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Revisiting the crossroads: returning to *The Empire Strikes Back*

Nasar Meer

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This essay provides a critical reflection on the intellectual and political questions raised by *The Empire Strikes Back*. It argues that thirty years after the collection helped establish the politics of race at the centre of mainstream scholarly debate; these have now been pushed to the periphery of British sociology. The discussion begins by setting the book against its prevailing political economy, before commenting on the virtue and authenticity in its type of critical scholarship. The essay then moves to spotlight some of the ways in which the collection may be deemed both pioneering and limited, how we might recall the collection today.

Keywords: political economy; race; intersectionality; nation; cultural studies; sociology

Introduction

It is a daunting task to revisit a text widely regarded as a landmark on the study of race in the social sciences. Of course, I say *social sciences*. On publication the book's immediate constituency was *cultural studies* in so far as it took aim at the marginalization of race within it. So while consistent with the broader ambition of what the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCCS; 1982) promoted as 'an important point in the development of our "new left" tradition of research' (Johnson 1983, 7), *The Empire Strikes Back* (TESB; Carby 1982) was not intended as a continuation of what had gone before. 'If nothing else', insisted Paul Gilroy (1982a, 7) on behalf of the Race and Politics Group, 'this book should be taken as a signal that this marginalisation [of race] cannot continue'. Perhaps the authors always understood that such a task could never be contained within a register of cultural studies *narrowly conceived*. So whether intentionally or otherwise, the aperture widens as the reader moves through the ways in which 'continuing colonial struggle'

of Black and Asian Britons (signalled by the title) is charted in different arenas across the collection.

And yet over thirty years on, if the aspiration was to see a politics of race treated with the same seriousness as questions of gender and class, the book's core objective is yet to be realized. From *its* conjunctural moment to *ours*, the objects of crises have changed, or more precisely they have shifted from alleged Black criminality to Islamic terrorism. This has not taken a linear route, and the political dynamics are different, but both categories are racialized constructs, which Muslims resist just as Black communities did. Each, moreover, is touched by Lawrence's (1982, 47) complaint: 'the fear that society is falling apart at the seams has prompted the elaboration of theories about race which turn on particular notions of culture'. Sadly, the conservatism of British sociology, found in its institutional systems and intellectual priorities, a combination of historical institutionalism and disciplinary inertia, has taken a perhaps predictable route in pushing race to the margins. Hence (with some exceptions), the scholarship on Islamophobia, where it is even minimally registered in the dwindling presence that race enjoys in mainstream British sociology, is understood as a de-raced concern.

It is very tempting to spend the allocated space cataloguing the laundering of race in England's sociology departments (and its near complete *absence* in Wales and Scotland, with the important exception of universities across Glasgow).¹ I would like to resist this by reading the book in its context, discussing some ways in which it conceives scholarship and activism, including the constituency the authors saw themselves representing, before pointing each to one way in which the collection loses and sustains its relevance.

At the crossroads

TESB is a book that needs to be read in its moment.² Resting at the crossroads of the 1970s and what Thatcherism was beginning to herald for post-colonial minorities in the inner cities, the authors framed their analyses against the background of an 'international crisis of the capitalist world economy, and the deep-seated structural crisis of the British social formation' (8). This, we are told, 'links the various chapters which follow' (8). It does so not through a hard political economy that catalogues cyclical crises, but by focusing on discursive repertoires that became visible within specific representations of crisis management. So far, so Stuart! Perhaps unsurprisingly, Hall et al.'s (1978) influence is from the outset not hard to detect.³ Illustrative extracts include the reading and application of Gramsci, something that allows Solomos, Findlay, Jones, and Gilroy (1982, 19) to 'see that the crisis which Britain faced during the seventies, and faces today, is a crisis of hegemony, an "organic crisis" to use Gramsci's

terminology'. This, they argued, went hand in hand with a recalibration of Ideology, 'a struggle to "make sense" of a conjecture where all that is good and wholesome seems to be under threat' (1982a, 27).

But there is more here than a debt to *Policing the Crisis*. Unlike the latter text, Solomos et al. in their chapter were observing in real time the rupture of an old consensus and the birth of a new one. Where Hall et al. diagnosed, in Gramscian terms, the conditions of a 'morbid system', Solomos et al. observed a new authoritarian populism. It is easy to forget that while post-Keynesian monetarism had a widespread traction with the lunatic fringe (and Chicago economists), today's neoliberalism then enthralled a minority of governing political actors. The post-war consensus stood until the opportunities in economic crises were seized and ruthlessly pursued. The task the authors set themselves was to locate race within this 'hegemonic struggle' and to assess its articulation within emerging ideologies. It is clear why.

