challenges by black members in the Communist Party was in 1957 when they appealed against the word-

10 For more on Claudia Jones, see: Sherwood, 1999; Johnson, 1985; Schwarz, 2003b, 264–285.

ing of the section on colonial freedom in *The British Road to Socialism*, due to be re-published in 1958, after the mass exodus of Party members in 1956.¹¹ *The British Road to Socialism* outlined a proposal for a “new, close, fraternal association of the British peoples and the liberated peoples of the Empire,” in order to “promote mutually beneficial economic exchange and co-operation.” This exchange would ensure Britain “the normal supplies of the vital food and raw materials,” in return giving the former colonies “the products of British industry” (CPGB, 1951, 12). Communist Party General Secretary Harry Pollitt compared this “fraternal association” to the relationship between the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc countries, stating: “you cannot go anywhere in Peoples’ China, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Albania, and the German Democratic Republic without being struck by the volume of assistance that has been given to the peoples of all these countries by the Soviet Union” (Pollitt, 1954, 544). However, the West Indian Committee dismissed this “fraternal association” as “an attempt to impose a new form of British-led alliance on newly independent colonies,” proposing instead voluntary “fraternal relations” (Flinn, 2002, 59). In Noreen Branson’s *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, she writes that the amendment was moved by Dutt after objections by some West Indian members, while Sherwood identifies the objections being sent to the Executive Committee by the Aggregate Meeting of the West Indian Committee, alongside some suggestions made by Party branches (Branson, 1997, 238; Sherwood, 1999, 64). The Party leadership insisted on maintaining the term “fraternal association” until Dutt, as a member of the Executive Committee, led a vote at the 25th National Congress, with 298 in favor of dropping the paragraph and 210 opposed (Flinn, 2002, 59–60; Sherwood, 1999, 64). Therefore, the 1958 edition of *The British Road to Socialism* stated that the CPGB would recognize the “complete independence and right of self-determination” of former colonies and that a socialist Britain would “seek to promote close *voluntary* [emphasis added] fraternal relations . . . between Britain and [those countries] willing to develop such relations” (CPGB, 1958, 25). By comparison, the Party’s domestic anti-racist policy in the 1958 edition was expressed in a single sentence — “It [the British labor

11 Over 8,000 members left the CPGB between February 1956 and February 1958, after the Party leadership failed to reevaluate its uncritical support for the Soviet Union during the Stalin era and the invasion of Hungary by Soviet forces in October 1956.

movement] needs to fight against the color bar and racial discrimination, and for the full social, economic and political equality of colonial people in Britain" (CPGB, 1958, 16) — and was included in the section "For Colonial Freedom."¹²

Other national branches were formed in the mid-1950s, organized in Cypriot, Indian and West Indian communities. These branches were an attempt to accommodate new immigrant members, who often had experience in their native countries' labor movements, into the Party structure, "justified on the grounds that either language or some other temporary special circumstances necessitated exceptional organizational forms" (Flinn, 2002, 61). The Party did advise that it was still "very important to note that participation in the Party branches and the groups must not be substituted for each other," although these groups "gradually converted into actual party units or branches composed of Indian Party members only" ("Indian Members of the CPGB," 1966). The existence of these nationality branches was usually left unacknowledged by the Party leadership and was essentially acknowledged only when they were dissolved in 1966 by the International Department. For Carter, the "stubborn class-before-race position of the Party during the fifties and sixties cost the Party dearly in terms of its [black] members" (Carter, 1986, 62).

Bolsover's 1955 pamphlet, *No Colour Bar for Britain*, contained a "Charter of Rights" for colored workers in Britain that advocated making racial discrimination a "penal offence," opposition to restrictions being placed on immigration, "equality of treatment" in employment and "full encouragement" for blacks to join their trade union (Bolsover, 1955, 11). Marika Sherwood wrote that despite the positive aspects of the charter, its proposals were vague, and "while advocating action, [they] sadly do not indicate what form that action might take" (Sherwood, 1999, 66). A report from the International Department in March 1957, titled "West Indians in Britain," was much more precise in identifying the problems faced by black immigrants than other CPGB literature. It complained that in the pamphlets on the issue of "race" and immigration circulated in 1955, the Party's commitment to anti-racism did "not appear to have penetrated deeply into the Party membership." The report requested a re-examination

12 Another line, slightly different from the one under "For Colonial Freedom," appears in the section dedicated to Socialist Democracy: "All forms of discrimination on grounds of race or color need to be made illegal" (CPGB, 1958, 24).

of the “Charter of Rights,” alongside more practical and immediate measures, such as having the Industrial Department “present an account of the problems arising” in various industries, public support for Labour MP Fenner Brockway’s Racial Discrimination Bill, a call for cooperation with the Movement for Colonial Freedom and other immigrant organizations and more attention to the matter in the *Daily Worker* (International Affairs Committee, 1957, 6; 7).

