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The Uses and Abuses of Class: Left Nationalism and the Denial of Working Class Multiculture

Dr. Sivamohan Valluvan

Satnam Virdee has offered today a typically expansive and learned account of the different histories by which class, race, and nation has been locked into a fatal embrace; incrementally threaded into what is now a 'snarling vine' that reaches far into this country's political mainstream. He rightly argues that recognition of this constitutive interdependency has been lacking in sociology's more orthodox reckonings with the history of capitalism, a neglect that consequently also hampers the discipline's attempts to grapple more confidently with the ructions of contemporary British politics. As regards the latter, Virdee draws complex attention here to how the contemporary political reversion to racial nationalisms actively calls upon the working class – those who believe themselves to be white but others too – to share in the emolliating embrace, entitlements and promise of nation. And importantly, as he further elaborates, the formalization of such working class nationalisms is never simply a case of elite deception and hegemonic 'diversion'. It is instead a streak of subject formation and accrued political sensibility that is deeply lodged in the mechanisms of British capitalist modernity and nation-state formation alike.

The task that Virdee sets himself is therefore an ambitious one. But it is one that shapes to better steel sociology for the type of analytic and political questions that it is being currently asked to contend with. Alongside recent contributions by Bhambra (2017), Bhattacharyya (2018), Lentin (2017), and Shilliam (2018)[i], Virdee's recent works represent another race-conscious volley against the sociological complacencies still prevalent. Whilst it would be disingenuous to deny that 'race and racism' has staked of late a hard-won prominence in British sociology, it is worth remembering that this has transpired in a rather discrete manner – wherein it has been allowed to emerge only as a well-sealed field unto itself, leaving accordingly the broader sociological temperament, and its aforementioned complacencies, largely intact. Complacencies that are not only analytically inhibiting, but worse yet, risk lending contemporary nationalist-populism, however minimally, an alibi it does not deserve. This is in short the sense of economic struggle, cultural injury, and political disenfranchisement as ascribed exclusively to the 'white working class' that helps ennoble and 'authenticate' (Kennedy, 2018) contemporary nationalist politics.

Class and the temptations of left nationalism

But in the sheer historical scope of Virdee's argument – one that traverses the 17th Century founding of the Virginia Colony to the contemporary advance of nationalist ideologues – the designated 'discussant' is convulsed by a chronic bout of indecision. In short, where does the poor fool start.

Central to Virdee's historical argument is how racism and capitalist accumulation developed in complex conjunction. Key here is the importance of reading racialization through an intimate relationship to capitalism, but never allowing it

to become entirely epiphenomenal to capitalist imperatives. Or as Bhattacharyya's (2018: *ix*) 'first thesis' on racial capitalism reads, the story of racism is not one of elite conspiracy made to do capitalism's bidding at every turn. Instead, as she puts it,

> Racial capitalism does not emerge as a result of a plan. No one maps out this programme and then enacts it. What we seek to understand is the place of racialization in particular instances of capitalist formation, most of all when those instances are now.

Such a temperament marries also well with Stuart Hall's (1980) broader development of a race and capitalism co-'articulation' argument. It is sometimes easy to remember Hall primarily as a theorist of identity and 'new ethnicities'. He was however also fundamentally a theorist of capitalist 'crisis' and popular legitimacy alongside identifying the wider role of race and racism in suffusing but also *escaping* such capitalist imperatives. Hall's defining work on 'Thatcherism' (1979, 1988), to which emergent work on the present 'crisis' is increasingly returning (Featherstone, 2017; James and Valluvan, 2018), constitutes in turn an interesting if tacit complement to Virdee's own attempts at 'contesting' the relationship between racialization and capitalism.

Needless to say, such theoretical comparisons with Bhattacharyya's much acclaimed *Rethinking Racial Capitalism*, but also the broader canon as developed via Stuart Hall, is as likely to generate productive disagreement as it would affinities. For instance, one suspects that Virdee is likely to think that Hall, or at least the work that followed in his wake, struggled to retain the Marxist current that was in fact still central to his analysis. Put differently, in wanting to extend the brilliance of Hall's analysis, it could be argued that many had neglected the Marxist pivots that remained vital to that original brilliance, a pivot that could juggle the cultural, the political, and the economic with such elegantly tight complexity.