Suspected Person (SUS) Law policing (sanctioned under Section 4 of the Vagrancy Act 1824) was in full swing, and the stop and search of Black men and boys was only one feature of state criminalization. St. Pauls in Bristol, Toxteth in Liverpool, Chappletown in Leeds, Brixton in London and Handsworth in Birmingham had all seen rioting in response to police incursions (Perhaps one illustrative symbol of the day was not a local but international issue – the Young Conservatives' campaign for the execution of Nelson Mandela, then still resident on Robben Island). In this context, TESB authors argued that a prevailing, overly functionalist, approach to race relations said 'nothing about the relations of power' routinely felt (Lawrence 1982, 135). Instead they pointed to collective identities spoken through race and group struggle as a powerful form of resistance, often (but not always) in the absence of white working-class solidarity (Virdee 2014). In these conditions, they elaborated, 'the British left has been reluctant to approach the Pandora's box of racial politics. [...] The simplistic reduction of race to class, which has guided their practice, has been thrown into confusion by intense and visible *black struggles*' (Gilroy 1982b, 277 original emphasis).

Carrying a style of critical scholarship

From the outset then, and arguably throughout, TESB aspires to a type of activist scholarship, taking the name of communities 'whose struggles we aim to serve' (Gilroy 1982a, 7). Errol Lawrence's (1982) two chapters in particular are as sharp as the day he penned them; and thirty years on his complaint of 'convergence between racist ideologies and the theories of "race/ethnic-relations sociology"' is no less searing (Lawrence 1982, 95). It is probably the sting of such critique that motivated the group's preamble:

If at times what we have written seems too firmly in a critical mode, we feel this is a small price to pay to while the predicament of the black community

is professionally obscured by those who make a living on the back of black suffering. (Gilroy 1982a, 7)

I would like to come back to the validity of Lawrence's critique, for there is still purchase in the challenge he posed. But it seems appropriate at this point to question what authenticity the authors claimed to possess; for which suffering, and on behalf of whom, were they speaking? I do not want to rehearse the arguments presented more persuasively by others, and which rejected the application of an ethnicized blackness in favour of a differentiated ethnic identity that recognised peoples 'mode of being' (Modood 1988). Gilroy (1982a, 7) certainly acknowledged the problem I am speaking to when he registered that 'only one of us has roots in the Indian subcontinent'. Yet this did not prevent him from stretching Rastafarianism across 'Black' communities, where it functioned 'as a shared language' (1982a, 293) that 'marks the frontiers of a discursive community', and in a way that meant 'all black people are Rasta whether they know it or not' (1982a, 293). This seems ridiculous now and I do not really understand why it did not then. Perhaps, it is registered in the preamble set out earlier on:

We were always divided by 'racial' and gender differences and it was unusual to be able to work together at all. The same political differences which took their toll on group membership were also part of the same creative process of production. [...] The trace our final text represents does not imply that the war is over. (1982a, 8)

To take the most prominent example, and there are others, even though the Rushdie Affair is widely regarded as the trigger for Muslim identity, and the splintering of the 'Asian' from the 'Black' category further, Muslim community activism emerged not long after *TESB* was published. The Honeyford Affair of 1984, which saw a campaign for the recognition of Muslim practices at a Bradford school (amongst other complaints), was an obvious challenge to Gilroy's colour-based ethnicity. This is why it was short-sighted to complain that 'for the "ethnic studies" researchers, the relationship between the "ethnic minorities" and the "majority society" is viewed exclusively in cultural terms' (Lawrence 1982, 114). It is precisely at the cultural boundary that political self-definitions amongst Muslim communities – or 'Muslim consciousness' (Meer 2010) – were emerging.

It is worth keeping in mind that neither the government nor anti-racist groups desired (or indeed foresaw) Muslim assertiveness, nor understood how best this assertiveness should be channeled. The latter point is a slightly different one, but is related in so far the question of what form Muslim-state (local and national) engagement should take was raised long before Muslims 'became' Muslims. Race relations were the prevailing way of pursuing this,

and what is interesting is that Solomos et al. (1982, 32) answer Lawrence's charge against it elsewhere in the book when they argue:

It is important to avoid a binary counter-position where at the level of political strategies there is either a conspiratorial attempt to control black people or a policy of social reform. For throughout the sixties and seventies race-relations legislation has been neither been completely 'progressive' nor 'controlling'. It reflected both a reform and a control element, which attempt to secure the problem of 'race' as part of an overall political agenda.

Fast forward to the present day and we find this formulation could easily describe Muslim participation in contemporary governance, for they appear to be precisely the dynamics that Muslim political actors are currently negotiating (O'Toole et al. 2013). How do we calibrate group identity, agency and political participation in a way that engages in, but is not solely governed by, the prevailing political settlements? In the subsequent years, race relations have expanded (through both contestation and consensus) into a *category* resembling multicultural citizenship, even though the *term* multiculturalism is politically damaged (Meer and Modood 2014). This is joined by security agenda that has had mixed and complicated outcomes, both stigmatizing and empowering, but in ways that illustrate how the governance of minority-state engagement is always about more than regulation.

