

Book Review

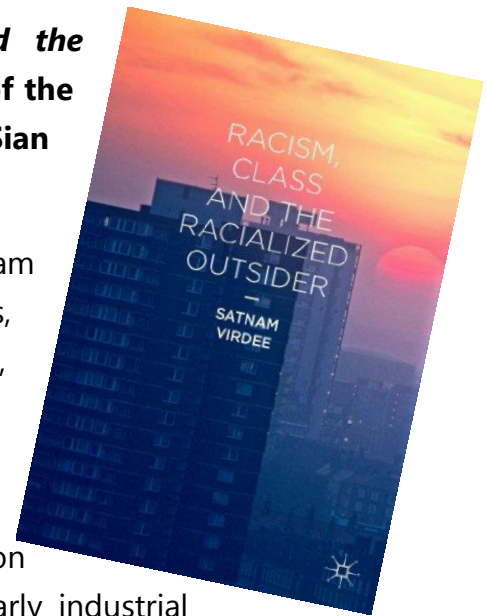
Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider, Satnam Virdee
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Satnam Virdee's new book, *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider*, is a re-reading of the history of the English working class through the lens of race. Sian Moore reviews the book for CESR Review.

In *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider*, Satnam Virdee demonstrates that the English working class was, from the moment of its inception, a heterogeneous, multi-ethnic formation. He moves away from a colour-coded definition of race to include those of Irish and Jewish, as well as African, Caribbean and Asian descent, who arrived in England in waves of migration from the late Eighteenth Century onwards. In the early industrial period Virdee identifies a coexistence of solidarity and tension between different sections of the working class, including Irish and English workers. He points to the key role of black radicals in the anti-slavery movement and to the high proportions of Irish Catholics in the Chartist movement, with William Cuffay, an English tailor of African descent, amongst its leadership. The shifting relationship between class and race is the key tenet of the book, which illustrates how 'race was constitutive in the making of the working class in England across two centuries' (2014: 8). Race is a social category, which is not fixed, but changes over time.

Virdee dates working class racism to the 1830s and 1840s and the defeat of the working class in the aftermath of Chartism. As the elite learned to govern in a more consensual manner components of the working class were ideologically incorporated into a concept of British national identity underpinned by race and religion. The working class consciously embraced this identity, constructed in opposition to the 'racialised other', whether Irish, Jewish, Asian or of Caribbean and African descent. For Virdee, 'class as a representational form and as a material relation was indelibly nationalized and racialized' (2014: 5) and by the late Nineteenth Century this was articulated in socialist nationalist struggles and then mediated, in the Twentieth Century, by the trade unions and Labour Party. The English labour movement and left



were then complicit in the production of racialised difference and the integration of the working class into the project of Empire and nationalism.

However, Virdee documents two historical moments between 1848 and 1968 when the working class suppressed or rejected racism. The first occurred amid the new unionism of the 1880s and 1890s, when trade union leaders were put under pressure from below to resist employer attacks on workers' living standards at a time when the material foundations supporting the cross-class settlement of the previous period became untenable. The catalyst was unemployed, unskilled and women workers and the successful strike of young women from the Bryant and May match factory. Virdee describes the contribution of Jewish workers and Irish Catholics to new unionism, in the case of the latter linked to the campaign for Home Rule in Ireland. The end of the period, however, was marked by anti-Semitism, including by socialist nationalists, with the Trades Union Congress (TUC) calling for immigration controls against Jewish migrant labour culminating in the Aliens Act of 1905.

The second period in which an oppositional current amongst the working class emerged was in the 1920s and 1930s. It followed a period of strikes and worker militancy, but also racist riots in the port areas of British cities against black and Asian seamen. Anti-racist and anti-imperialist opposition was led by the Communist Party of Great Britain – a multi-ethnic formation – and marked by the battle of Cable Street in 1936 against the British Union of Fascists' attempts to march through the East End of London.

The post-war period saw the wave of migration from the Caribbean and Indian sub-continent. There was bipartisanship on immigration controls, which culminated in the Labour government introducing emergency legislation ending the freedom of entry of Asians from East Africa – a colour bar. At the same time the Labour Party introduced the Race Relations Act in 1965, following the boycott of the Bristol Omnibus Company because of its refusal to employ Black or Asian bus crews. It was this legislation that fuelled Enoch Powell's 1968 speech calling for the repatriation of non-whites – 'a racializing conception of English nationalism built around a white identity' (2014: 116). Working class support for Powell was widespread, taking the form of racist strike action including amongst London dockers. By the end of the 1960s Virdee reports that 'Britain was two communities 'deeply stratified by racism: one black, the other white' (2014: 121).

It was after 1968, in the 1970s, that the organized labour movement began to actively challenge racism with an alignment between class struggle and struggles

against exploitation by the black and Asian population. An anti-racist standpoint emerged in the trade union movement, notably in its support for the Asian women workers in the Grunwick dispute. The period saw the formation of Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League. There is a very powerful exposition of the importance of black self-organisation to anti-racist and anti-fascist movements of the last 30 years. This predates the more recent focus on intersectionality as a way to conceptualise difference which aims to capture how people experience multiple oppressions, sometimes simultaneously, and in ways which cannot be disentangled. Intersectionality emerged out of black feminist writing, in particular that of Kimberlé Crenshaw and in one sense the book confirms this approach, because the relationship between race and class is fundamental. Yet intersectionality is distinct from the single-strand focus and language of self-organisation that Virdee describes and its political efficacy is as yet unproven.

For Virdee moments of crisis in capitalism may fracture the political consensus and win workers to alternative narratives – although this is not an inevitable process. Central to unlocking this potential is the existence of international socialist leadership within the working class and the book highlights the role played by ‘racialized outsiders’ of Irish (particularly James Connolly), Jewish, African, Caribbean and Asian descent in such leadership and in the transmission of anti-racist ideas.

Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider makes an important contribution to the history of the English Working class, trade union movement and the left; crucially it is highly readable. Virdee recalls the music of the *Rock Against Racism* movement in the 1970s and this brings to mind the words of *Misty in Roots*:

“it is music which recalls history...without the knowledge of the history you cannot determine your destiny.”