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Roger Hewitt
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1 Introduction

During the 1990s, following three highly publicised racist murders, Greenwich in south London became known in the UK press as the 'racist murder capital of Europe'. Historically Greenwich was both a key site of British maritime and colonial history from the sixteenth century onwards and an important centre in the development of the labour movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These features alone might mark it out as the site of an unbroken elaboration of exclusive identities on at least two dimensions, both of which could arguably be related to its contemporary notoriety for racism. But the politics of race in the UK and particularly London reflect other developments at once more parochial and more global. The local features of Greenwich within London – its complex economy and political ambivalence – make its case more difficult. Furthermore, the unfolding of multiculturalist politics on the *international* stage from its point of origin in the USA is another factor that confronts attempts to determine why Greenwich in particular should have become the bearer of such a sorry record.

The murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 and the subsequent trials and inquiries brought the case against the criminal justice system to stark and undeniable prominence. It was said to be a 'watershed' in the nation's race and justice debate. Coming at the opening of the twenty-first century the Report of the Inquiry into the murder investigation[1] ushered in the most comprehensive review of 'institutional racism' ever seen in the UK. But while both black and white condemnation of police tardiness in the Lawrence case was widespread, beneath the complicated political alliances forming that public consensus, some local white discomfort at the attention it attracted, though unpublicised, was never far away. The Lawrence murder was the last and most notorious of three racist murders in Greenwich which became nationally prominent and

[1] Home Office, *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report* (London, The Stationery Office, 1999).

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generated their own local oral storybooks in the white working-class neighbourhoods where they occurred.[2] Racist and distorted as it may seem, rather than widespread sympathy with the black murder victims Rolan Adams (killed in 1991), Rohit Duggal (killed in 1992) and Stephen Lawrence, the white responses on a number of public housing estates in Greenwich were unrelentingly defensive and unsympathetic.

These locally told stories were not only versions of the 'real' truth behind the known events. They had their own messages about 'unfairness to whites' and the changing nature of justice. The mobilised responses to these murders had stirred up a cluster of resentments amongst some whites concerning the means by which black and minority ethnic causes get taken up in the public sphere through the agencies of the media and the state. These resentments were about the media's reporting of racial incidents, about equal opportunities in local government, about anti-racism and multiculturalism in schools and about police 'fears of being called racist'. They were complaints by the white have-nots about the impact on them of the black have-nots – or rather about the development of representation for minorities who seemed to them to outflank them in the everyday struggles for small advantage. The struggle to disarm the accusation of racism, either by inverting its meaning or by denying the validity of its application to particular instances, became part of the expression of resentment some whites felt about the prominence that black and other minority ethnic causes were receiving.

These phenomena were unique neither to Greenwich nor to the UK. During the 1990s increasing hostility to multiculturalism in its various forms was apparent both nationally and internationally. Thus, while repugnance at racial violence was widely expressed and a broad pro-forma consensus existed over the need to make multicultural societies work, there was also conflict over what multicultural*ism* meant and how or if it worked in practice. In the USA these issues were most evident in

[2] Following the first of these murders I was commissioned by Greenwich Council to conduct a study of racism amongst adolescents. This was followed by three further studies more broadly focussed on racist violence, community processes and communicative practices. These were funded by the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, Nuffield Foundation and the Economic and Social Research Council and took place over the next six years, covering the period following the murder of Rohit Duggal in 1992 until 1997, four years after that of Stephen Lawrence. I gathered a great deal of information from interviews with young people and adults living on the estates in central and southern Greenwich and from community workers, council officials, youth workers, police and other professionals in the borough. This body of data forms a substantial part of the source material for this book.

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academic circles and in a number of widely discussed publications appearing in the late 1980s and early 1990s that were critical of multiculturalism and of developments in race equalities politics.[3] In Canada the long taken-for-granted consensus aimed for in Canada's pioneering multicultural policy (1971) and its later articulation in the Multicultural Act (1988) also came under fire from several quarters.[4] In Australia hostility to immigration became expressed in the rise of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party which attacked multiculturalism without ambiguity. Similar attacks on multiculturalism were evident from Scandinavian and other European populist parties.[5]

These were disparate but related phenomena. They included responses within specific local communities to policies regarding migration, community relations and racism, as well as the competition between political groups seeking to appeal to such constituencies of interest. In the USA the attacks on multiculturalism came out of a long-running contest over the nature and scope of institutional racism, the emergence of identity politics and the special role that the issue of racial equality had come to have in the wider political agendas of the Republican and Democratic Parties.[6] The opposition to multiculturalism was evident in ideological argument, political activity and popular local issues, sometimes melding all of these. Each has been seen as part of a 'backlash' to the increasingly well-established profile of equal opportunities – and particularly racial equal opportunities – that had started to form during the 1960s, and to its contemporary re-articulation in multiculturalism. In the USA this 'backlash' was especially associated with the rolling back of equalities legislation during the Reagan and Bush administrations and with the response to the claims for recognition by the wide variety of identities uniquely included within the US version

[3] See below pp. 106–7.

