

# Is England 'Racialist'?

by Peter Baldock

The statement by Enoch Powell last May had all the inevitability, if none of the elegance, of the climax to a Greek tragedy. It was inevitable that a man who had already made frequent use of the rather tawdry rhetoric of largely fictitious statistics about the 'flood' of immigrants<sup>1</sup> and who fancies himself as a poet should begin to talk about rivers of blood. Just as bad a parody of Greek tragedy was represented by the chorus from the respectable press. From pompous phrases about 'dangerous nonsense' in the *Economist* to the somewhat more tart strictures of *The Times* leader, the respectable press offered no insight into the significance of Mr Powell's speech, but merely demonstrated its own moral rectitude and an incredible belief in the power of pure liberal reason. Many commentators appeared to believe that the fact that some of the dockers had mis-spelled their slogans proved their impotence. But many of the saints and many of the S.S. were near-illiterate. If intellectuals wish to contribute to the fight against racialism they must do so not by proving that racist myths are myths (that is old hat) but by analysing the nature of English racialism to see more clearly how it can be fought. In particular we must decide whether racialism in England is an aberration of individuals and groups or whether it is something essential to our society, whether England is or is not 'racialist'.

This is not to question whether coloured immigrants in England suffer various forms of discrimination. The PEP report by Daniel and others published in April 1967 merely spelled out in laborious detail what was already common knowledge. The question is why such discrimination takes place, and *this* most empirical investigations have failed to answer. Three main types of cause have been identified by various theorists: psychological inadequacy, misplaced aggression of the under-privileged, and social distance as a characteristic of English society. I shall try to show that explanations based on these three causes, whether taken singly or together, may be true, but are

<sup>1</sup>On 18th October, 1967 Mr Powell spoke of 50,000 immigrants a year, making 500,000 in a decade, a nonsensical figure since most of the 50,000 are the dependants of those who came in to escape the '62 Act and the number will obviously drop. On 9th February, Mr Powell claimed that official statistics showed that there would be 2,000,000 immigrants by the end of the century, three days later in another speech he raised this figure to 3,500,000 by 1985. None of the figures bear much relation to reality. 'Immigrant' means, of course, 'coloured immigrant' throughout. The number of immigrants remained pretty stable after 1962, but the numbers of coloured immigrants dropped, the number of white immigrants (mainly Irish) rose. This is the intention of immigrant legislation, which has nothing to do with economic necessity.

still inadequate, and that the causes of discrimination must be sought in the recent history of our society.

Explanations from psychological inadequacy of the discriminators are often attractive. In ethical terms the analysis offered by James Baldwin in his beautiful essay *The Fire Next Time* is precise and incontestable. There is a white and not a black problem in the United States and if white men were able to love one another they would not need to hate black men. The same is true of this country. Any amateur Freudian can quickly track down the sexual themes in racist literature and demagogy. On a more scientific level Robb in his study of anti-Semitism and Richmond in his writings on colour prejudice have shown some of the psychological elements at work. The trouble with this kind of explanation is that it offers no way out. Racist phantasies may be a neurotic or psychotic symptom in the case of many individuals, but when those phantasies are shared by most people in our society then the cure must lie in politics rather than in medicine. The extent of the problem makes it impossible to treat it as a collection of individual problems of individual people with 'authoritarian personalities'<sup>1</sup> or phantasies of rape. James Baldwin offers no answer to the question: Why do men in America not love one another? His whole description of the problem is steeped in the pessimistic tradition of American humanism.

Explanations from misplaced aggression offer clearer perspectives for action. It is the type of explanation most favoured by the extreme Left. At their most naïve, the extreme Left attribute racialism to a conspiracy to divide the working class. This may be good propaganda, but it is curiously un-Marxist as an explanation. It is difficult to be certain without medical evidence, but I am quite ready to believe that Enoch Powell really and sincerely believes that three million black men are trying to drown him in the Thames. The prognosis for such a condition is rarely good, especially when the symptoms may help one to become a Conservative Prime Minister.

Rather more sophisticated is the explanation proposed by Rex and Moore in their book on the Sparkbrook area *Race, Community and Conflict*. Borrowing to a large extent from the theories of Park and the Chicago School on the connexions between urban conditions and race relations, they see the explanation of hostility against coloured immigrants in cities like Birmingham in the reaction of the frustrated victims of urban decay who, not knowing how else to fight the decline of their neighbourhood, blame the immigrants. A similar view is expressed by Paul Foot in his analysis of Smethwick in his book *Immigration and Race in British Politics*. Both books, therefore, come to the conclusion that the working class is merely confused,

<sup>1</sup>The concept of the 'authoritarian personality' has been elaborated in the USA by psychologists such as Adorno and Sanford. Attempts to relate it to measurable personality traits have not been all that successful, which would seem to indicate that it needs to be understood as much in sociological as in psychological terms.

that it needs to be presented with other and more effective ways of fighting its problems, particularly housing. Such explanations may be more sophisticated than the conspiracy theory, but they too lead naturally to left-wing action. If it is not the immigrants who are responsible for bad housing conditions then it must be local authorities, land-owners, builders and money-lenders, the whole capitalist system.

