



Anti - Racist Community Work: A Radical Approach

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When I was approached to contribute to a book entitled "The reassertion of a radical agenda", I had to first ask the question if there ever was a radical agenda in the fight against racism within Scotland from which to reassert? Indeed what might a radical agenda look like?

Up until the mid 1980s, what tended to predominate in Scottish political discourse was a sense that Scotland had "good race relations" and that there was "no problem" here (see Miles and Dunlop 1986; Dunlop 1993). Consequently, racism did not become an issue within Scottish political or policy debates. Since the mid-1980s Scottish thinking has in general shifted from a stance of total complacency to one that accepts, be it grudgingly, that racism is not a problem confined to areas of high black populations eg: Birmingham, Tower Hamlets. (see Arshad and McCrum, 1989) Professionals both Black1 and white began campaigning for policies and practices that would effect changes in life-chances for Black people in Scotland. These initiatives and efforts were undertaken within a discourse of 'anti-discriminatory practice', 'multicultural and anti-racist education', 'race equality action', 'equal opportunities' and positive action.

However characteristics which distinguish radical anti-racist community work remain ambiguous. This chapter attempts to define such a model with the reminder that models are not blue-prints but are abstractions. As Martin (1987) states "such 'ideal-types' are exploratory rather than definitive, analytical rather descriptive". Before attempting to construct such a model, it is necessary to identify some of the issues surrounding the debate around 'race' equality work with which community workers have had to explore and grapple with.

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Multicultural or Anti-Racist Approaches?

The debate on multicultural versus anti-racist approaches originated in the early 1980s. (see Sivanandan, 1985; Hatcher, 1987; Brown and Lawton, 1991; Klein, 1993) Multicultural approaches were criticised for focussing exclusively on cultures and being preoccupied with with exotic aspects of cultural difference thereby ignoring the effects of racism. Moreover, opponents of multicultural approaches (see Mullard 1982; Sarup, 1991) argued that multicultural approaches assumed people started from an equal base when that was clearly not so. Racial discrimination and injustice were pervasive in British society and communities. Much has been documented about how this has affected the livelihoods and life chances of Black people in key areas like education and employment (see Troyna, 1987; Haynes, 1983).

Anti-racism and anti-racist approaches were seen as alternatives to multiculturalism in that they embraced an analysis of the issues of power and justice. These approaches argued for basic changes in the power structure of society. Sociologists like Sarup (1991) advocated that anti-racism 'includes multicultural education, and goes beyond it.'

The debate of multicultural versus anti-racist approaches is still on going. Klein (1993) states that debate is perhaps not as polarised as presented. Many educationalists (and presumably community workers) who take into account issues of power, equality and justice are also keen pursuers of cultural exchanges and cultural programmes such as multicultural drama festivals, multicultural story telling sessions, multicultural book fairs and so on. To suggest that multiculturalists were not anti-racists in these instances would neither be accurate nor fair and to suggest that anti-racists were not supportive of cultural events and exchanges would be equally mis-representative.

The issue for community workers intent on a radical agenda might be not so much which approach is adopted but rather to develop an understanding of the causes and processes of racism. Whilst it is important to be able to quote statistics of racist incidents and to point to

the effects of racism as evidenced by the extent of racial disadvantage, it is equally important life of the communities we work within today. This understanding can come about by working with and talking to Black people and by conceptualising an analysis of racism that does not deny the structural aspects of racism in Scottish society within Scottish institutions. By extension, in practice radical community work would therefore assist people (both Black and white) to organise and respond to institutionalised racism (see Wester Hailes Against Racism Project later in this chapter). It would support activities which affect the lives of people being oppressed by racist structures, it would get involved in issues of immigration, illegal deportations and campaigns against racial harassment. It would encompass but move beyond the realms of personal prejudices. Failure to engage with understanding the processes and dynamics of racism from its roots in the 17th century to its manifestations as we approach the millennium will lead to continued confused practice on the type of strategies that might be adopted to ensure radical social change.

Let us explore a situation where structural power was utilised in a subtle manner to generate confused policies and practice resulting in a perpetuation of institutionalised racism. This was done within race equality terminology and the old assimilationist paradigm was subtly adapted and added to instead of being redefined.