Also worthy of more debate might be some of the historical claims that Virdee advances. Claims regarding the specific circumstances of primitive accumulation; regarding the racialization of the European interior and to what extent this is comparable to the conditions that prevailed in the colonies; and regarding even the genesis of multiethnic forms of class consciousness in the Virginia Colony and elsewhere, wherein questions again arise about the actual extent of such manifestations and to what degree were these alliances actually forged around the specific matter of class.

These are of course all areas where debate is to be welcomed – where disagreement is only measured in gradations as opposed to it representing irreconcilable ideological divides or conflicting political commitments. For instance, the fact that multiethnic solidarities have surfaced throughout capitalist history is surely a given and Virdee is apt to signpost these as productive ciphers from the past through which to recover contemporary solidarities and strategies.

But I also note that to alight at the juncture of constructive disagreement would distract from what is perhaps most politically pressing about what Virdee has outlined; and this is of course his very measured, informed but unflinching critique of the many traps vis-à-vis race and nation that the European/British left routinely succumb to. A seduction of the left that often transpires on account of a misidentification with the not insignificant segment of the working class, broadly construed, that is at any given moment drawn to the nationalist call. As Virdee asserts in an extended passage,

> I want to suggest that this dimension of socialist nationalism should be understood as a form of racialized identity politics, a politics that even to this day refuses to be named as such because it comes pristinely enveloped in the universalist category of class. The [historical] insistence of socialist institutions and activists in locating their demands for working class justice on the ideological terrain of the nation effectively made them complicit in the production of racism. The idea of the nation operated as a power container, limiting the political imagination of these representatives of the exploited and oppressed.

This observation, which constitutes an important pivot for Virdee, attests to a broader attempt to resist the wider tendency of much contemporary analysis to attribute to this reconsolidated nationalism an elite, unitary and generically Rightist character. Instead, it remains important to observe here how racial nationalisms' heightened appeal hinges crucially on the convergence of multiple and often contradictory 'political rationalities' (Brown, 2006) – only some of which speak to elite machinations and/or attempts to manage capitalist crisis. Or as Rabinbach (quoted in Toscano, 2017) observed, via Bloch, in an analysis that carries many instructive echoes amidst our own attempts to reckon with the contemporary rehabilitation of the fascist possibility: 'For Marxism, the problem is that fascist ideology is not simply an instrument of deception but [for instance] "a fragment of an old and romantic antagonism to capitalism", derived from deprivations in contemporary life.'

This discrepant relationship of nationalism to capitalism, one made widely apparent in much of the Brexit and Trump vote, underscores how nationalist politics become contoured by so many different ideological vocabularies and sense-making schemas. These multiple traditions which constitute the contemporary nationalist cacophony include: classical values-liberalism and its particular ethnoracially coded assertion of civic nationalism (Kundnani, 2012); it includes neoliberal individualism and the distinctive racial pathologisation of poverty and undesirable immigration which sits within its moral and symbolic economy (Davies, 2017); it includes some ostensibly feminist rhetorics regarding sexuality and gender freedoms, a rhetoric which becomes noticeably acute vis-à-vis the by now ritual demonization of the Muslim (Farris, 2017; Rashid, 2016); it includes even some strands of a bucolic environmentalism (Pitcher, 2016); and of course, it includes the much more familiar conservative nostalgia for the putative public morality, stability and unity of pre-war colonial whiteness (Gilroy, 2004).

But crucially, it also includes a resurgent anti-immigration, anti-multiculturalism, *left* communitarianism (Gilroy, 1987). And it is indeed this last emphasis – regarding a nationalist politics that ably appeals to ideals of working class community and welfarism – that Virdee harnesses with such assured command. His broader parsing of what he calls the tradition of 'socialist nationalism' that sits deep in this country's political psyche and memory allows in turn for a better account of this susceptibility of left politics to the anti-migrant race baiting that has proven so politically expedient over recent years in Western Europe.

