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Excerpt

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Introduction

This work looks at British racial thought and the last phase of empire from the 1890s to the early 1960s. It focuses upon a period of rapid and dramatic transformation in British power as the empire it controlled changed from being the largest and grandest of European nineteenth-century capitalist imperialisms, controlling a quarter of the world's population, into a largely symbolic and ceremonial 'Commonwealth of Nations'. This decline in imperial power, however, was not accompanied by an equal and concomitant decline in racial ideas and ideologies for the advent of black immigration to Britain in the 1940s and 1950s led to a new phase of racial tension and hostility in British politics that culminated in rioting in such cities as Bristol, Liverpool and London (Brixton) in 1980 and 1981. For many observers, the more recent phase in domestic racial tensions are an inextricable inheritance of the British imperial past. The very withdrawal from empire has been seen as exaggerating many features endemic to an imperial tradition based upon notions of white, or more particularly Anglo-Saxon, racial supremacy which has now retreated inwards towards the black ethnic minorities in Britain itself and sought to marginalise them in inner-city wards as a new colonised under-class.¹

Furthermore, the imperial past of Britain has been seen by scholars of race relations as bequeathing a distinct ideology of 'conservative imperialism' which has interacted with rival ideologies of 'liberal individualism' and 'international socialism'.² This imperial tradition is seen as an ideological construct divorced from an understanding of political power and the configurations of historical change, and the theory of history engrained within it has not been sharply spelt out. The objective of this work is thus to establish the nature and meaning of the imperial tradition in its last major phase. It looks in particular at the tradition of political ideas established around the race concept from the imperial context and seeks to establish how far this legacy of race thinking affected British cities at the time of the commencement of an internal pattern of race relations on colour

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lines, from the inter-war years in such cities as Liverpool and Cardiff, and nationally after 1945.

Considerable attention has thus been paid in this study to the nature and role of ideas about race and empire during a period of rapid political change. The focus has thus been upon the political dimensions of race rather than upon an all-embracing sociological theory which contains the danger of imprisoning race thinking within a deterministic ideological teleology linked to social structure. While the sociological explanation of knowledge contains numerous insights into the manner in which thought is produced and generated within a particular matrix of social structures, it leads ultimately to the supersession of politics as an independent activity rooted in its own traditions of thought and behaviour.³ The importance, therefore, of analysing race thinking as part of British intellectual history lies in the critical examination of historicist theories of 'racist' ideology, which have been so prevalent in the sociological literature on race and which subordinate past history to contemporary political interests.⁴ While the race thinking of previous generations in Britain has bequeathed a legacy for more contemporary politics, it is still essential to understand their thinking on their own terms. There has been a tendency in a large body of the historiography of race in Europe to subordinate all discussion to the experience of National Socialism and the intellectual and ideological origins of the Final Solution. This mode of historical inquiry, however, overlooks the different world in which thinkers of race lived during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and imposes upon them motives and objectives defined in contemporary terms.⁵

This problem of historical analysis emerges particularly in the case of the term 'racism', which has come to be used very generally in recent historical writings on race and racial thinking. In one sense, the saliency of 'race' in a society presupposes the existence also of 'racism' for, as Pierre van den Berghe has pointed out, 'without racism physical characteristics are devoid of social significance'.⁶ 'Racism' in this general context means any form of belief system that rationalises and justifies the assumption that one human group is inferior to another, and is thus operational at the level of social attitudes. This perspective, which has been strongly visible in much social science writing since the early 1940s and the appearance of Ruth Benedict's *Race and Racism*, has not satisfied some sociologists concerned with linking manifestly 'racist' attitudes to underlying social structures.⁷ The problem, however, for historians is substantially a different one to that facing the student of contemporary society and social behaviour for the 'facts' of social structures from the past are by no means given, but come down through the prism of documents and records that have themselves been interpreted and selected by human minds. Thus, as Marc Bloch so ably

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reminded historical scholars: 'in the last analysis, it is human consciousness which is the subject matter of history. The interrelations, confusions and infections of human consciousness are for history, reality itself.'⁸

The onus on historians, therefore, is less the easy task of passing judgement on past actions than in seeking to understand human behaviour in the particular social context in which it is being studied. History has, as Bloch remarked, a need to renounce its 'false angelic airs' for historians can no more play God than sociologists.⁹ At the same time, this greater humility towards the subject matter of the past can lead to the avoidance of the 'presentist' dilemmas defined by the American historian Carl Becker in 1912 as meaning 'the imperative command that knowledge shall serve purpose, and learning be applied to the solution of the problems of human life'.¹⁰ This divorces historical scholarship completely from present-day questions and problems, and in fact the cleavage is by no means so stark as some conservative historiography would like to imagine, for there is a general demonstration effect derived from studying the past which does affect present-day political behaviour. But the linkage is tenuous and indirect and there is no necessary reason even why those who remember their past may not still be condemned to repeat it.