[4] See for example Pan K. Datta, 'Multiculturalism: Has it actually Fed Racism?', *The Ottawa Citizen*, B3 (29 Apr. 1989); Vic Satzewich (ed.), *Deconstructing a Nation: Immigration, Multiculturalism and Racism in 90's Canada* (Halifax, Nova Scotia, Fernwood Publishing, 1992); Neil Bissoondath, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (Toronto, Penguin Books, 1994).

[5] Bligh Grant (ed.), *Pauline Hanson: One Nation and Australian Politics* (Armidale, Australia, University of New England Press, 1997); Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, *A Place in the Sun: Re-creating the Australian Way of Life* (Sydney, Harper Collins, 2000); Katherine Betts, *The Great Divide: Immigration Politics in Australia* (Sydney, Duffy and Snellgrove, 1999); Paul Hainsworth(ed.), *The Politics of the Extreme Right: From Margins to Mainstream* (London, Pinter, 2000); Peter Fysh and Jim Wolfreys, *The Politics of Racism in France* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

[6] Edward Carmines and James Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton, N. J., Princeton University Press, 1989); Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights and Taxes on American Politics* (New York, Norton, 1992).

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of multiculturalism.[7] Political developments regarding multiculturalism in the UK, Canada and Australia, and more recent ones on the European mainland were directly and indirectly influenced by developments in the USA.

The events in Greenwich during the 1990s, culminating in the Macpherson Inquiry Report of 1999, had both local and national significance. In being part of the wider pattern of political contests of the period, it is possible to examine them in coming to understand racial 'backlash' phenomena more generally in its continued relevance to issues of migration to increasingly plural societies. This book attempts to look closely at these relations through the prism of one part of south London made briefly infamous by racism and the Stephen Lawrence murder. Against a backdrop of high levels of racial harassment and the irony that in the heartland of a notorious case of injustice to a black family, the theme of 'unfairness to whites' should have gained such local prominence, it explores the narratives of daily life that show the larger historical dialogue at work. It also attempts to use parallels with the past and, although mainly focussing on the UK and the USA, with developments across the Western liberal democracies, to shed light on social and political processes that are key to contemporary social policy.

The 'white backlash'

What has been referred to as the 'white backlash' may more accurately be described as part of a socially disparate set of responses to equalities discourses as they unfolded from the 1960s to the present. The so-called 'white backlash' has not been unitary, nor has it had the finality which its name seems to suggest. It is part of an on-going dispute with an also socially and politically disparate equalities and multiculturalist agenda. It is an international phenomenon whose history, despite often deep national variations, continues to influence contemporary struggles over race and justice, migration and settlement and the national policies designed to address them.

[7] Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counter-Revolution* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1996), pp. 55–68; Stanley Greenberg, *Middle Class Dreams: The Politics and Power of the New American Majority* (New York, Times Books, 1996), pp. 39–49; Norman C. Amaker, *Civil Rights and the Reagan Administration* (Washington DC, Urban Institute Press, 1988); Stephen Steinberg, *Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1995); Nathan Glazer, 'Multiculturalism and American Exceptionalism', in Christian Joppke and Steven Lukes (eds.), *Multicultural Questions* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 183–98; Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1995).

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Even in the USA, where it achieved its most strident forms, 'backlash' was by no means ubiquitous. When the impacts of the civil rights agenda began to move beyond the South, local responses to school segregation and bussing, for example, though fierce in many instances were far from uniform despite some familiar patterns.[8] The same was true with affirmative action in higher education and employment – the other major site of white protest in the USA. Much occurred smoothly and without overt opposition.[9] In the UK competition from black and foreign workers for jobs at certain periods had led to rioting and violence in the first half of the twentieth century.[10] However, the post-World War II immigration of black people from the Commonwealth and the recognition of black disadvantage and exposure to racist harassment prompted gradual accommodation alongside racist hostility and resentment at 'special treatment' in both countries. 'White backlash' to official policies aimed at providing equal rights, opportunities and protection under the law was by no means the only response from within white communities. It was, however, always susceptible to – if not always only expressive of – political interest and manipulation.

