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Virdee's challenges

Marcel van der Linden

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Satnam Virdee's *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider* is a book of great merit. But it contains a remarkable paradox: it argues strongly against racism and nationalism, but it does so in an insular way. Now and then there is mention of other parts of the world, but the book does not as such look beyond England's boundaries. This implies at least two important challenges for further work. First, it appears that Virdee still remains imprisoned in methodological nationalism (not to be confused with political nationalism). Second, Virdee does not yet offer a structural analysis of working-class racism. An additional point is that Virdee's analysis lacks an explicit gender perspective. The connection between fragile masculinities and (anti-)racist attitudes is not explored. These marginalia are not intended as objections to Virdee's work. He has accomplished quite a lot and we can build on his work.

Keywords: working-class racism; methodological nationalism; stereotyping; gender; labour aristocracy; split labour markets

Satnam Virdee's *Racism, Class and the Racialized Other* is a book of great merit. Using a lot of secondary literature as a base, Virdee reconstructs the role that racism and anti-racism, and nationalism and internationalism, have played in the development of the English workingclass. The book covers a long period, from the early nineteenth century to the present, although the emphasis is on the years after 1945. The author clearly feels more at ease with the last seven decades than with the preceding one-and-a-half centuries. He has taken pains with the earlier period, but when he does so he seems to be trespassing upon another's land and his narrative becomes a bit wooden. The years after the Second World War are an entirely different matter. Here he tells the story vividly, with many useful insights.

Virdee's synthesis as a whole demonstrates convincingly that 'racism and nationalism' have 'profoundly scarred English society' (p. 163). Yet he also shows that there have always been oppositional movements as well that offer hope for the future. The empirical support that Virdee gives for this contention over more than two centuries makes his work a real achievement – one that future studies in this area cannot ignore. I at least do not know of a similar work. Virdee's book moreover calls for international comparisons. It repeatedly raises the question of what is more generally applicable and what is unique to the English experience of working-class (anti-)racism.

Although one could of course contest points of historical detail, I take the liberty of not developing a detailed critique of Virdee's reconstruction. The essence of what he has to say is, I believe, entirely correct. However, Virdee invites further steps in research. There is a remarkable paradox in the book: it argues strongly against racism

and nationalism, but does so in an *insular* way. Now and then there is mention of other parts of the world, but the book does not as such look beyond England's boundaries. Irish, Caribbean and South Asian immigrants are seen through an 'English' lens. That these migrants may have led transcultural lives hardly comes up for discussion. Virdee has written an internationalist book from a national perspective.

I would say that this implies at least two important challenges for further work, or if you like, two necessary 'radicalizations'. First, it appears that Virdee still remains imprisoned in *methodological* nationalism (not to be confused with *political* nationalism). By this I mean a combination of two trends of thought. First, the 'naturalization' of the nation state: the nation state is considered as the basic, self-evident analytical unit for historical research. Even if it is recognized that nation states only flourished in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the older history is still interpreted as the prehistory of the later nationstate. Cross-border or border-subverting processes are seen as distractions from the 'pure' model. Such a teleology should be abandoned, because it is unreal. From a global perspective, the existence of nationstates is, to be sure, an essential feature of the world system, but it is a feature that needs to be thoroughly historicized *vis-à-vis* sub-national, supranational and transnational influences. Second, methodological nationalism conflates society with the state and a national territory; 'societies' are regarded as geographically identical with 'states'. A more realistic approach is possible and desirable. We ought to think more profoundly about Michael Mann's (1986, 1–2) insight that societies are 'multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of [ideological, economic, military and political] power', with the implication that 'Societies are not unitary. They are not social systems (closed or open); they are not totalities. We can never find a single bounded society in geographical or social space'.

A clear example of methodological nationalism is E. P. Thompson's (1963) *The Making of the English Working Class* – without any doubt also a path-breaking book. Thompson reconstructed the English process of class formation in the period 1792–1832 as a self-contained process. England was, according to his analysis, the logical unit of analysis. External forces certainly influenced it, but they are specifically portrayed as 'foreign' influences. Thus, the French Revolution plays an important background role in Thompson's narrative, as a source of inspiration of working-class activities, yet developments in neighbouring countries always remain an 'externality'. Added to this is the fact that Thompson pays no attention at all in his *magnum opus* to imperial connections. Colonialism, with its growing influence on the lives of the lower classes through the nineteenth century, is simply disregarded.

In their book *The Many-Headed Hydra*, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker pointed out that, at its foundation in 1792, the London Corresponding Society (LCS) – prominent in Thompson's story – declared itself in favour of equality, whether 'black or white, high or low, rich or poor'. Yet in August that same year, the LCS declared: 'FELLOW CITIZENS, Of every rank and every situation in life, Rich, Poor, High or Low, we address you all as our Brethren (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, 274).' Here, the phrase 'black or white' had vanished. Linebaugh and Rediker (2000, 274) argue persuasively that this change of phrase must be explained with reference to the revolt in Haiti, which began just before: 'Race had thus become a tricky and, for many, in England, a threatening subject, one that the leadership of the L.C.S. now preferred to

avoid.' No recognition of this transatlantic effect can be found in Thompson's writing. His 'insular' approach is all the more surprising given that, politically, he was very much an internationalist, who was familiar from his childhood days with stories about British India, where his parents had lived for some time. Virdee does quote from *The Many-Headed Hydra*, but not this revealing fragment.