At a *Labour Monthly* anti-colonial conference in October 1958, Dutt stated in his opening speech that the “real foundations of the color bar and racial discrimination is the colonial system,” which was a prevailing attitude among Party members involved in anti-racist activism. The racism prevalent in the British Empire had repercussions for those black immigrants who had come to work and reside in Britain. Dutt warned that the racist actions that were inherent in colonialism were “happening today . . . not at the other end of the world, but close to our shores.” The “ugly danger signals of color bar violence” were to be condemned, with Dutt appealing for the labor movement to demand legislation against racial discrimination in Britain, as well as support for “national independence, withdrawal of armed forces, and the right to determine their own futures” in the colonies. The fight against the color bar and racial discrimination was ineffective, Dutt argued, if people “condone and uphold the color bar in the colonial sphere” (Dutt, 1958, 532; 530; 537; 532).

The CPGB and “Race” in the Post-Colonial Era

By the mid-1960s, however, the decolonization process was almost complete, with few European colonies remaining. As Idris Cox recognized in early 1964:

Within the past seven years the number of independent states in Africa has trebled. . . . With the exception of South Africa (which is “independent” only for the European minority) these independent states account for over 80 per cent of the African territory, and 85 per cent of its population. (Cox, 1964, 38.)

But the end of European imperialism had not ushered in the collapse of the capitalist system, as Lenin had predicted. The notion of neo-colonialism, as put forward by Kwame Nkrumah, partially explained

the reason why capitalism was able to survive the decolonization process. In *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, Nkrumah wrote:

The essence of neocolonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside. . . . The result of neocolonialism is that foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than the development of the less developed parts of the world. Investment under neocolonialism increases rather than decreases the gap between the rich and the poor countries of the world. (Nkrumah, 1965, ix–x.)

Neocolonialism was thus incorporated into the Marxist–Leninist theory of imperialism, by maintaining the assumption that the end of colonialism, *in all its forms*, would mean the creation of new socialist states. As Bert Ramelson wrote in *Marxism Today* on the 60th anniversary of the October Revolution:

The ending of colonialism does not, of course, automatically end the exploitation of the previously enslaved peoples by their previous imperialist overlords. . . . Having been compelled to grant political independence to most of their previous colonial possessions, imperialism has and is striving to perpetuate its economic exploitation. “Colonialism is dead! Long live neocolonialism!” became its slogan. (Ramelson, 1977, 334.)

Neocolonialism did not displace the “old Leninist theories of imperialism,” but was used to explain, despite the intervention of the Soviet Union in many of the former colonies, why these countries had not established socialist states based on the Soviet model (Callaghan, 2003, 139). This was an indication of the rigidity of the older Party ideologues towards amendments to the CPGB’s view of colonialism and how this was challenged in the post-colonial era.

For the CPGB, the “real enemy” responsible for “bad housing, poverty and unemployment,” for which the black immigrants were being blamed, were the “Tories, landlords and the bosses” and those who were the “noisiest objectors” to immigration were the “fascist groups who do the dirty work for the Tories” (Matthews, 1959; Moss, 1961, 9). These statements, along with Dutt’s, demonstrate the two notions that shaped the Communist Party’s attitudes in the struggle against racism — that indigenous racism in Britain was the deliber-

ate end result of a consistent policy of imperialism, and that fascism was the violent form of monopoly capitalism. These notions reinforced the view that racism was consciously controlled by the ruling class to divide and subdue the working class. The Party regarded racism as a “malevolent ideology” used by the ruling elite to divide black and white workers and the Party’s theory of race “contained a reductionist thrust” that reduced the issue of racism to below “the ‘bread and butter’ struggles of socialists” (Callaghan, 1993, 285). According to black Party member Trevor Carter, John Gollan, General Secretary of the CPGB from 1956 to 1976, disclosed to the black minority within the Party that “black politics is on the periphery of the movement” (Carter, 2000, tape 08). A similar attitude of “class before gender” was evident in the Party’s relationship with the politics of women’s liberation, as the Party “saw the interests of women as bound up with the interests of the working class as a whole,” which “would ultimately be resolved with socio-economic transformation” (Andrews, 2004, 60).