In the wake of discontent in Brixton, Southall, Liverpool, Manchester and throughout at least 27 other towns in England in 1981, Central Government commissioned the Scarman Report quoted in Sivanandan (1983). In Scarman, the uprisings were attributed to the "ill-considered, immature and racially prejudiced actions of some officers in their dealings on the street with young people" (Scarman 1982: 63). The problem was therefore defined as prejudice which manifested itself occasionally in the behaviour of few, unthinking ignorant and isolated individuals. In this account, individual errors can be punished and ignorant individuals can be assisted to rationality by undergoing attitude change. This is an essentially liberal perspective in which issues of differentials in power between the police and young people and between white and Black remained unaddressed.

In 1985, the Swann Report was published--the outcome of the deliberations of the Rampton Committee which was set up to deal with the problems of all Black children. It's primary focus was the growing underachievement of African and Caribbean children in mainstream education. Racism as a contributory cause of underachievement was identified but the Report was indecisive in its advice as to which model of practice would best eliminate either racism or underachievement. Issues relating to control the curriculum, the conduct of educational assessments, and who set the tests were side-stepped in favour of a focus on 'cultural tolerance'. In focussing on the children and their disadvantage instead of the racism that the Report itself identified as a contributory cause to the underachievement, the real issues remain undealt with. These problems and disadvantages were associated with cultural and linguistic characteristics of the 'immigrants' themselves; problems that they brought with them. The perceived role of 'immigrant' language and customs as a cause of disadvantage and an obstacle to assimilation saw the Labour Government in the mid 1960s release monies under the infamous Section 11 to the Education Departments within Authorities to ensure that these disadvantages could be reduced by

"... providing smaller classes in which English can be adequately taught, as well as providing extra visitors to remind parents of their new obligations in Britain, it is essential to teach these children basic British customs, basic British habits and , if one likes, basic British prejudices-all those things which they need to know if they are to live happily and successfully in an integrated way in this community.." [Hansard 1966, col 1336]

Both these reports formed the basis of much of the Equal Opportunity initiatives within Scottish Local Authorities and the projects they supported within the voluntary sector. The purpose of mentioning these two reports is not to engage in invidious comparisons of governmental reports but to draw upon two key tenets which have proven to be vanguards of racism. The first has been to contain the challenge against racism to a personal level and the second has been to engage in offering token projects and short-term projects for black people rather than working to dismantle the system that perpetuates racial oppression. In that way, the faceless forces of racism continue to operate, obtaining legitimation for its actions from the silent and often uninformed majority. The essential point of both reports was the pathologisation of racism.

Radical anti-racist community work practice needs to recognise that pathology as described above is not ambiguous and if radical community work practice aims to enhance the life-chances of those suffering racism, it too cannot afford to be ambiguous.

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In Search of Difference- Beyond Anti-racism?

" The 'assertion of difference' has become, for many radicals, the principal dynamic in society today" (Malik, 1996). Stuart Hall, a leading Black sociologist welcomed the flowering of different ethnicities as an expression, not of social discord but a new form of democracy through which the voices of the many previously silenced could now be heard.

The idea that all groups have a right to speak for themselves, in their own voice and have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate is an attractive proposition for many who work with people and communities who have been marginalised, categorised and excluded. Community workers committed to social justice and anti-discrimination may well be attracted to an approach which on surface appears to allow for the expression of individual identities.

The last decade has witnessed an increased desire particularly from the white communities to learn about different cultures and lifestyles. The hope was that such knowledge would bring about better race relations and eradicate racial discrimination. Educational programmes began to offer sessions where pupils and public alike could learn about "a taste of India" or "family life in a Traveller community in Ireland" for example. Libraries stocked up on different books about lifestyles and community workers and social workers

wanted to learn about how different cultures cared for their elderly, conducted their marriage rites, and cooked their exciting cuisines.

In this sense, a "culturing of politics" has occurred. The notion of 'society' is reduced to the aggregate of individual relationships and the 'social' nothing more than a particular decision that an individual may make. (Malik, 1996). Indeed trying to understand multiple social identities has led to anxieties from practitioners in that there is a recognition of conflicting social pressures and identities. Given that cultures are not static or stable, is it ever possible for a practitioner to comprehend all these subjectivities? If no two experiences or cognitions are identical because of the way identities depend minutely on the contexts in which they appear, how then can the practitioner work with communities in an appropriate and truly culturally sensitive manner?