Working-class formation has in fact never been an isolated process within the closed 'monads' of separate states. Virdee rightly notes the considerable support of British workers for the campaign against the slave trade and slavery around 1800 (pp. 18–21, 25–26). He could also have pointed to the impressive solidarity of Lancashire textile workers with the Northern troops during the US Civil War. The Irish, East European (Jewish) and South Asian migrant workers, to which Virdee rightly pays so much attention, prove the importance of transnational connections. They not only brought their own experience, culture and expectations to the new homeland, but also influenced the development in their regions of origin by their departure, their remittances sent to relatives, and in all kinds of other ways. Information was exchanged transcontinentally, so that lives and struggles in areas far apart influenced each other. The English and Irish textile workers who migrated from Lancashire to Fall River in Massachusetts remained in close touch with the 'Old World', through their personal contacts and through more formal means of communication:

Lancashire's leading working-class newspaper during the late nineteenth century was the Cotton Factory Times. This weekly circulated widely among Lancashire textile workers, and was used by workers on both sides of the Atlantic for information concerning the state of the trade, the cost of cotton in New York and New Orleans, wage rates in various sectors of the shire, strikes and union business, as well as political and social news of interest to the working class. (Cumbler 1980, 284)

In a few cases, such connections were already institutionalized early on. The Knights of Labour, originally a US-based organization, gained a certain influence among English workers in the 1880s (Pelling 1956).

At the end of the nineteenth century, the British cooperative movement owned plantations in West Africa and South Asia, where coolies cultivated cocoa and tea for British working-class families. In this case, workers' organizations exploited workers in other countries. Little is known about how this was perceived in England. More generally, what the workers' stance to colonialism actually was is not given enough attention in Virdee's account. The British trade union movement identified itself in the course of time more and more with its own state, so that in the twentieth century 'relations between the TUC [Trades Union Congress] and colonial trade unions were rarely characterised by acts of genuine solidarity. At best the TUC generally exhibited paternalistic tendencies towards colonial labour movements' (Zezeza 1984, 10). More important was that the production relations in which workers were involved were less and less contained within national states. Phenomena like the 'cotton famine', which in the 1860s made so many textile workers unemployed, showed this already. But especially after the Second World War, global commodity chains, transnational corporations, multi-state agreements and supranational institutions brought a lot of changes. Through globalization, the classical 'national' class analysis has become in good part

obsolete. 'Class analysis flourished during a period of stability in the world system and in the boundaries of specific national states. ... Conditions are very different now' (Breen and Rottman 1998, 16).

A second challenge concerns the structural analysis. What is the source of working-class racism? Virdee gives many examples of this phenomenon, and shows that anti-racist forces are often weak. But he does not yet offer a materialist explanation for it. It will not surprise readers of this journal if I claim that 'race' is a historical-cultural construction that articulates the expression of power relationships not just because 'white', 'yellow', 'black' or 'brown' people are ranked in a racial hierarchy, but also because the observed skin colour can change. In the seventeenth century, Europeans (who chromometrically should themselves be called 'pink' rather than 'white') still regarded the Chinese as 'white'. With the rise of colonialism and the disintegration of the Heavenly Kingdom, the Chinese gradually became 'yellow' (Demel 1992). Inverse processes of 'decolourization' also made their appearance. Thus, in the nineteenth century the Ethiopians were considered to be 'black', but very quickly became – after they had trounced the Italian invaders decisively in the battle of Adwa in 1896 – paler and paler; it was, after all, unthinkable that 'whites' would be defeated in battle by 'blacks' (Marcus 1971).

Racist stereotyping usually has a structural background, whether it concerns age-old forms of anti-Semitism, or the more recent discrimination of people who are regarded as 'black' or 'yellow'. First, there is a social and economic difference between 'whites' and others; then racist prejudices emerge when the differences turn out to be durable (cf. Postone 1986). Once racism is established, these prejudices can persist and, to some extent, attain a life of their own, even if the initial situation in which they emerged has disappeared. But even then such prejudices are usually weakened when changed socio-economic circumstances shift the development of society in a different direction.

There are at least two types of inequality that contribute to working-class racism and which ought to be investigated further historically. To start with, there is the inequality between 'developed' and 'developing' countries. In 1907, Lenin formulated the hypothesis that:

as a result of the extensive colonial policy, the European proletariat *partly* finds himself in a position where it is *not* his labour, but the labour of the practically enslaved natives in the colonies, that maintains the whole of society. The British bourgeoisie, for example, derives more profit from the many millions of the population of India and other colonies than from the British workers. In certain countries this provides the material and economic basis for infecting the proletariat with colonial chauvinism. (Lenin 1907, 77 – emphasis in original)

Lenin's hypothesis was elaborated on by Rosa Luxemburg's student Fritz Sternberg (1926) and by the Greek economist Arghiri Emmanuel (1969). Contributions to the debate about those are still being published (e.g. Cope 2012). Nevertheless, there have been few attempts to test Lenin's hypothesis empirically. The AfricanAmerican sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois suspected that not only the absence of revolutionary orientations but also the racism of 'white' North American and European workers towards 'black' and 'yellow' people could be explained from this structural inequality.