For the CPGB, “capitalism is the cause of slumps, not colored workers,” and racism would only disappear “when the capitalist system is overthrown” (Moss, 1961, 14). This reduction of racism to an issue of class remained intact as the colonial struggle dominated the Party’s views on anti-racism. The view that the colonial struggle and the anti-racist struggle are interchangeable, as well as the primacy of class above “race,” was still strong in the CPGB in the 1950s and into the 1960s. However, the notion of colonialism and the immigrant as “alien” became less prominent in the Party’s anti-racist program, beginning in the mid-1960s and continuing throughout the 1970s. Before the alternative of black revolutionary organizations began to appeal to a wider black population in the late 1960s, the CPGB still commanded a position of authority among black workers and intellectuals, as the only political party that seemed to be dealing with anti-racism (Carter, 2000, tape 04).

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Party’s understanding of the issues of “race,” racism and immigration underwent a significant change, from viewing black immigrants as part of Britain’s colonialism to the identification of these immigrants as an integral part of British society. By the mid-1960s, the Party’s literature on “race” and racism had developed two concepts that dominated discussion on the issue of “race relations.” One concerned how racism was created by capitalism and imperial exploitation. As the Head of the International

Department, Jack Woddis, stated, “the root and fruit of racialism is profit” (Woddis, 1960, xii). The other was that “race” was purely a sociological construct, demonstrated by the CPGB slogan, “one race, the human race.”¹³

The CPGB emphasised that race was not a biological certainty and logically there was “no scientific basis for racial prejudice” (Beauchamp, 1966, 170). However, this reliance on anthropological and scientific definitions of race ran into the very real problem that race as a political and sociological phenomenon did exist. As Robert Miles has written, “‘races’ are socially imagined rather than biological realities”; racism is “an ideology which identifies individuals as belonging to a group on the basis of some real or imaginary biological or inherent characteristic” (Miles, 1991, 71; Miles and Phizacklea, 1984, 10). Thus, racism can be used to “constitute the foundation for discriminatory and unfavorable treatment of all individuals identified as belonging to the group” or “justify such a course of action after it has occurred” (Miles and Phizacklea, 1984, 10).¹⁴ Denial of the importance of race and racism under the slogan “one race, the human race” therefore reduced the problems experienced by blacks in Britain to a purely abstract position that conflicted with practical anti-racist campaigns and the rise of the concept of “black power.” These understandings of the concept of “race” had repercussions on the practical anti-racist campaigning taken up by the Communist Party. They allowed for the subjugation of race to the “immediate” issues of the class struggle, which led to a failure to attract black workers (especially young blacks) to the CPGB, who were more likely to join black power organizations, or in the case of Asians organizations such as the Indian Workers Association.

There had been a tendency within the Communist Party to view black immigrants as a colonial product, the “alien” or “outsider,” a view that was widely held in British society. However, by the mid-1960s this view was changing after nearly 20 years of large-scale black immigration and increase in the visibility of the black population, especially in the larger cities, although racial prejudice was still pervasive

13 See *One Race, the Human Race. . . . Two Classes, Workers and Bosses* (CPGB flyer, London, 1968); *One Race, the Human Race: A Communist Party Broadsheet on the Menace of Racism* (CPGB flyer, London, 1974); “One Race — the Human Race,” draft of CPGB flyer (CP/CENT/CIRC/52/07, NMLH).

14 For more discussion on the ideology of “race,” see Miles, 1982, 7–92; Gilroy, 2002, 1–40; Solomos, 1989, 11–25; Anthias, Yuval-Davis and Cain, 1993, 1–20.

within Britain. For those in the CPGB involved in anti-racist activities, the perception was changing, from race as a colonial to a domestic issue, although a paternalistic attitude was still apparent in the Party's relationship with its black members and the wider black communities. During the mid-1960s, Party literature included educational pieces on the origins of racism and how racism evolved, providing a theoretical background to the other more activist literature on racism and immigration that the Party produced.