Negative reactions within white communities to (i) the proximity of black communities following migration, or (ii) the potential acquisition of new power and/or status by blacks, or (iii) the fashioning of policies or legislation to bring about greater equality between 'racial'/ethnic groups, or (iv) the enforcing of such policies or legislation, have all at different times and places led both to visible protest and the mobilisation of political pressure. (The initial Ku Klux Klan, immediately post-Emancipation, focussed on the possibility of blacks achieving positions within the judiciary and thus could be said to be amongst the earliest of 'white backlashes' to equalities legislation.[11]) Historically, each of these were spurs to reactions against the *possibility* of whites having to compete with blacks on legal, occupational, educational and/or residential grounds where white advantage would be diminished if not nullified.

[8] See Chapter 6.

[9] Erin and Frank Dobbin, 'How Affirmative Action Became Diversity Management: Employers' Response to Anti-discrimination Law, 1961–1996', in John David Skrentny (ed.), *Color Lines: Affirmative Action, Immigration and Civil Rights Options for America* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 87–117; John Aubrey Douglas, 'Anatomy of Conflict: The Making and Unmaking of Affirmative Action at the University of California', in Skrentny (ed.), *Color Lines*; John Edwards, *When Race Counts: The Morality of Racial Preference in Britain and America* (London, Routledge, 1995), pp. 126–53.

[10] Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London, Pluto Press, 1984), pp. 298-316; Ron Ramadin, *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain* (Aldershot, Wildwood House Ltd, 1987) pp. 72–5.

[11] Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (New York, Vintage Books, 1998), p. 153.

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In the USA some of the earliest talk of a ‘white backlash’ came in the early to mid-1960s as the civil rights agenda of legislation began to be rolled out during the Johnson administration. It was apparent initially in George Wallace’s impact during the 1963 presidential election campaign. Following the riots in American cities in the late 1960s there was even more pronounced negative reaction by whites and widespread talk of a ‘white backlash’. Martin Luther King however, declared:

> There has never been a solid, unified and determined thrust to make justice a reality for Afro-Americans. The step backward has a new name today. It is called the ‘white backlash’. But the white backlash is nothing new. It is the surfacing of old prejudices, hostilities and ambivalences that have always been there. It was caused neither by the cry of Black Power nor by the unfortunate wave of riots in our cities. The white backlash of today is rooted in the same problem that has characterised America ever since the black man landed in chains on the shores of this nation. The white backlash is an expression of the same vacillations, the same search for rationalisations, the same lack of commitment that has always characterised white America on the question of race.[12]

The case that all forms of white backlash were in essence examples of the same phenomena continued to be made by black activists as the stomach for further and more effective extension of civil rights began to diminish amongst whites and increasingly hostile and organised reactions became further articulated. This was a critical transition in which social class featured in both obvious and obscure ways. Early on a gulf had begun to grow between those sections of the middle class that had supported black progress and the white working-class groups who felt themselves to be materially threatened by the extension of racial equality in ways the middle classes were not. The case for taking seriously white working-class concerns over their hard-won but slender security in jobs and housing was drowned out by the welter of evidence of sustained oppression blacks had suffered and continued to suffer. Furthermore, not only did the case for urgent and effective remedies seem incontrovertible, but white working-class protests were sometimes expressed in language that was unambiguously racist. Thus the poorly articulated and morally flawed responses of white blue-collar workers became emblematic of northern red-neck-style bigotry, the South beyond the South, and of what stood in the way of social progress.

This was a new kind of class warfare in which, ostensibly at least, middle-class whites and the black working class made common cause

[12] Martin Luther King Jr, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York, Harper Row, 1967), p. 68.

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against ingrained institutional racism and its popular supporters in the racist white working class. This particularly meant those 'white ethnics' – Irish, Italian, Slavs, Greeks, etc. – who had historically struggled most amongst the whites to maintain economic security and an acceptable social status.[13] It was not that these groups did not recognise the case being made against black's low wages, poor job promotion prospects, higher rents and institutional exclusion. Many of these things were well known, often more directly amongst blue-collar workers than by the middle classes supporting black protest. It was the fact that black progress appeared to be hitched specifically to greater economic struggle and less security for white workers – and with little or no consequences for the white middle class.[14] However, during the 1970s the gap in attitudes between these classes began to narrow as the domain of increasing and urgent interest to the middle classes – higher education – again became the target of equalities activists. SAT scores increasingly came to symbolise the frontier of black/white struggle and the sympathies of the middle classes seemed less certain.[15]