Sooner or later, indeed, historians will need to develop a wider and more systematic theory of 'racism' in Western history and culture anchored in a commonly agreed periodisation of its growth and development. Contemporary historiography employs a very catholic use of the term, reading back far into Western history a racist discourse that is more recognisably modern in its meaning.¹¹ Though Christine Bolt has rooted the work in the nineteenth-century anthropological discourse on race and the notion of hostility based simply on colour, it is clear that the term has even more modern origins.¹² The word 'racism' really only emerges into popular usage *entre deux guerres* and in reaction especially to National Socialism in Germany. In 1938, Magnus Hirschfeld's posthumous *Racism*, which examined Nazi racial theory and underlined what was seen as a doctrine of 'race war', was published in English.¹³ The book reflected a changing climate of intellectual and scholarly attitudes towards race in the 1930s (which is examined more fully in Chapter Four) and the evolving meaning of a word which had hitherto been generally synonymous with 'nation' in British liberal discourse. Informed opinion in Britain had in fact traditionally had a weak understanding of the nature of 'nationalism', and in colonial areas like South Africa, furthermore, 'race' was generally meant to refer to the two white groups of British and Afrikaners.

The aetiology of the word 'racism' is not without meaning and significance, for historical study has traditionally failed to generate a vocabulary of its own (unlike the social sciences) and has been generally dependent upon a

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more popular use of words and meanings. In the case of 'racism', though, the meaning has to a considerable degree been superimposed via committees of experts, who have been seen by some sociologists as the natural bodies to deal with the 'problems' arising from race in the wake of the Second World War.¹⁴ If 'racism', however, becomes linked to an a priori theory of social causation in Western societies stemming from a theory of capitalist expansion since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and its eventual development into overseas imperialism and slavery, then the term cannot be taken simply at face value but needs extensive and critical historical testing. No theory or term in history is sacrosanct and can only survive rigorous testing against the evidence available. This problem emerges in the recent study of Peter Fryer on the history of black people in Britain. Here the term 'racism' is given a teleological and historicist quality once it has been separated from an earlier phase of 'race prejudice', which was less systematic and was symptomatic of a more isolated and parochial British community in the era before the seventeenth century. Once, however, the overseas connection is established via the slave trade, then the economic conditions are said to have been available for the generation of racist ideology based on the oral tradition of the slave plantocracy in Barbados. Via word of mouth, this racist tradition became implanted in British society and culture as a relatively systematic ideology, and its eventual emergence into a full-blown pseudo-scientific ideology in the nineteenth century was thus more or less inevitable, given the theory, for 'in time [racism] acquires a pseudo-scientific veneer that glosses over its irrationalities and enables it to claim intellectual respectability. And it is transmitted largely through the printed word.'¹⁵

The weakness with Fryer's analysis of racism is its fatalistic quality and his failure to distinguish between the more extreme and systematic views of the Caribbean slave plantocracy and the more flexible attitudes that were generally manifest in British society itself, where the black population outside the capital in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was infinitesimal. Indeed, as Anthony Barker has shown in a study of British attitudes to the negro in the period of the slave trade, black races before the 1770s were judged inferior more through their cultural attributes and the traditional associations within Christian culture of blackness with evil than on any theory of innate racial inferiority.¹⁶ Furthermore, when a more systematic racism did begin to emerge in the 1770s on the basis of works like Edward Long's *History of Jamaica*, it was not an inevitable result of the notion of a 'Great Chain of Being' in European culture, which a number of scholars have used to explain the emergence of European racist thought. The Chain of Being notion was an essentially static one and a number of philosophers had difficulty in applying it in practice, preferring instead to