Journeys into the nation, misrecognition and intersections

It strikes me that two other issues warrant discussion. The first is a recurring theme and concerns how the Britishness of the 1970s, in which "the "alien"cultures of the blacks are seen as either the cause or else the most visible symptom of the destruction of the "British way of life" (Lawrence 1982, 47), is not the Britishness of today. I do not mean that tacit racial criteria for membership of the nation have dissolved, or that minorities cannot be viewed as an indication of national decline. It is instead to register the success of claims-making on the national identity of Britishness, through an agent-centred contestation, and which addresses Gilroy's (1982, 278) prediction that 'it will take far more than the will to create a "pluralist national identity" to prise the jaws of the bulldog of British nationalism free'. This appears to have been done, and is a profoundly important multicultural success (Uberoi and Modood 2012). Indeed, one might persuasively argue that the complications of Britishness are presently observed at an angle adjacent to ethnic and racial groups, exercised as they are in debates about devolution and independence. It remains an open question, however, as to where race fits in Scottish and Welsh nationalism; something that at least partly reflects the wider poverty of scholarship on race in these contexts.

What warrants more attention is some of the pioneering critique from Carby (1982) that speaks to ideas of both misrecognition and intersectionality, long before either had been identified as distinct concepts and properly fleshed out in the *modern* literatures.³ The following passage that is worth quoting at length for it captures a set of complicated dynamics:

In arguing that most contemporary feminist theory does not begin to adequately account for the experience of black women we also have to acknowledge that it is not a simple question of their absence, consequently the task is not one of rendering their visibility. On the contrary, we will have to argue that the process of accounting for their historical and contemporary position does, in itself, challenge the use of some of the central categories and assumptions of recent mainstream feminist thought. We can point to no single source for our oppression. When white feminists emphasize patriarchy alone, we want to redefine the term and make it a more complex. (Carby 1982, 213)

The first half of this passage advances what today we would call misrecognition; as something distinct to non-recognition that can play a central role in a conception of equality. What is pioneering in Carby is that while this includes the issue of subjectivities, it also focuses attention on articulations of political relationships and not just matters of individual esteem or psychology, but in ways that link up with what we would describe as intersectionality. This has come to describe a cluster of theoretical positions which seek to revise the view that identity categories, and the web of social relations in which they are located, are experienced as ‘separate roads’ (Roth 2004). Whilst this necessarily takes in more than race, the provenance of the concept may be traced to Carby’s (1982) critique of the ways in which mainstream (white) feminism had historically ignored the intersections of race and patriarchy. ‘It is only in the writings by black feminists that we can find attempts to theorise the interconnection of class gender [sic] and race’ (Carby 1982, 215).

I struggle to find an earlier expression in the modern literatures (e.g., Crenshaw 1989), especially so because it goes beyond what Harding has described as ‘add women and stir’ approaches to gender issues’ (Harding 1991, 212). It is closer to what Yuval-Davis characterizes as ‘transversal politics’. She elaborates: ‘One cannot assume the same effect or constellation each time and, hence, the investigation of the specific social, political and economic processes involved in each historical instance is important’ (2006, 200). Carby’s account, it seems to me, seeks to forge a political path through which to pursue this transversal (Meer 2014).

Destinations

The year 2014 marks the 50th anniversary of the creation of the CCCS (now disbanded), and TESB forges a distinctive path through the earlier

tradition of the cultural studies writ large, and uses race as the prism through which to pioneer genuinely innovative critical social scientific inquiry, in contrast to the focused specialisms in cultural studies from the 1990s onwards (beyond the CCCS). So while the collection forms ‘part of the long project of cultural studies which is bound to be political and well as intellectual and aesthetic’ (Hall 2012), it was also a turning point. Where that leaves us today, however, is unclear, and at best some distance from where the authors were journeying. I have recently argued that in the institutional home (sociology) for race scholarship, we have seen an evacuation of race in so far as:

[I]n several cases, race appears to have been traded downwards for sociologies of nation (these were not always understood as incommensurate intellectual activities), or traded outwards for sociologies of ‘development’ or ‘global sociology’ (as though race were not central to each). (Meer and Nayak 2013: 14)

This is not an insignificant charge, and it should encourage senior colleagues in sociology departments to reflect and engage seriously with the concept of institutional racism as something not only relevant in criticizing the Metropolitan police.

Notes

1. See also the longitudinal research by David McCrone, especially McCrone (2002).
2. Not only is context important, but several authors also subsequently revised their positions as their views developed, something that cannot be addressed in this short contribution (for a full discussion, see Meer and Nayak 2013).
3. Reflecting on *Policing the Crisis*, the late Stuart Hall (2012) observed that: ‘Almost casually, almost by chance, we hit on the moment of two major conjunctures’.
4. While few other people see W. E. B. Du Bois as a pioneer of misrecognition (Meer 2010), I am not alone in thinking W. E. B. Du Bois a pioneer of intersectionality (see Hancock 2005).

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