There is a good deal of truth in this view, of course, and one can see from the example of Cuba how a successful revolution against exploitation can make racialism seem irrelevant. But it is not the full explanation. It does not make clear why the coloured immigrants should be so readily chosen as the victims of misplaced aggression, nor why the more privileged should share their prejudice (so that Paul Foot is driven to accepting the 'conspiracy theory' and signs a pamphlet with Tariq Ali and others offering this theory). To see why coloured immigrants should be the victims we need to look closer at cultural norms in our society.

One concept which has been used to do this is that of 'social distance'. The concept originated in social psychology and is particularly associated with the name of Bogardus, an American psychologist interested in race relations, who devised a cumulative scale for measuring the attitudes of Americans to foreigners.<sup>1</sup>

Although originating in psychology the concept of 'social distance' has been used by Michael Banton, in particular in his two books *White and Coloured* (1959) and *Race Relations* (1967), as the basis for a sociological explanation of racial discrimination in Britain. Banton believes that explanations from personal insecurity, sexual inadequacy or the authoritarian personality may be psychologically valid and may add something to our knowledge, but are inadequate. He feels that explanations from misplaced aggression, as represented by such Marxists as Cox and McWilliams, do not fit the facts. Apart from particular criticisms he feels that these universal theories are not sufficiently related to the particular English situation. He believes that English racial discrimination is a cultural product that is unique and that can best be described in terms of 'social distance'.

His argument runs roughly as follows: For historical and geographical reasons Britain has a more homogeneous culture than most countries and has had it for a longer time. One result of this, as pointed out by people like Ruth Landes, is that behavioural norms are much less explicit and depend much more on the sharing of unspoken assumptions. This is less true among the lower than the

<sup>1</sup>Respondents are asked to state which of a series of relationships they would be prepared to accept with certain nationalities ('would allow into my country' 'would accept as a fellow employee' 'would accept as a relative by marriage', etc.), the idea being that the further up the scale they are prepared to go in offering affirmative answers, the more tolerant they are. Those most prejudiced against negroes, Jews, Germans, etc., have also been found to be prejudiced against non-existent nationalities 'negretians' 'wallonians' etc. Eysenck found that Englishmen who were prepared to accept foreigners as member, of their club, still do not necessarily accept them as prospective citizens, a reverse of the American pattern.

upper classes, but is nevertheless generally so. This means that the foreigner, the 'archetypal stranger', is likely to be avoided because he will make mistakes in social behaviour and because Englishmen expect him to and will wish to avoid embarrassment. Where fewer obligations are entailed, or where they are more explicit or where it is easier to apply sanctions, coloured immigrants may be accepted. Thus there are no segregated buses and immigrants can usually get some kind of employment. Where more obligations are involved and unstated norms are even more complex coloured immigrants will not be readily accepted. Thus few of them marry white people. People who discriminate do not necessarily feel hostility. They simply feel that the immigrants are 'different from us' so that separation is a means of avoiding embarrassment, or that they cannot afford to be associated with strangers and so become strange themselves (so that many landlords discriminate to maintain their respectability). On the other hand a coloured immigrant who has learned the 'unspoken norms' can gain considerable acceptance. Coloured doctors are usually examples of this. Banton states, however, in his latest book that this is becoming more difficult. English society is no longer so homogeneous as it once was. It is more difficult, therefore, for the immigrant to send his children through the 'right socializing agencies' to gain acceptance for them. For this reason the coloured immigrants are not gaining acceptance in the same way as the Irish, the Jews, the Poles and other white immigrants in the past.

The argument is in many ways attractive. It *sounds* right and it does offer an explanation of many of the variations and different aspects of discrimination. It lays useful stress on the nature of English society and culture as determinants. Nevertheless, it is open to criticism.

While some detailed criticisms of Banton's analysis can be made, the most general criticism must be based on the damaging admission made in his latest book that the coloured immigrants are not finding it as easy to gain acceptance as other immigrants in the past, a fact which he fails to explain. He asserts that the reason must be that English society is becoming less 'homogeneous'. But does this mean anything? The only evidence he cites are the rude things being said about the Establishment on television. The change, if such a change has come about, must have been an enormous one to happen in a society in the few years between 1959 and 1967. One might have assumed that if anything British society was becoming more 'homogeneous' as a result of mass media and mass education. But there is little point in arguing against Banton on this since his notion of 'homogeneity' is so loosely stated.