While there are often similarities in the content of anti-equalities talk in the late 1960s and the mid-1990s, there came to be stark changes in its meaning and significance, despite Martin Luther King's early characterisation of 'white backlash'. The working-class family had been exposed to several major transformations taking place over that period. The most important of these was de-industrialisation and the shrinking of the number of traditional blue-collar jobs, restructuring and the

[13] Thomas A. Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Colour and Power in Chicago 1890–1945* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2003); Thomas Sugrue, 'Crabgrass-Roots Politics: Race, Rights and Reaction against Liberalism in the Urban North, 1940–1964', *Journal of American History*, 82 (1995), pp. 551–77; Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1985); Jonathan Rieder, 'The Rise of the "Silent Majority"', in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (eds.), *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order 1930–1980* (Princeton, N. J., Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 243–68.

[14] Richard Sennet and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1972); Jack Bloom, *Class, Race and the Civil Rights Movement* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 155–213; Gary Orfield, 'Race and the Liberal Agenda: The Loss of the Integrationist Dream, 1965–1974', in Margaret Weir, Ann Shola Orloff and Theda Skocpal (eds.), *The Politics of Social Policy in the United States* (Princeton, N. J., Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 313–55.

[15] Oldfield, 'Race and the Liberal Agenda'; George E. Curry (ed.), *The Affirmative Action Debates* (Reading, Mass., Addison-Wesley, 1996); Alan Matusow *The Unravelling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s*, New York, Harper Row, 1984); Joel Dreyfuss and Charles Lawrence, *The Bakke Case: The politics of Inequality* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979); Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom, *America in Black and White, One Nation Indivisible* (New York, Touchstone, 1979), pp. 349–422.

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growth in service and information-related work.[16] This had consequences for the voice of the 'little man' and for how it was incorporated and manipulated by political forces. Secondly the political value of the race issue changed enormously in kind between the 1960s and the 1990s. Race reconfigured the relationships between the Democratic Party, the Republicans and the American people, and race also came to have considerable political significance in the UK in the shifting fortunes of the Conservative and Labour Parties. Thirdly the focus of multiculturalist attention moved from the earlier issues of equality and citizenship rights towards those of cultural recognition and identity.[17] Finally, re-configuring this whole procession of change itself, the nature of international migration and the variations within and between migrant communities intensified greatly towards the end of the period,[18] giving 'race' and 'racism' new, a-historical, 'post-modern' meaning detached from reference and political aetiology.

The vulnerability to political manipulation that public opinion and sectional interests were exposed to was evident in the kinds of politics that arose. The newly emergent middle class in the USA had seemed during the 1960s to display a left/liberal bias taken at the time and for a while afterwards as definitional. However, in time its political allegiances proved more malleable and more capable of responding to a range of appeals. Furthermore, it was a class in the ascendant. Unlike the industrial working class it had power and came to have a sense of its own social leadership – particularly by the 1980s and 1990s.[19] Its destiny was

[16] Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott (eds.), *Beyond the Ruins: The Meaning of Deindustrialisation* (Ithaca, ILR Press, Cornell University Press, 2003); Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialisation of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York, Basic Books, 1982); Eileen Appelbaum and Rosemary Batt, *The New American Workplace: Transforming Work Systems in the United States* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1994); Steven J. Davis, John C. Haltiwanger and Scott Schuh, *Job Creation and Destruction* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1997).

[17] Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N. J., Princeton University Press, 1990); Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Multiculturalism', in Amy Gutman (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, N. J., Princeton University Press, 1994); Nancy Fraser, 'Recognition or Redistribution? A Critical Reading of Iris Young's *'Justice and the Politics of Difference'*, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 3, 2 (1995), pp. 166–80; Cynthia Willett (ed.), *Theorizing Multiculturalism: A Guide to the Current Debate* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1998).

[18] Stephen Castles, 'The International Politics of Forced Migration', in Leo Panitch and Colin Leys (eds.), *Fighting Identities: Race, Religion and Ethno-Nationalism, The Socialist Register 2002* (London, Merlin Press, 2002), pp. 172–92.

[19] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2000); R. Reich, *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for Twenty-First Century Capitalism* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1991); J. Rifkin, *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labour Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era* (New York, Putnam and Sons, 1996); Krishan

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one with the information age and politicians played to its gallery. In this context the 'backlash' to multiculturalism left the workshop and the street corner and located itself within the academy, journalism, foundations and their think-tanks and in government itself. The voice of the 'little man' was still rhetorically important but now as a token, not as a flesh and blood reality.