The organized left is certainly newly emboldened in the United Kingdom. A renewal that has been so exhilarating for so many of us; and, indeed, there are many from within British sociology who have been commendably involved in that revival. This is however a left that does continue to frustrate when faced with the question of nation and race. It is a left that does, at best, tend towards a certain quietism, and, at worst, to willfully partake in the demonization of the migrant. A wider left reflex that seems reluctant to intuitively recognise certain minorities and other outsider migrant figures as part of the working class, and worse yet, wishes to characterize them as active threats to the 'native' working class.

Multiculture and a post-nationalist commonsense

This left inflected invocation of what is described as the beleaguered 'white working class' has been recently consolidated as a common feature of Western political discourse – finding analogues in the politics of Trump, Le Pen and other comparable new nationalist movements. It is accordingly against this ascendant political backdrop that I am particularly appreciative of Virdee's closing attentiveness to how contemporary circuits of 'everyday multiculture' might offer, in part, the basis for an alternative class politics.

This generous prompt by Virdee, by way of a concluding remark, allows in turn for a decidedly more speculative line of critique vis-à-vis nationalism and its leftist idioms; a speculation that I will center in the remainder of this paper. Put simply, what I want to stress, as a possible counter-point to contemporary political trends, are the realities of this multiculture. A multiculture that can be minimally defined as the cultural and political textures that often emerge in those generally impoverished, working class pockets of our cities and towns that are characterized by meaningful ethnic and racial diversity. Of course, we should not romanticize this multiculture; we should not overstate its presence, even in our cities; and we should remain cognizant of its fragilities, fragilities that are frequently rocked whenever a turn in our wider political culture transpires – e.g. the 'War on Terror', Osborne's Austerity Doctrine, or the aftermath of the EU Referendum. But nonetheless, this 'lived multiculture' remains an important resource and reference that, if properly commanded, hints at the possibilities of a post-nationalist politics of solidarity. And crucially, contrary to those highly orientalist and exotic accounts of this multiculture, this is not some colour-run party comprising only minorities, but white working class people too remain an integral humdrum presence amidst such formations; white working class people

who are often equally versed in the cultural and political literacies relevant to the shared space that multiculture comprises.

I accordingly argue in what follows that equally important to charting the existing challenges to the contemporary nationalist conjuncture is a more determined attentiveness to what Virdee refers to as the 'easily-worn' and 'lived-in' ethnic and racial diversity that characterizes so many working class people's everyday realities. A habituation that is not simply about living with and amidst difference; but a habituation that also generates an anti-nationalist literacy hungering to be given wider political articulation. It is in these recesses that the anti-nationalism archive that the British left is in such need of might be assembled; a popular archive that not only offers some initial solace but might also generate some of the relevant political and symbolic resources to wage a wider claim on the future.

In terms of the specific political philosophy that such multiculture cultivates, these urban circuits takes the presence of difference alongside the complementary flows of migration into and out of a locale as being a pre-given, non-negotiable feature of urban life (James, 2015; Jackson, 2018; Valluvan, 2016). The normalisation of such 'indifference to difference' ground rules creates in turn a prefigurative base for other more far-reaching political affinities. In other words, to bundle two somewhat different lines of Paul Gilroy (2004), the 'ludic cosmopolitan energies' (p. 154) and the 'feral beauty of the postcolonial metropolis' (p. 157) is where social alternatives to nationalist closure might best be had. In the habituation of such features of shared space and interaction, many people, including many white people who call such places home, increasingly find the political appeal to nation to be summarily anachronistic, uninteresting, and, frankly, wrong. The cultural and political energies that flow accordingly from such everyday practices offer a useful and underappreciated indication of how an alternative, post-national popular politics might be envisaged.[ii]

The Locations of Multiculture

It would be remiss however to not attend here to a couple frustrating features about sociology's approach to multiculture – given that the wider context of this journal but also Virdee's intervention is nominally billed as concerning the wider legacy and trajectories of sociology as a discipline.

For instance, the initial sociological current tended to only locate this multiculture in the more fabled global cities, a selectiveness to which I admit I too have been party when conducting previous research in London and Stockholm. This was namely the over-studied and perhaps even fetishized fixation with the inner city – a fetishism that ran unsettlingly close to the consumerist frisson for all things inner city.[iii] Put differently, urban sociology seemed briefly complicit in the broader commodified aestheticisation of the diverse inner city in a way that appealed to an increasingly self-satisfied middle class who were aggressively stylizing themselves as suave, worldly, and crucially, alternative (Greif, 2016).