Nevertheless, Banton's work is interesting not merely because he provides the explanation for certain facts but because he sees that the reasons why misplaced aggression is directed against the coloured

immigrants must be sought in terms of British culture. The trouble with his cultural explanation is mainly that it does not go far enough. Not only is discrimination of the racist type a by-product of some of the ways our social relationships are conducted, it is also justified by a racist ideology that has widespread acceptance in our society.

The nature of this ideology and its function in our society must be clearly understood. Obviously it is not so well articulated or given legal expression as that of Nazi Germany or South Africa. But when Rex and Moore look for a widely accepted and *coherent* theory they are probably mistaken. Intellectual confusion is the major characteristic of ideologies in the sense that Marx used that word.

But there is a certain amount of evidence of the widespread acceptance of racist ideology in Britain. As early as 1956, 64 per cent of those interviewed by John Darragh in Birmingham said they believed that coloured people were intrinsically less intelligent than whites. In her analysis of 'Enoch Powell's Postbag'<sup>1</sup> Diana Spearman found only a small number of letters that gave what she considered 'racist' grounds for approving of Powell's outburst, yet an almost equally small number cited the strain on the social services which Rex and Moore think is all-important. The major reason given was 'fear for British culture', a reason essentially racist in implication if not based on spurious biology.

It is also the reason usually given by leaders of anti-immigrant agitation and has been expressed clearly in racist terms. John Osborne does not want 'a chocolate coloured, Afro-Asian mixed society'.<sup>2</sup> Peter Griffiths seems to have had a pathological need to become a member of the Establishment and to do so was prepared to say liberal things to liberal audiences and racist things to racist audiences, but Paul Foot's analysis of his career shows that his basic sympathies are racist. In the campaign that led to his election he specifically rejected time and time again the thesis that the immigrant problem would be solved if the social services were made adequate. 'Would more houses end the nuisance and filth?' he asked. 'Would more houses end the knife fights? Would more houses make the streets safe for women and girls?' He claimed that 'Smethwick rejects the idea of becoming a multi-racial society'. In his book *A Question of Colour?* he begins by denying that there are any biological differences between races that should lead to their being considered unequal, then claims that races are happier living apart, drifts into a confused mixture of vague assertions about the sexual practices of Smethwick immigrants and complaints about the way he has been treated and ends up with some rubbishy story about a negro on a train who said that the blacks were taking over the country. The Labour Party has acquiesced in this view of things.

<sup>1</sup>*New Society*, No. 293.

<sup>2</sup>In an article in *The Spectator*, December 1954 cited by Paul Foot, *Immigration and Race in British Politics*, p. 129, who also gives the two quotations from Peter Griffiths at pp. 46-7.

Whether like Mr Hattersley they talk vaguely of 'additional problems'<sup>1</sup> or like Mr Ennals of 'millions of Alf Garnetts in this country' they mean one thing: Englishmen don't like Blacks and this is natural if regrettable. Races cannot live together.

If Messrs Osborne and Griffiths, Hattersley and Ennals assert the equality of races, but still insist that it is better if they live apart, then they are racials in any meaningful sense of that term. This is precisely the official doctrine of Apartheid and whatever the official theory, segregation has always meant lower status for one of the groups concerned. The differences lie mainly in the style of rhetoric. Enoch Powell uses classical allusions, Mr Hattersley uses mincing words, Mr Ennals hypocritically claims virtue for himself, John Osborne is just crude, and a gang of mixed-up adolescents who are not important enough to get into the newspapers any other way make their feelings known by beating up a West Indian family. But all these instances and many more are statements of the same ideology: Black and White don't mix and (slightly mumbled) should not.

It is important that this ideology is an official one. It is respectable to believe in it because it is a principle of British law. The 1962 Act, the 1965 White Paper, the failure to implement the Wilson Committee's proposals on appeals procedure and the panic measure against Kenyan Asians and smuggled Pakistanis have written racialism into the political consensus. The Race Relations legislation introduced by the present government cannot counter-balance the effects of this. There is a logical and psychological contradiction in the stated policies of both major parties, 'Every coloured immigrant who is here must be treated as an equal citizen, but we wish they hadn't come; we are not having any more of them if we can help it and we'll give them the money to go home if they want to'. And this can clearly be seen in the development of events. It was not Powell or Pannell or Sandys who were prosecuted for and found guilty of incitement to racial hatred but Michael Abdul Malik. . . .

An examination of the nature of this ideology would involve a detailed investigation into the way that imperialist expansion was presented to the mass of the population by the press, the politicians and the school history books. A study of Chamberlain's influence on Birmingham might be especially useful. The reaction to Suez still awaits study. (John Osborne's *The Entertainer* illustrates some of the attitudes that Suez helped to crystallize.) It is an ideology with many variations but its basic characteristics and its origins in British imperial history are clear. Widely accepted by the general public, articulated by politicians and written into the law of the land, racialism is a major element in British society and politics today.

<sup>1</sup>For an analysis of Hattersley's speech and the development of Labour policy to 1965 see Foot, esp. pp. 192-4.