



Moving into the 20th Century - Post-War UK

Race and racism, in the aftermath of the Second World War, intersected with the anti-immigrant sentiments of the native British population; there was a widespread hostility towards Germans, who were blamed for the world's recent horrors. Racism also intersected with nationalist sentiments from Britain giving up control of its former colonies. The crossover between racism and anti-immigrant attitudes (xenophobia) is particularly important to note, as some argue that this is what also characterises contemporary racism in Britain.

In the aftermath of world war two, Britain had a significant amount of manual, unskilled work which it needed filling. Such work was low-paying, with minimal mobility opportunities, and was thus seen as undesirable to the native population. In order to fill these jobs, Britain recruited citizens from Ireland, the commonwealth, and previous colonies to come over as immigrants and work in these jobs. However, from their very arrival into Britain, there were open fears specifically about the rise of black (referring here to *both* South Asian and African and Caribbean people) immigration, as the 1948 Nationality Act allowed for free movement of citizens of the UK, the Commonwealth, and Britain's former colonies. Controlling black immigration was a topic of debate throughout both the Labour government of 1945-51, and the subsequent Conservative governments in the 1950s; but also throughout the rest of the 20th century, as we will see. Public hostility toward black immigrants in this time period is well highlighted by the protests staged at the arrival of 417 Jamaicans on board the 'Empire Windrush' in May 1948, with protestors bearing 'Go back home' signs.

Not only were immigrants, and most intensely black immigrants, economically disadvantaged upon their arrival, but they were also socially marginalised. This can be seen clearly in the common signs put up in houses for rent/sale: 'No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs'. This led to clear patterns of housing discrimination towards immigrants, resulting in them living in inner city districts that tended to be isolated (by transport) from commercial centres, devoid of any social services, and overall quarantined from spaces of 'whiteness' such as cultural centres, and Anglican churches. Although the UK did not have a legal system of segregation in place, like the US did, they still had informal systems of racial segregation which the state didn't take any action toward.



The openly hostile attitudes toward black immigrants were clearly manifest in acts, uprisings, and riots involving violence towards such people. Two examples display this – the 1958 riots in Nottingham and Notting Hill. Both riots consisted of white people going into particular neighbourhoods and estates, and attacking black people. Such tension between groups led to the sociological study of ‘race relations’, led by John Rex. More contemporary critics have criticised the ‘race relations’ models for pitting groups against one another, and for making boundaries between groups appear to be too solid and immutable, thus making race appear ‘essential’ instead of socially constructed. However, Rex’s work on race relations demonstrates something that is repeated across many sociological studies: that struggle is *productive* – in other words, struggle is one of the social processes that actually constitutes the formation of racial groups. For an overview of the Notting Hill riot, read:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/white-riot-the-week-notting-hill-exploded-912105.html>

Politicians and the media, however, construed these events as evidence that ‘black immigration’ needed to be controlled, because blacks were causing a social problem – no onus was put on whites. It was in this racial climate that the Conservative government – through individuals such as Lord Salisbury and Cyril Osbourne, were able to gather more support for stricter stances on black immigration into the UK, and it was in this context that black people in the UK were seen as constituting a social problem of the state. This is well highlighted by MP Enoch Powell’s famous ‘rivers of blood’ speech in the ‘60s, where he claimed that:

As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, I seem to see ‘the River Tiber foaming with much blood’. The tragic and intractable phenomenon which we watch with horror on the other side of the Atlantic, but which there is interwoven with the history and existence of the States itself, is coming upon us here by our own volition and our own neglect.

Going on to describe white Brits as ‘strangers in their own country’, Powell’s speech became emblematic of the anti-immigrant, anti-black sentiments across the nation. Immigrants and immigrant descended people in the UK were seen as taking up social resources – such as healthcare, education, and social security benefits – away from those people who were



rightfully entitled to them (white Brits).

Task

1. What was the relationship between racism and xenophobia in post-war Britain?
2. What inequalities did immigrants to Britain face in the post-war period?