Thankfully however, much emergent research has successfully relocated its focus towards certain semi-urban and provincial settings more mundane and more representative of where most of the British population is likely to be living (Huq, 2013; Saha and Watson, 2013; Jones *at al.* 2015). As put in the punchy prose of the urban ethnographer, Rhys-Taylor (2017: 145),

> 'As part of the city's post-industrial invasion [by an middle-class consumer class], something important is [happening] to its erstwhile suburban spaces. Amidst the landscapes of cul-de-sacs, secondary shopping malls and franchise cafes, a number of recent studies have found convivial multiculture alive and well. Apparently, under the cloak of mirrors, tiles and fordist sensations, cultural differences and individual auras are not entirely stultified. [...] Thus, in contrast to the new open-air markets of the bourgeois inner-city, it is the 'blandscapes' typically associated with suburbia, retail parks and identikit high streets that nurture the city's convivial multiculture.'

This important reworking of convivial multiculture that Rhys-Taylor refers to becomes particularly apparent in the related research attempt to profile more 'middling' towns such as Milton Keynes (Kesten *et al.* 2011), suburban Leicester (Neal *et al.* 2018), Epsom (Wilson, *forthcoming*), as well as Burdsey's (2016) highly textured and original commentary on the 'English seaside'. Both the grey suburb and the provincial town become herein vital sites through which multiculture is ascribed by contemporary research a wider geographic berth. (I passingly note here that as opposed to the not entirely ironic hyperbole vested in the current fashion for 'luxury communism', it is in the interstices of distinctly unassuming mediocrity where utopian horizons might also be sourced).

But in terms of its most acute political purchase, this burgeoning research field has also moved its focus to those areas now considered politically emblematic of wider economic distress and working class nativism. As seen for instance in Erel (2011) and Rogaly and Qureshi's (2013) respective studies of Peterborough and also Nayak's (2003, 2017) multi-sited work involving various Northeast locations – all of which try to bring through a carefully observed and caveated notion of 'working class cosmopolitanism' (Rogaly, *forthcoming*). These are all efforts that prove particularly adept at balancing an appreciation for the everyday breaching of ethnic and racial divides with a close attentiveness to the continued re-entrenchment of white nationalist nativism. Nativist pressures that risk becoming further emboldened when contending with grinding austerity and the complementary sense of political disaffection.

Seen as a whole, this general ability to root multiculture in such disparate contexts has given this research field a robust complexity initially lacking – tending as it was towards a certain 'descriptive naivety' (Valluvan, 2016: 205). An erstwhile research situation where the utterly mundane truism that multiethnic life exists seemed to constitute a valid research conclusion in its own right. Analogous to what Wise and Noble (2017: 425) have described as being the risk of advancing an unduly 'romantic', 'happy-clappy' view of 'togetherness'.

The fresh injection of vitality into to the field prevents accordingly any such exaggeration of multiculture's presence as well as always foregrounding the eminently fragile nature of any such multiculture when and where it does in fact manifest. After all, the original conceptualization of multiculture was only ever interesting precisely because multiculture was understood here as always being subject to stress by the wider forces of nativist racism (and the essentializing view of minority communities that is a partial extension of this). It is often forgotten that this was indeed the fraught tension that was central to Paul Gilroy's (2004) defining *After Empire*. This book was not about convivial multiculture on the one hand and melancholic nationalism on the other. It was instead very much about how both projections are *simultaneously* competing for validity in the lives of modern Britons. Or as Karner and Parker (2011) articulated it when discussing an oft-derided area of already unloved Birmingham: conviviality becomes empirically distinctive only because it is always existing contiguously to the multiple conflicts routinely underpinned by the wider racial pathologisation of minority residents. The point therefore, as far as I see it, is not that multiculture triumphs regardless, but that it endures and gets remade, releasing energies waiting to be harnessed by a less apologetic, less integrationist political programme that might command mass purchase (Sealy, 2018).

Politicizing multiculture

This everyday multicultural sensibility has certainly found its political voice independently of the Labour Party; but, interestingly, this is also a political voice that has been proactively eager to lend its buoyant and youthful immediacy to Corbyn.