In a 1965 CPGB pamphlet, Harry Bourne acknowledged that there was "already considerable color prejudice" in Britain, described as "latent for the most part," but "inflamed by political exploitation" on the part of the Conservatives and the far right. This latent racism existed, Bourne explained, because of Britain's imperialist history and the capitalist economic system. Racial prejudice was not "natural or inborn," but "man made . . . based on lies and thriv[ing] on ignorance" (Bourne, 1965, 8). The Party's emphasis on the falsity of "race" as scientific fact and its historical origins within the rise of British imperialism reduced racism to a determined product of the capitalist system, and any anti-racist action was inherently action against capitalism. This class reductionism saw the elimination of racism as part of the socialist revolution, "even though capitalism does not directly, exclusively, and necessarily 'cause' racism" (Ben-Tovim, 1978, 205).

Alongside Bourne's pamphlet, a book was written by *Daily Worker* staff member Tony Chater to dispel the "prejudices and false conceptions of the ordinary British elector" and to counter the "false ideas of racialism and the various arguments used to justify immigration control" by showing historically racism's "specifically capitalist origin and its fundamentally exploitative purpose" (Chater, 1966b). Chater reiterated the Party's emphasis that "race" was a sociological construct with no definite basis in biological science. The "mythology of racialism" was the belief that "the white man stands at the pinnacle of evolution," but Chater stated that "even from a strictly biological angle, the concept of racial superiority is untenable" (Chater, 1966a, 20). The Communist Party used the authority of various anthropologists and reports by UNESCO to prove the difficulty of defining "race"; Kay Beauchamp concluded in *Marxism Today* that "there are no pure races," instead that a "mixture of races" existed. "There is only one human species with one common origin and in that strict sense we all belong to one human race" (Beauchamp, 1966, 167; 171). However,

the biological falsity of “race” led to a promotion of “color blindness” among Communist Party members, whose appeals to fraternal notions of class disregarded the actual experiences of racism felt by black workers and undermined practical actions to combat racism at the shop-floor level. The view of anti-racism as merely part of the wider issue of class politics did not acknowledge that the fight against racism demanded different and immediate actions that were not addressed by the white left and the labor movement. As the CPGB stated in 1981:

Often the major problem with the trade union movement (seen in the left generally) is “color-blindness.” This may seem to have good intentions, but it means, in practice, a failure to *carry out practical policies* to undermine racism and overcome racial disadvantage at work. . . . For a long time the struggle against racism was taken as a low political priority. (CPGB, 1981, section 4.2.)

The Party’s account of the cause of racism was based on a historical materialist analysis, which stated that racism “did not exist before the 16th century.” Expansion of the European imperial powers into the Americas and Africa led to the development of the concept of racial superiority and therefore racial prejudice. As racism was a “product of and a justification for ruthless exploitation” in the colonies, it was necessary for ideas of racial superiority to be propagated within the lower classes. Racism within the lower classes was seen as the result of “woggism,” the philosophy disseminated within the colonial armies, made up of the working class and lower middle class, who had to use force against “colored workers demanding the very rights for which their fathers had fought back home” (Chater, 1966a, 7; 17). The “insidious concept” of racism and white racial superiority was the “main weapon” of the British imperialist armies, and thus had been “bred deep into the British consciousness” (YCL Education Committee, n.d.).

For the Communist Party, racism was an extension of previous efforts by the ruling class to create divisions in order to protect its status and economic position. “Capitalism breeds racialism, national conflict and religious bigotry,” stated Beauchamp, with the result that “centuries of class society” saw “racialist ideas . . . deeply embedded in man’s mind” (Beauchamp, n.d., 12–13). Quoted in the Young Communist League (YCL) branch notes, the Education Committee stated that “racialism has been used to facilitate imperialist plunder

abroad” and “racialism has been used to facilitate the plunder of capitalism at home” (YCL Education Committee, n.d.). There was a tendency in Communist Party literature to give a conspiratorial quality to the racism of the ruling class, thus seeing working-class racism as merely a “weapon . . . for dividing one section of the workers from another” (Beauchamp, n.d., 12).