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argue for a more empirically based subtle gradation of species. The crucial distinction was between man and brute animal and between reason and instinct, and Long's extremism drove him to deny this by arguing for the infertility of the offspring of the union of blacks and whites, an observation that is clearly contradicted by the mixed unions of the black population in English society at this time.¹⁷ The prevalence of Long's views, therefore, is questionable, despite the importance placed on his work by a number of historians.¹⁸ His assertion that Africans mated with apes, for example, was likely to have been undermined by the more popular images of black sexual debauchery and the promiscuity of black women with white men, while school textbooks generally preferred to ignore the sexual dimension altogether and to focus on blacks as culturally backward in a manner similar to other non-African peoples.¹⁹

Thus the link between formalised racist ideology in Britain and the economic interests of the slave plantocracy must be considered tenuous at best. Additional sources must be looked for to explain the fostering of racism in the period *after* the abolition in 1807 of the slave trade and the emergence, by the middle years of the nineteenth century, of newer modes of imperial expansion that had their economic base in interests different to those of the slave plantocracy. This Victorian context is the focus of Chapter One of this study, which looks at the debate on race in terms of the evolution of an expanding liberal middle class that, like its eighteenth-century forebears, was sceptical of too great an emphasis on dogmatic and extreme theories.

Much of the emphasis of this study is thus on the body of central, informed thought that by the twentieth century had come to be called 'middle opinion'. Its general ethos was one of faith in slow, governmental reform and belief in the progressive evolution of scientific rationality.²⁰ It was thus a typical example of what Noel Annan has noted as the 'curious strength of positivism' in English thought, though it could be gripped by more systematic social theories on occasions, as with liberal idealism towards the century's end.²¹ The central argument of this study is that British middle opinion acted as a crucial cushion against the more general extension of systematic racist doctrines in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whilst at the same time still continuing much of the earlier cultural provincialism on the issue of race which was to continue into the era of black immigration to Britain in the period since the Second World War. Some of this provincialism can be ascribed to the more general weakness of British thought on nationalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for, while periodic fits of nationalist fervour gripped the public mood in Britain, the country for the most part escaped the great age of nineteenth-century nation-building in Europe. The English Channel thus acted as a crucial

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ideological and intellectual barrier on matters of race well into the twentieth century. Though debate on races and 'inter-racial contact' had begun to flourish in the imperial context by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it tended to be conducted amongst small circles of informed specialists who had an eye to influencing imperial policy rather than wider English public opinion.

This relative isolation and provincialism of English thought on race in the nineteenth century thus partly explains the remarkable survival of 'neo-Victorian' ideas on race and its linkage to geographical and cultural theories of group differences.²² This study, therefore, of the pattern of thought on race between the 1890s and the 1960s in Britain reveals certain wider features of English social and political thought as a whole at this time, and its generally insular and incremental quality. The value of intellectual history as an academic enterprise is thus that it can be a vital means of clarifying and complementing other historical subject areas such as social history, especially if the focus is upon important moments of *change* in thought.²³ To this extent, intellectual history as a distinct area of historical research and writing is indelibly shaped by the revolution in European social thought in the nineteenth century arising from the concept of *social dynamics* in the writings of Comte, Marx and Spencer. Intellectual history thus represents a considerable expansion and development of an older tradition of 'history of ideas' which, as Leonard Krieger has argued, 'refers to a category of literature in which articulate concepts have themselves been the primary historical agents, with the personal bearers and external relations adduced as conditions of them'²⁴ Intellectual history is concerned not simply with articulate and formal patterns of thought, but also with the less systematised and articulate thinking which makes up a wider climate of thinking within a society at a particular point in time. As a field it is thus a vital component part of a socio-historical understanding of a society's nature and functioning, but, unlike much sociological faith in the possibility of a 'science' of social processes, whether of the Marxist or structural functional sort, it is characterised by a general loss of faith in the inherent lawfulness of human nature and behaviour.²⁵ Intellectual history thus insists on the basic autonomy of human ideas and beliefs from social scientific 'structures' and is important in revealing the contingent nature of sociological beliefs themselves. As Quentin Skinner has remarked: 'to discover from the history of thought that there are in fact no . . . timeless concepts, but only the various different concepts which have gone with various different societies, is to discover a general truth not only about the past but about ourselves as well'.²⁶

This has been the underlying premise in this work, which has sought to unravel the key traditions of belief on race in British society during a period

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of considerable social and political change which includes three important wars – the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902, the First World War (1914–18) and the Second World War (1939–45). During this period the notion of the British Empire began to change in establishment discourse at least into that of a ‘Commonwealth’. The first phase, leading up to the First World War, is discussed in Chapter 1, which looks at the manner in which Victorian racial ideas developed under the umbrella of an Anglo-Saxonist racial ideology until 1905–6 and the re-emergence of liberalism in British politics. Thereafter, as Chapter 2 shows, a tradition of cultural relativism towards different races became established by Mary Kingsley’s acolytes, though it eventually became bogged down in the racism of E. D. Morel in the aftermath of the First World War on the issue of the use of French troops in the occupied Rhineland.