Radical anti-racist community work would encompass the need to understand the complexities of identity politics, to recognise there can be different subjectivities and to grasp that everyone juggles different identities for the sake of expediency or to enjoy the position of 'belonging'. None of these identities are to be trivialised in that they are all derived from the person's experience and interpretation of knowledge of the various discourses they have been exposed to. However a conceptualising of this as multiple and dynamic must be done both within a politic of solidarity and within an analysis of the causes and effects of structural discrimination if issues such as racism are not to be marginalised and left unchallenged. Indeed failure to do so lays the practitioner hostage to the prejudices and whims of the particular group or individual they are working with at any given time.

Within a radical anti-racist model, fundamental social relations such as racism and racial oppression do not become reduced to lifestyle choices. A radical approach would make connections with other forms of disadvantage and discrimination. The comments of A. Sivanandan, Director of the Institute of Race Relations is helpful when he urges us to:

"... organise not for culture but against racism, against fascism, against the erosion of civil liberties, against injustice and inequality - against racism qua racism instead of particularising the racisms. We are organising not for the Bangladeshis (in the East End of London) but against racism..." [A.Sivanandan, 1995: 2]

Radical anti-racist community work need also to be aware of how the New Right have claimed the debate around identity and difference. The New Right's recognition of difference is not with the intended outcome of equalising differences but to assist categorisation to promote an implicit xenophobic message that " difference" equals "deficit".

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Terminology and Political Correctness

There has been much debate during the last few years about terminology . Challenging racist languages and terms has laid the anti-racist movement open to being accused of attempting to be the thought police, curtailing free speech and denying common sense. Words like ' Black' that were once upon a time used by Black activists and supporters of the Civil Rights Movement in the States during the 1960s to reclaim and reestablish Black identity became linked in the 1990s to a hysteria against political correctness. Virulent campaigns by the tabloid press about 'loony left' councils who sacked childminders for having golliwogs or who allow children to sing 'Baa Baa, Black Sheep' in schools resulted in anti-racist terminology offending the Right and confusing the Left. For the Right, this has been in character with their ideological base of denying voice to different social movements and groups thereby denying them a right to be participants within political struggle and discourse. The attempt to debunk "Black' as a political category is part of that process. However the confusion of the Left on anti-racism and political correctness is an altogether more tragic affair in that the fear of challenging racist language has also led to a fear of challenging the assumptions built into our ordinary use of language and its implications. It also closes the door to recognising that struggles over language are not necessarily over the term itself (such as 'Black' per se) but over its connotative meaning (such as black = beautiful not 'the despised'). Such confusion also prevents the uncoupling of terms that have been coupled together illogically? For example, in an examination of language, it would be logical to use a term like blackboard if the board was black however, terms like 'blacklist' and 'blackmark' have connotations which are negative. Why pre-fix such terms with black?

If one of the key aspects of radical community work practice is to challenge racism and reclaim lost history, that is the history of Black people over the centuries, then part of this has to include an analysis of how language has been used to demean groups of people or ethnic groupings. There are many historical examples where the conduct of a social struggle has depended on the dis-articulation of terms which have been previously used to further oppress or marginalise. Feminism in challenging the overall usage of terms like "He" to encompass both male and female is one such example.

Within this chapter, I have used the term 'Black' as a political term to define any individual or group who suffers racism because of their skin colour. This perspective by no means negates the diversity of Black people, nor does it deny that discrimination exists against other groups, who may or may not have defined themselves as 'ethnic minorities', such as travellers or Irish people. Understanding the political meaning of the term Black is a necessary step for anyone interested in working towards an anti-racist agenda because to see Black in its political context is to site it squarely within the structural manifestations of racism, thereby removing the debate from a surface level involving personal examples and individual values to one that recognises the 'superstructure' ie. how colour as a category has been used to differentiate people into high and low status groups for discriminatory purposes.