Despite the Party’s emphasis on capitalism producing racial tensions, it was not monolithic in its view of the way racism could be used for a particular end result. Sociologist and CPGB member Gideon Ben-Tovim wrote in 1978 that the prevailing reduction of racism to a reflection of simplistic class interests was “still found within much of the left’s [including the CPGB] discussion of racism.” Ben-Tovim labeled the view of racism as “essentially a ruling-class conspiracy” as “inadequate” and “at best a very partial and over-generated analysis,” while “at worst, misleading and an opening of politically disastrous consequences.” Racism was propagated by various elements of British society with wide-ranging motives and agendas, and this demonstrated the “relative autonomy” of racist ideology. However, while capitalism was often not the direct if exclusive cause of racism, “it is the economic, political and ideological structures that have been the major provider of the conditions under which racist ideologies and practices have been reproduced” (Ben-Tovim, 1978, 203; 204; 205).

In 1981, the Party’s National Race Relations Committee (NRRC) produced a discussion pack for CPGB branches, titled *Power & Prejudice = Racism*. The publication was a significant change from the literature of the 1960s that saw racism as a deliberate result of British imperialism, and instead argued for a need to “take account of three important facts”:

1. Anti-semitism . . . has a history in Britain which pre-dates the growth of capitalism.
2. Aspects of white racism can be found in the pre-capitalist period in Britain.
3. National chauvinism, in particular English chauvinism, emerged in the period of the growth of the English nation. The best known date in this connection is 1066 which . . . saw the first coming together of an English nation. (CPGB, 1981, section 2.1.)

The publication of this material for distribution throughout the Party branches, endorsed by the CPGB’s Education Department and

Central Organization Department and primarily created by an academic sociologist (the pack was compiled by Ben-Tovim and Martin Rabstein) demonstrated the loosening of the Party's traditional ideological framework of the centrality of class struggle, which had been challenged by the influence of new social movements upon the Party's theorists.

From Colonialism to Black Resistance: Challenges to the CPGB

In the early 1970s, Beauchamp maintained in her pamphlet that "racialism can only be ended by socialism," but accepted that immediate anti-racist measures had to be taken as racism was an ideological construct that "will not cease to exist automatically" with the building of a socialist society (Beauchamp, n.d., 13). In 1979, Vishnu Sharma, a member of the CPGB's Executive Committee and General Secretary of the Indian Workers Association (Southall), still insisted that racism was a symptom of a "class divided society which is rotten to the core," but now stated that the "fight against racism is *linked* to the fight for democracy and socialism" (Sharma, 1979, 20), that overcoming racism is not a mere by-product of the class struggle, and that the anti-racist struggle is one of immediate concern. By 1981, the Party had stated that racism was "the most serious human, democratic and class issue in Britain today"; an "effective response to racism" is a "most potent ideological and political force for revolutionary change" (CPGB, 1981, 1.2).

The reason for this change in the CPGB's position was twofold: the rise of the black separatist organizations and the increasing promotion of new social movements within the broad democratic alliance in the 1970s, primarily by those influenced by Gramscism and Eurocommunism. In Britain, politically active black immigrants had initially drifted towards the Communist Party, the Movement for Colonial Freedom and the Labour Party, but support for addressing the problems facing black immigrants "turned out to be very limited" (Huntley, 1982, 71). By the late 1960s, black political action underwent a significant change as a black militant position started to emerge. Inspired by American black militants, such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael and later by the Black Panthers and Angela Davis, black power was the idea that "black people needed to redefine themselves by asserting their own history and culture, to project an image which

they would develop without white people” (Shukra, 1995, 6). Black militancy, which included both black separatist organizations and a Marxist-inspired black radicalism, “captured and reactivated many of the disaffected activists” who had been neglected by the labor movement or felt compromised working within official race related bodies (Carter, 1986, 62). For the emerging black organizations, the Communist Party’s marginalization of “race” was rejected in favor of an active acceptance of the political and cultural definition of “race,” the basis for black militancy.

The importance of black militancy for the CPGB was that it had shown black activists that there was a way to organize outside of the Communist Party (Carter, 2000, tape 09). Black militancy was concerned with the white left’s “pervasive need to ‘integrate’ the Black class struggle under their organizational/political domination” (Cambridge and Gutzmore, 1974, 199) and the call for specifically black organizations reflected this apprehension. For the Communist Party, black power was “seriously compromised by a lack of class analysis implied in the concept” (Thompson, n.d., 2). The Party was also suspicious of black militancy due to its revolutionary approach outside the established trade union movement and its inclusion of revolutionary violent rhetoric. The Communist Party’s main strategy during this period was industrial action through the labor movement and cooperation with the Labour left, committed to parliamentary democracy and the “broad popular alliance” as outlined in *The British Road to Socialism*. Black militancy, in particular the black radical Marxism as promoted in journals such as *Race and Class*, *Race Today* and *Black Liberator*, while advocating black trade union action, shared a greater revolutionary affinity with the far left. The CPGB was criticized for its “primary expression of Labourism,” where the Party continued to support voting for the Labour Party, “whilst patiently ‘raising class consciousness’ and ‘politicising’ the masses inside this laborist hegemony” (Cambridge and Gutzmore, 1974, 199). On the other hand, the Communist Party warned that black militancy could “embark on the dangerous path of ‘all blacks against all whites’ and . . . lead to serious consequences” (International Affairs Committee, 1968).