While mainstream liberals hoped for international equality and the brotherhood of races before the First World War, establishment-oriented circles sought to liberalise imperialism from above through the Commonwealth concept. This is examined in Chapter 3, especially in terms of the racial ideas of those groups such as the Rhodes Trust and the Round Table which were instrumental in first promoting the Commonwealth concept before and after the First World War. One important aspect of this reformulation was the loss of historical self-confidence in comparison to the Victorians and the shift towards a benevolent notion of British imperial ‘trusteeship’. With the weakening of older historical certainties there also emerged a growing reliance on British institutions, especially parliament and the monarchy, whose stature in some measure increased internally while external British power and influence waned.

Given this strength of the dominant establishment ideology, Chapter 4 looks at the efforts by the political left to develop an alternative concept to Empire–Commonwealth in the inter-war years. It focuses on efforts by such figures as Norman Leys, Sydney Olivier and Leonard Barnes to attack British colonial policy for its connivance with white-settler power in the colonial setting, especially in East and Southern Africa. Some of the criticisms of British imperialism made by an earlier generation of liberals before the First World War were developed in socialist circles in the 1920s and 1930s, most notably among a group of black *émigré* intellectuals which included George Padmore, Jomo Kenyatta and I. T. A. Wallace-Johnstone. The British left, though, remained remarkably unmoved by the nature of colonial racism and still reacted to colonial issues in a humanitarian and moralistic manner more typical of their Victorian forebears. The black Pan-Africanist cause enjoyed only a short-lived influence on British left-wing opinion, reaching its apogee at the 1945 Manchester Pan-African Congress, and by the end of the Second World

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War the British left had been substantially accommodated to the modernisation of colonial government through the colonial development and welfare programme.

The failure of this more general political challenge in Britain to the dominant Empire–Commonwealth ideology made the discussions within the intelligentsia on the nature and meaning of race all the more important in the inter-war years. From Victorian times, race had an important place in debates in anthropological and scientific circles and had long been associated with ideas of ‘scientific racism’ based upon notions of biological hierarchies between racial types analogous to those between different biological species. The advent of Darwinian ideas from the 1870s onwards in many respects reinforced these notions and there continued to be periodic debates about the origins of races and whether they took the form of *monogenesis* – evolution from a single racial stock – or *polygenesis* – evolution from originally different racial stocks. Chapter 5 discusses the continuation of these debates in sociological and anthropological circles in the twentieth century and argues that the small coterie of professional scholars in this field had a particular importance in a society such as Britain, for they were conveyors of new ideas from both Europe and the United States into an insular culture where many of the Victorian notions of race survived in popular discourse. In the first half of the twentieth century, the social sciences were first starting to obtain professional status in British universities, so the debate was conducted by an amalgam of both gentleman amateurs in the older tradition and more professional scholars like A. C. Haddon and Julian Huxley, who, by the 1930s and the advent of National Socialism in Germany, were instrumental in helping shift mainstream and middle opinion from the older racial ideology, especially with the emergence of studies in genetics.

This debate, though, did not work solely in a liberal direction for there was a strong conservative counterattack on race which viewed racial groups as characterised by different hereditarian traits. These views, which survived in circles of eugenicists as well as in physical anthropology well into the 1930s, had some impact on the early discussions on internal British race relations in the seaport towns in the inter-war years. Chapter 6 looks at the response by some sections of the administration as well as the police to the emergence of small communities of blacks, mostly seamen, in such seaports as Cardiff and Liverpool in the 1920s and 1930s and the growth of fears regarding the ‘miscegenation’ between these blacks and local white women with the resulting ‘social problem’ of ‘half-caste’ children. In the case of Liverpool especially, eugenic ideas on ‘half-castes’ continued to have a considerable impact well into the 1930s, for they reinforced the campaign by the National Union of Seamen to restrict the immigration of black

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seamen into Britain so that jobs on British ships could be reserved for white, British seamen.