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Raising the Issue of Racism Causes the Problem

It is no easy task to balance the right of the individual within the context of the common good. Sandel (1994: 54) an American professor of government argues that "intolerance actually flourishes where life is dislocated, roots unsettled and traditions undone." Sceptics of anti-racism have often used such thinking to prevent work that would allow people to engage in critical thinking within the area of multiculturalism and anti-racism on the basis that it would breed a backlash. The basis of Sandel's argument within a Scottish context is that Scotland being predominantly white may feel naturally unaccustomed or threatened by other cultures and ethnic groupings. To enforce a programme of anti-racist initiatives may be to impose irrelevancy to people's real life experiences thereby causing discordance and disharmony where none previously existed. Resistance to anti-racist work is often prefaced by statements like "there are no ethnic minorities here", "the real issue here is...." or "why bring it up and make it an issue when it is not one..."

This fear of backlash and the prospect of even more reactionary consequences have held some workers back from being pro-active against racism or have channelled their energies into other forms of generalised discrimination such as anti-poverty work, work around issues such as homelessness or drugs whilst all the time carefully side-stepping anti-racist work.

Radical community with its premise firmly located within an analysis of power, structural inequalities would seek to encompass the challenge against racism recognising that failure to make connections across issues is likely to leave racism unacknowledged and unchallenged. Ohri et al writing in the early 1980s stressed that there are two objective facts which community workers need to accept and internalise in order to address the issue of racism. The first being that Britain is a multi-racial society and that secondly that racism has infected 'the consciousness' of both individuals and institutions in this society.

A radical community work practice would work to expose how racism has infected this consciousness both personal and structural. It would seek to work with people in ways that would challenge dominant Eurocentric values, organising to ensure Black and white would begin dialogues to construct a new paradigm.

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Building Fragile Bridges

A lesson that was heard loud and clear from the MacDonald Inquiry in 1989 which investigated the murder of thirteen year old Asian pupil, Ahmed Ullah, by a white boy Darren Colbourn (also 13), in Manchester was the need to make connections between different forms of oppression. Ahmed was a victim of racism, Darren was a victim of class oppression. The school's anti-racist approaches were confined to working with Black pupils and parents. White parents and pupils were not brought into these initiatives thereby relegating them into the role of 'baddies'. Two lessons emerged from Burnage; firstly, the struggle against racism needs to be equally a struggle against other forms of inequality and secondly, as racism damages all of us, then everyone, both Black and white, had to be brought into the fight against racism. It was not the responsibility of one group alone.

Radical anti-racist community work demands a politic of solidarity, linking experiences and identifying core elements of similarities between groups as the beginning of the sustenance of an agenda for radical change. Hilary Wainwright (1991) argues that social movements whilst successfully releasing and expressing everyday knowledge have been less so in the coordination of such knowledge. As community workers, we have been fairly successful in creating space for people to come together to develop and to engage in self-help, for example, womens groups and girls work but we have been less strategic in achieving a coordination of such spaces to ensure the emergence of a radical anti-discriminatory project. How does girls work link in with work with boys, how does feminist thinking link to work with men. How should feminists work with men? These discourses are yet to be opened up within the community work agenda. It is no longer sufficient to generate good ideas, we need to know how to implement them in order to make a difference. If Black and white are to work together then community workers need to be assist in organising for these energies and concerns to come together.

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Community Work Practice: From Dialogue to Action

So far, I have explored some issues that have surrounded race work which community workers have had to grapple with at both the conceptual and practical levels. How can this move beyond the rhetoric? The following case-study is shared as an example of innovative practice and comments on lessons for radical anti-racist community work practice and development are summarised at the end.

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Wester Hailes Against Racism Project (WHARP) and the Akin Adegboye Campaign

A case study of radical community work practice

WHARP is funded primarily through the Urban Programme fund. It has just completed its first year of operations. It has a small multi-racial staff team of four workers (two full-time, one part-time and one administrator). WHARP's main aim is to identify the needs of the black/ethnic minority communities in Wester Hailes and to work to promote their rights, aspirations and entitlements. WHARP has been operating for just over a year. WHARP received Urban programme funding and is supported by the local authority community education service. The need for a project like WHARP was identified by local agencies and the community education service. Consultation with locals, Black or white about the ethos and aims of WHARP prior to its commencement appeared to be minimal to nonexistent.

WHARP staff identified the need from the outset to establish credibility with local black/ethnic minority residents. Did local people really want a Project like WHARP. If so, how could the Project best meet their needs? To find out, I interviewed the Project Coordinator, Andy Egan.

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Send reactions and/or comments to [Malcolm Parnell](mailto:Malcolm.Parnell) in Edinburgh, Scotland.

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