Second wave

The second wave of backlash in the USA was not articulated in popular, local arenas, like the earlier bussing and work-related white protests. It was conducted more in print and policy and claimed to be concerned less with specific instances of 'unfairness to whites' and more with general principles on which race-related social policy and legislation was based – individual versus group actions being the most prominent amongst them. It was partly the result of a convergence of features emerging from the late 1960s and early 1970s. These included liberal concerns over the direction of the equalities agenda; the articulation of a definition of racism amongst conservatives in both political parties that rejected the idea that it was politically and economically generated but insisted on its characterisation as a matter of individual prejudice or acquired bigotry. Most importantly it included the Republican Party strongly distancing itself from the Democrats' record with regard to race equality and successfully mounting political campaigns that simplified the issue of 'affirmative action' and portrayed itself as the party of common sense and the Democrats as the party of rash do-gooders.[20]

During the Reagan/Thatcher era government race policies in both the USA and the UK became primarily a matter of both denying the existence of any structural or institutional causes of racism and halting or reversing policies aimed at effecting equality of outcome. With the presidential election of 1980 the Republican Party cashed in on its long-evolving public image with respect to racial conservatism. Reagan's political record included opposition to the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. As president, Reagan's symbolic endorsement of white, small town 'home truths' struck a chord with

Kumar, *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1995); Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York, Norton and Company, 1998).

[20] Edsall and Edsall, *Chain Reaction*; John Higham (ed.), *Civil Rights and Social Wrongs: Black – White Relations since World War II* (University Park, Pa., Pennsylvania University Press, 1997).

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disaffected white Democratic voters. By 1984, despite the political opportunity apparently offered to the Democrats by the recession of 1981–2, not only did the white Southern vote continue steadfastly Republican but white working-class voters in the *North* now also greatly contributed to the increased Republican base in returning Reagan. This was an important moment in the political mobilisation of the white backlash to the equalities movement in general, American multiculturalism and to race-based affirmative action.[21]

Key in Reagan's assault on equalities legislation was his infusion of 'racially conservative' appointments to the Department of Justice, and in particular in the Civil Rights Division which rapidly began challenging the existing bases of affirmative action in hiring practices from 1981 onwards.[22] In 1983–4 the Reagan Justice Department also filed suits declaring affirmative action agreements in Detroit, Boston and New Orleans to constitute illegal 'reverse discrimination'[23] – picking up on just those populist sentiments expressed by George Wallace a decade earlier.

In the UK the impact of three successive Thatcher administrations on equalities was less evident with regard to legislation. Indeed, although it generally did not advance equalities, 'positive action' in employment was actually endorsed by the Conservative government in the 1989 Fair Employment Act, which was aimed at the treatment of Catholics in Northern Ireland. Compared to the USA there was, of course, very little to dismantle. Although the Thatcher government was vocal in its opposition to anti-racism and multicultural education, local councils' rights to promote racial equality through business contracts were preserved in the Local Government Act 1988, despite pressure from the right wing of the party.[24] This Act, however, and the government's other legislation seeking to limit the power of local government did serve several purposes including the limitation of anti-racist and multiculturalist activity. However, the most evident assault on multiculturalism and on race-based public policy was in the realm of ideological and political rhetoric from quarters close to and sometimes directly part of

[21] Greenberg, *Middle Class Dreams*, pp. 39–49; Kevin Phillips, *The Politics of Rich and Poor: Wealth and the American Electorate in the Reagan Aftermath* (New York, Random House, 1990), p. 22; Amaker, *Civil Rights*; see also Norman C. Amaker, 'Reagan and the Civil Rights Legacy', in Eric J. Schmertz, Natalie Datlof and Alexej Ugninsky (eds.), *Ronald Reagan's America*, vol. I (Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1997), pp. 163–74; Edsall and Edsall, *Chain Reaction*.

[22] Ronnie Dugger, *On Reagan*: *The Man and his Presidency* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1983).

[23] John L. Palmer and Isabel V. Sawhill (eds.), *The Reagan Record: An Assessment of America's Changing Domestic Priorities* (Cambridge, Mass., Ballinger Publishing Company, 1984), pp. 207–8.

[24] 'Tory Right Urges Revolt on Race Contract Rule', *Independent*, 15 Dec., 1987.

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