Consider here the special role of say 'Grime for Corbyn' in injecting the 2017 Labour campaign with such an easy working class and multicultural credibility. As expertly summarized by Charles (2017), this attested to a particularly fluent, resonant and unaffected synchronization of grime with a popular left politics. Equally, when seen inversely, this is a multicultural affinity that also helps hold the Labour left to bolder account, should they continue to remain hesitant about challenging the racialized politics of immigration, security and policing that has become such orthodoxies in our wider electoral culture.

But this also goes well beyond popular culture, important as that is (Saha, 2018), with the Grenfell tragedy being a particularly bracing example here.[iv] The politics released by this haunting moment seamlessly alternated between, on the one hand, an uncompromisingly vocal forcefulness, and, on the other, a dignified silence deafening in its pathos – I mean here the silent marches that are held on a monthly basis.

But this is also a politics that has so creatively insisted on its victims and survivors being understood as multi-ethnic *and* 'multi-status' (de Noronha, *forthcoming*). Grenfell was namely a particularly resonant microcosm of a broader working class community – neglected but overexploited – that is so deeply scored by a vertiginous array of not only ethnic backgrounds but also

variations in the status of their citizenship. The activism that followed in the political aftermath of Grenfell certainly foregrounded this ground reality in particularly powerful ways, implicitly reminding the social democratic left that it must always recognise poverty's multi-ethnic, 'migrant city' (Back and Sinha, 2018) realities. As the cultural output and interventions of someone like Akala (2018) has made powerfully evident, this is a reminder that a politics of class worth its name must always remain attentive to the migrant and minority subject as key to its political programme; as opposed to recycling a shameless and ultimately counter-productive working class versus immigration false dichotomy.

The future

In this battle lies the future fate of the Corbyn left in Britain. Their cautiousness hitherto on challenging the various racialized nationalist fault lines governing contemporary politics is certainly understandable – given that the newly convened Labour left is still struggling to find its footing amidst the sustained attempts at de-legitimation issued by so many factions and forces, both external and internal. But, as Virdee makes so starkly apparent in his paper, this question of nation is not like other issues where one might be able to bide one's time. It is instead the case that, as we witness a partial unraveling of the neoliberal consensus, it is the xeno-racist nationalist right, cast in the parochial Powellite (Hirsch, 2018; Schofield, 2009) tradition, which is hurriedly positioning itself as the most likely heir to formal governmental power. That this front might also call upon certain leftist registers as premised on an iconography of working class plight alongside an institutional programme of welfare state provisions as tied to exclusive visions of community is no aberration. It is instead an extension of what Virdee recalls as being the wider history of socialist nationalism, wherein left wing idioms as sourced in the symbolism of working class community and the welfare state project alike are made to bend to serve the ambitions of a wider nationalist assertion. For the current left to remain all too silent on the suite of racialized demons and complementary policy prognostics that contemporary demagogues, both extreme and mainstream (Winter and Mondon, 2017), rally into view merely allows the quickening march of nationalism the free path it is now eyeing.

A free path to consolidate itself as the politics of the future; no longer only a deeply resonant echo of high modernity, but instead, an insular politics of nation that is staking a uniquely powerful claim for managing the 21st Century and its assorted anxieties, imperatives and even its visions of utopia.

Notes

[i] Some other important works in this context include Khalili (2017), Narayan (2017), Sayer (2017), Seymour (2018), Shaheen and Khan (2017), and many, many others.

[ii] These potential affordances of multiculture stand in partial contrast to what is generally meant by multiculturalism. Multicultural*ism* – whether seen as the state led blunting of anti-racism or as a more grassroots led wager for the recognition of difference – is probably best read as being a governmental and/or 'rhetorical' aspiration (Lentin and Titley, 2011) that is primarily about

group cultural rights and formal institutional inclusion. As opposed to it politically purposing in a more direct manner the lived-in textures of residential, civic and leisure derived multi-ethnic cohabitation that is otherwise the focus of multiculture research.

iii See *Regeneration Songs* (Duman *et al.* 2018) for a particularly deft recent unpacking of this wider urban branding that unfolded under the auspices of Blairite chic.

iv I am thankful to Adam Elliot-Cooper and Virinder Kalra for drawing my attention to this important reading.

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