A more professional approach to the study of immigration began to emerge, however, through the Liverpool University School of Social Science in the late 1930s, and by the Second World War a new optimism began to be engendered by hopes for a more welfare-orientated society which would absorb earlier racial conflicts. The war itself, though, introduced a new racial dimension into British politics both in the imperial and domestic arenas. Chapter 7 looks at the shift towards ideas of colonial development and welfare programmes in the colonies in the 1930s and 1940s with the publication of Lord Hailey's *African Survey* in 1938, which led to a more unified and imperial view of 'race relations'. The pursuit of a strategy of guided social engineering in British colonies became especially important after the outbreak of war when the resources and manpower from the colonies became vital in the war against Germany and Japan. The arrival of some 17,000 black American troops in Britain by the end of 1942 produced a new race relations situation in Britain and there was a renewed impetus, especially from the Colonial Office, for the British government to pursue a clear liberal policy and resist any segregation of these black GIs, despite the fact that the American army had itself not yet been completely desegregated. The presence of black students in Britain had taken an added significance by the war years and the Colonial Office stepped into the arena of welfare provision for these students, which had formerly been conducted informally through voluntary and philanthropic agencies. The result was, for a period, a close political alliance between black students, organised through the West African Students' Union (WASU) and the Colonial Office.

Indeed, the story of race in British politics by the time of renewed black immigration to Britain after 1948 is one of successful cooptation and control as part of an overall plan of colonial economic development and slow diffusion of political power to groups of 'moderate' and amenable nationalist opinion. The black workers from the West Indies imported into Britain during the war years had been seen as part of these overall aims, for the skills they acquired were seen as useful back in the colonies from which they had come. There was no ready acceptance that they were likely to settle permanently in Britain. By the late 1940s, however, it began to dawn on civil servants and politicians that the wave of immigration from the West Indies and from South Asia was likely to be permanent and that new policies would have to be devised accordingly. Chapter 8 looks at the discussions in governing circles, in the period after the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* in 1948, of the kind of responses the government should make in order to guide and control this new race relations situation in British

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society. The imposition of controls was considered but was at this stage rejected through fear of outraging nationalist opinion in the colonies. The government instead sought to dissuade the immigrants from going to the seaports and increasing the size of the black communities there and encouraged them to move to inland cities and towns where they could more easily find jobs and be 'absorbed' into British society through dispersal. This strategy the government tried to pursue during the 1950s by tapping the resources of various voluntary bodies on a local basis in order to fulfil the ideal of 'assimilation' of the immigrants into British society. There was a remarkable continuity in Victorian paternalist ideas as the voluntary bodies sought to establish a more formal pattern of social relations between the dominant white society and the black minority communities. This became especially pressing after the disturbances at Notting Dale and Nottingham in the summer of 1958 and efforts in some localities were stepped up to provide a forum for inter-racial 'harmony' through International Friendship Councils.

These efforts at containing the growing domestic pattern of race relations in Britain through more indirect methods began to break down by the late 1950s in the face of growing racial hostility and calls for control on Commonwealth immigration, which culminated in the passing of the first act of restriction, the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act. The central conclusion of this is, however, that, while it was possible to establish some continuity in both imperial ideas and policy in the field of race and colonial development, the tradition was by no means absolute. Imperialism as an ideology gripped the public mood as a sense of national mission only for a relatively brief period in British history, in the 1880s and 1890s. Before then, British imperial power had tended to be exerted informally through methods that fell short, in many cases, of full-scale colonisation, though the argument that the middle years of the century were characterised only by a 'free trade imperialism' eschewing annexation is overstated. After the high point of imperial ardour, with the growing loss of faith in the whole enterprise after the Anglo-Boer War, the whole system increasingly needed a new set of psychological buttresses to prop it up. The actual 'decline', though, of the empire from the end of the First World War onwards was by no means a simple and unilinear process. This 'decline' was interrupted by a fit of revival at the end of the Second World War at the time of the defeat of fascism. The post-war colonial development and welfare programme under the aegis of the Commonwealth represented a renewed spurt to the imperial enterprise that only began to run out of steam by the late 1950s as the cost of the project and changing political demands following the emergence of international criticism of imperialism compelled its abandonment.²⁷ Suez was the last fling of a beast irreparably doomed by the passage of events.