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## Scotland: nationalism without racism?

Satnam Virdee

It's a particular pleasure for me to participate in this roundtable arranged by *Soundings* because Stuart Hall – one of the founding editors of the journal - was an important influence on my own thinking. In fact, one of the things I took from Hall was his rejection of any neat separation of theoretical work from political practice; instead, he emphasised the importance of deep thinking - of producing critical knowledge - precisely so that it may inform better political practice. And that relationship was always reciprocal. He believed strongly that thought was an essential step towards renewing a project for transformative social change. I think this is what he meant when he spoke of 'theory being a detour to somewhere more important'.

### Introduction

Thirty years on, this standpoint position remains as compelling as ever as we find ourselves in another moment of systemic crisis. In Britain, the financial crisis and resulting implementation of austerity has been rapidly over-determined by a constitutional crisis that threatens to break-up the British state. In Scotland, 45% of the population voted for independence, with Glasgow – historically, the second city of the British Empire - voting to secede from the Union. And by May 2015, it was clear that the SNP – the principal party of independence - had become the hegemonic force in Scottish politics. In the same period, developments in England have taken a rather different political trajectory. On the one hand, we saw a marked shift to the right in the 2015 general election with UKIP securing 4 million votes and the Conservatives winning a narrow majority on a pro-austerity platform. On the other hand, we have also seen the first indications of a progressive push-back in England with Jeremy Corbyn being elected leader of the Labour Party.

Given these events, and the historical and contemporaneous structuring power of racism in Britain, including its proven capacity to disorganise and fragment the multi-

ethnic working class in the field of politics<sup>1</sup>, it is somewhat surprising to find how little attention has been devoted to a consideration of the place of race in this emergent splintering of the Union – particularly in Scotland. It is against this backdrop that I want to offer some tentative reflections about how the relationship between race and nation in Scotland is playing out in the current conjuncture.

### **Scotland: nationalism without racism?**

As I just said, I was deeply struck at how rarely discussion about racism featured amid the political awakening that occurred during the independence campaign and beyond, including among the Green and socialist left. I don't think this is new. Over many years, this relative silence has come to be interpreted as an indication of racism's absence by much of the Scottish population, including its political parties, helping to consolidate a now powerful myth that there is 'no problem here', that, in that memorable Scottish phrase 'We're a' Jock Tamson's bairns'. This narrative of an absent racism in Scottish history has become even more entrenched in the course of recent developments (such as the rise of the SNP and the independence referendum) because it is able to nest so comfortably within the new common sense of Scottish politics, the dominant story that has been forged, by the SNP and others - that the Scots are in some sense different from the English - more egalitarian, more likely to place an emphasis on collectivism over individualism, on government intervention over self-reliance. And the regular public statements made by successive First Ministers welcoming increased migration in contrast to the increasingly shrill pronouncements emanating from party leaders in Westminster seem only to have further reinforced the myth that Scotland does not have a serious racism problem.

On one level, such elite rhetoric is welcome, particularly when contrasted to what is unfolding today across large parts of Europe in relation to the refugee crisis. However, this mainly SNP-led re-imagining of Scotland as different (and arguably more progressive) than England has been crafted in such a way that the historical role which Scotland played in Atlantic slavery and colonial conquest has been consigned to what George Orwell referred to as the 'memory hole' leaving us with the impression that it never happened. Or, on those rare occasions when such episodes are forced out into the

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<sup>1</sup> S. Virdee. 2014. *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider*. Palgrave Macmillan; CCCS. 1982. *The Empire Strikes Back*. Hutchinson.

open, they are implicitly projected back onto a reactionary British/English establishment. This suggests not only a degree of intellectual dishonesty but an unwillingness to confront the legacies of empire and racism in which Scotland is implicated. Further, those broadly sympathetic public statements made by elite politicians in Scotland about migration and the 'new Scots' – are too often taken at face value – including by parts of the Left – and this carries with it the danger of underestimating and thereby disabling the contemporary struggle against racism that is required.

It is crucial to remain alive to the disjuncture between elite discourse on migration and the lived reality of racialized minorities in Scotland. Everyday racism remains a deeply structuring force distorting the lives of those we know as the black and brown Scots. From racist harassment in the community, to systematic discrimination in the workplace, these so-called new Scots remain a class apart – one that is seen as somehow not quite Scottish. And on occasions – just as in England - this failure to imagine this group of Scots as 'truly Scottish', as 'unhyphenated Scots' can lead to violence and sometimes murder. From the still unproven racist killing of Surjit Singh Chhokar just prior to the advent of devolution in 1998 to the death of 31-year-old Sheku Bayoh while being restrained by 15 police officers in Kirkcaldy, Fife in May 2015, racism remains a significant on-going problem in Scottish society, irrespective of the other more progressive transformations that are currently on-going.

### **So, what is to be done?**

What I've tried to briefly highlight here are some of the potential pitfalls of constructing emancipatory political projects that fail to foreground questions of racism and anti-racism. Currently in Scotland, concerns about growing class inequalities, of social justice, have come to be expressed through the national question but they have not been accompanied by any corresponding shift in consciousness on challenging racism. We, on the left, not only need to think more deeply about how we might come to terms with the historical and contemporaneous legacy of racism in Scotland but also find innovative ways of challenging its corrosive effects in the here and now – not post-independence. My suggestion is that in nations such as Scotland we cannot foreground questions of democratization and social justice by going round race, we have to go through race. As someone who came to political consciousness in the immediate aftermath of the anti-racist social movements of the late 1970s and the municipal anti-racism of the early 1980s, I've been left puzzled by the comparative lack of fluency shown by the SNP, and

much of the Scottish left on the question of race. Leading individuals who can make complex contributions around questions of independence, class, gender and social justice seem to fall back on simplistic sloganeering when it comes to understanding racism, and how to challenge it. In the kind of rapidly moving situation we find ourselves in Scotland - where progressive forces appear to be moving with the current for once - to raise the question of racism is almost to appear as a killjoy – interrupting the ‘good vibes’ that have been created in the course of the IndyRef and beyond.

Perhaps a first step to reaching beyond this current paralysis might be to recognise not only the long-established ethnic diversity of Scotland’s working class, but also to begin to actively build coalitions with those progressive civil society organisations created by the black and brown Scots, as well as more recent migrants, in the course of their attempts to challenge racism and social inequality, and secure a more stable life for their children. This kind of approach has the potential to expand the political imaginary of all social movements striving for social justice because the dominant conceptions of racialized national belonging at any one moment in time tend to be constructed in opposition to such folk, and their attachment to such conceptions is therefore often weaker. As a result, historically, we know that their participation in working class conflicts gave them a unique capacity to see through the fog of blood, soil and belonging and thereby to universalise the militant, yet often particularistic, fights of the working class. Informed by their unique perspective on society, they often acted as a leavening agent, nourishing the struggles of all. Irish Catholics, Jews, Asians and Caribbeans have all played this role of catalytic agent at various points in British history over the past two centuries as I show in my recent book *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider*.

So a fundamental question facing socialists and other progressives in Scotland today is can emancipatory politics be stretched today to truly include those black and Asian Scots who have long been here, and those migrants that are newly arriving? We have a rare opportunity to unthink the old way of doing emancipatory politics in Scotland; we should take it.