Referring to the support that ‘socialists’ in many countries had given to their governments at the outbreak of the First World War, he noted:

Subtly they had been bribed, but effectively: Were they not lordly whites and should they not share in the spoils of rape? High wages in the United States and England might be the skilfully manipulated result of slavery in Africa and of peonage in Asia. (Du Bois 1920, 935)

Another mechanism that seems to have promoted working-class racism is the phenomenon of split labour markets. Even if the Lenin-Sternberg-Emmanuel hypothesis turns out to be untenable, and the English working class did not profit from global inequality, the fact remains that in the last two centuries a growing disparity has emerged between wages in the developed and the underdeveloped world that encouraged labour migration:

[C]apital imports labor from the periphery at a lower wage (reserving for this labor the most thankless tasks), in order to depress the labor market of the metropolitan countries. ... This additional immigrant labor force constitutes also a disguised transfer of value from the periphery to the center, since the periphery has borne the cost of training this labor force. (Amin 1976, 361–362)

Such immigration, as we now know, usually does not lead to an equalization of wage rates within the metropolises, but rather results in ‘dual’, ‘split’ or ‘segmented’ labour markets. The origin of such durable inequalities can be traced back to at least the early nineteenth century. Already in 1848, John Stuart Mill discussed the rigidities of British labour markets, implicitly referring to the substandard wages of Irish immigrants:

So complete, indeed, has hitherto been the separation, so strongly marked the line of demarcation, between the different grades of labourers, as to be almost equivalent to a hereditary distinction of caste; each employment being chiefly recruited from the children of those already employed in it, or in employments of the same rank with it in social estimation, or from the children of persons who, if originally of a lower rank, have succeeded in raising themselves by their exertions. (Mill, 1848, I: 462)

Both of these structural lines of inquiry suggest that working-class racism and anti-racism have to an important extent been a result of state economic policy. When Germany lost its colonies after the Treaty of Versailles (1919), the German trade unions became clearly more opposed to racism than their British counterparts. And from a remarkable study of the Australian trade union movement – which for a long time supported a ‘White Australia’, but after 1945 gradually began to renounce racism – it appears that a crucial factor in this turnaround was the changed regulation of the labour market:

The integration of immigrant workers, including Asians, in Australia [was] achieved in a context where there is a centralised and pervasive system of job regulation, sponsored by the state and having a symbiotic relationship with a strong trade union movement.

The threat of job competition has been thereby minimised. (Quinlan and Lever-Tracy 1980, 179)

Following Edna Bonacich, we could interpret working-class racism as the result of the interaction between three class forces: capitalists/employers, cheap labour and higher-priced labour. That creates four possible outcomes (Bonacich 1972, 1975, 1976, 1979): (1) *displacement*: capitalists succeed in reducing labour costs by replacing higher-priced labour with cheaper labour, or by reducing the wages of the better-paid workers to the lower level; (2) *exclusion*: higher-priced labour succeeds in preventing the import of cheaper workers or in removing them; (3) *exclusiveness*: higher-priced workers succeed in reserving certain jobs for themselves, thereby making it impossible for capitalists to use cheaper labour in those cases; and (4) *radicalism*: cheaper- and higher-priced workers join forces against the employers. Virdee's study shows that in England exclusion and exclusiveness were most prominent, but that – and this is a hopeful sign – there were also forms of radicalism almost continuously.

An additional point is that Virdee's analysis lacks an explicit gender perspective. The connection between fragile masculinities (Donaldson 1987) and (anti-)racist attitudes is not explored. While female workers are mentioned now and then, especially when they went on strike (pp. 42, 44, 70–71, 132–135), what is missing is an approach 'from below', in which racism and anti-racism are situated in the context of workers' household survival strategies, and subsistence labour performed by women in that context. A century and a half ago, a notorious gentleman rightly noted that: 'Social progress may be measured precisely by the social position of the fair sex' (Marx 1868, 185). Applying that insight more comprehensively would, I think, add more weight to Virdee's analysis.

These marginalia are, as I said before, not intended as objections to Virdee's work. I think he has accomplished quite a lot. Rather, it is a question of taking his research further, and broadening its scope. Antonio Gramsci recognized that:

The history of the subaltern classes is necessarily fragmented and episodic Subaltern classes are subject to the initiatives of the dominant class, even when they rebel; they are in a state of anxious defense. Every trace of autonomous initiative is therefore of inestimable value. In any case, the monograph is the most suitable form for this history, which requires a very large accumulation of fragmentary materials. (Gramsci 2011 [Third Notebook, §14], 21)

Satnam Virdee has written such a monograph. We can build on it.

Disclosure statement

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