Despite this hostility towards black power from the CPGB, there was some recognition of the importance of the black militant movement in radicalizing people outside what was perceived as the economic confines of the class struggle, which was increasingly promoted

with the revisions to *The British Road to Socialism* in the late 1970s and the broad democratic alliance. One of those associated with the reformer wing of the CPGB was Willie Thompson, who wrote an article on black power for the YCL's theoretical journal, *Cogito*, which discussed the developments within the attitudes towards Britain's black population and more importantly, black activism. Although Thompson reiterated the traditional Party line that "racial conflict arises because the colored people are a specifically exploited group" by capitalism and "not from any inherent biological antagonism between races," he acknowledged that black power is "power to combat persecution" because the "racial line represents certain social facts" (Thompson, n.d., 4–5). This constituted a significant step within the Party's attitude towards "race" after coming into contact with black militancy, that despite the Party's insistence on its falsity as scientific fact, "race" was a political and social classification that formed a necessary partner in the struggle against oppression and thus could not be ignored.

In the early postwar period, the CPGB, as the largest political party to the left of the Labour Party and an influential force within the trade unions, had the potential to play an important role within the anti-racist movement, attracting a significant number of immigrant workers, who had been trade unionists or politically active in their home countries. By the 1970s, autonomous black organization and the failure of the left to effectively address the issue of racial discrimination had left the Communist Party with a greatly diminished role. The importance of the new social movements, such as anti-racism, for the CPGB was their impact upon those who sought to reform the party, who believed that the Party's emphasis on trade unionism failed to recognize that there were other people within the working class, politicized by their "consciousness of oppression, rather than [by] their class exploitation" (Cook, 1978, 371). The new social movements were not rejections of class struggle or without trade union support, but worked outside the organized labor movement and demanded immediate actions to redress inequalities and discrimination within the capitalist system. The move by those radicalized away from what John McIlroy described as the "old axis of the unions, Labour Party and CP" did not mean that class-based activism had become invalid (McIlroy, 1999, 224). However, there was a perception among these radicals that the traditional labor movement was too socially conservative. The emphasis on class-based politics had

alienated many potential activists, including those in Britain's black communities. The 1977 edition of *The British Road to Socialism* recognized that the struggle for socialism needed "not only . . . to be an association of class forces . . . but of other important forces in society which emerge out of areas of oppression not always directly connected with the relations of production." Although the "struggle . . . against all forms of racial discrimination" was considered by the Party to be "a vital democratic question," the potential for the CPGB to make any significant contribution to the anti-racist movement had dissipated, with black workers reluctant to follow the lead of the CPGB (or the rest of the white left) and the Party itself in a state of steep decline (CPGB, 1977, 29; 30).

The views of the CPGB concerning "race" and racism had been significantly altered by the 1970s after 30 years of black immigration. The Party had originally viewed black immigrants as colonial workers, tied to the colonial struggles for national independence. The Party's attitude was also informed by a Marxist outlook that viewed the notion of "race" as a capitalist construct to justify imperialist exploitation. Between the late 1940s and the 1970s, racism had been transformed from an issue of colonialism to an immediate and everyday issue for Britain's black population, but the Communist Party was slow to formulate an effective and practical strategy to combat the immediate matters of racial discrimination in British society. Based on a tradition of anti-colonialism and adherence to the Marxist concept of the class struggle, the CPGB's attitude towards the issue of "race" had failed to recognize that racism was of primacy importance for black Britons, and not just a secondary issue within the wider struggle for socialism. The history of anti-racism within the CPGB is a history of potential squandered, one that had greatly diminished between the 1950s, when significant numbers of black immigrants were joining the Party, and the early 1980s, when the Party was in sharp decline and the black communities were wary of the white labor movement that had for so long held fast to an attitude of class before race.

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