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## **Racism and the Left**

**I HAVE JUST COME** from a demonstration-cum-picket in the middle of Manchester assembled to argue in defence of immigrants and to attack the “racist Brexit campaign”. The rhetoric was larded with references to the working class and the self-serving nature of Tory and Ukip politicians. The event was clearly intended to cohere those already engaged rather than to talk to newcomers; it was a perfect example of the hermetically sealed circles of the left - a small gathering “singing to the choir”, as the American expression has it.

Despite their hatred of racism many of those present had voted for Brexit. Some in solidarity with South Asian communities in Newham or Bradford who see the EU as discriminating against migrants from outside Europe, some opposed to all borders who confusingly prefer a British frontier to a European one, because they seek, like Marie Le Pen, the disintegration of the European Union. Some, simply appalled by the wretched character of ‘Fortress Europe’ revealed by daily tragedies in the Mediterranean, and squalid encampments of refugees trapped by police and soldiers in the Balkans.

Today’s gathering, in microcosm, expressed the more or less complete disintegration of the British left in a welter of unsustainable contradictions. Those of us who supported Remain no less than those who supported the campaign led by Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson. The left was utterly unprepared to fight the referendum – completely unable to come up with an independent position regarding the institutions of the British state, or those of Brussels.

For the last twenty-seven years there has been atrophy on the left, marked by occasional twitches of life – through the years since the great counter-

revolution swept the Soviet Union and its satellites into the 'dustbin of history'. It could be argued, of course, that necrosis had set in much earlier, but the long process in which those of us on the left have been unable to respond with understanding or much effect to the onward march of globalisation is well defined by the period 1989 to 2016. It is now abundantly clear, if there was ever any doubt, that most of the working class, and the great majority of lower middle class people, are not much interested in anything we have to say.

Seventeen million people voted for Brexit fronted by Gisela Stewart, Nigel Farage, and Boris Johnson – they voted to get the “country back”, to “regain control of the borders”, and to trade freely with the rest of the world without being regulated by foreign politicians and bureaucrats for whom the British people had not voted. All this was encompassed by the notion of regaining Britain’s status as a sovereign nation.

Clearly, the leading issue in this narrative was opposition to the free movement of labour, and the desire for determinate political control of who are allowed to enter and settle in the country.

The left responded to this desire to control immigration with what have now become habitual charges of “racism”. This causes some confusion amongst those who do not see Poles or Latvians or the French as racially distinct from white British or Irish people. White Europeans are, to be sure, foreigners, who speak foreign languages, and may have disconcerting ways, but they are not thought of as racially distinct from white people born in this country.

Further confusion is caused by the fact that the widespread hostility towards South Asians is muddled up far more with suspicion of Islam and fear of Islamism – as if Muslims form a single undifferentiated religious bloc - than it is with race. And this is born out by strikingly different attitudes and prejudices amongst most white people regarding those whose parents or grandparents hale from China or the Caribbean. Over the years there have been a wide range of prejudicial

responses to people from different regions of the world, not to mention tensions between different racial, ethnic, and religious groups within the country.

Consequently, the words, “racism” and “racist” have never worked well as catchall epithets for a mass of different and often contradictory attitudes and outlooks common amongst the population at large. The admixture of European national and ethnic hostilities with post colonial racial discrimination, often institutionalised in Britain, has created circumstances in which the rhetoric of anti-racism deployed by the left comes nowhere near capturing the complexity or fluidity of our situation.

Racism is wildly unpopular in Britain, consequently people react very badly to being called “racist”. It is regarded by most of our people as an insult and as an assertion that you are narrow-minded, ignorant, and bigoted. The sections of the white population who avowedly claim to be racists and argue for a politics grounded in race and racial identity are few and far between, and are usually to be found in tiny fascist organisations which are considerably weaker and less influential than even the left-wing grupuscules with whom they like to clash.

It is, of course, true that there are fairly widespread racist attitudes among some white people who routinely attribute their problems to the presence in the country of people with different racial characteristics from themselves, and who vote Labour, Tory, or Ukip, but there are not seventeen million racists in Britain and the broad opposition to ‘mass immigration’ is not racist in any meaningful sense.

What there is, however, is broad hostility to migrants and refugees who come, in seemingly “uncontrolled numbers”, without regard to the country’s available resources or its infrastructure. What made Brexit wildly popular was its support for the view that “uncontrolled immigration” is a major contributory factor to low pay, the shortage of housing and school places, and pressure on the NHS. So, very large numbers of people who already attribute their

economic and social problems to foreigners at home, as well as those in Brussels, were encouraged by leading Brexit campaigners to believe that they could seek redress by leaving the European Union.

Plainly this was a reactionary strategy, which sought to blame foreigners at home and abroad for our problems rather than the failure of successive governments to resource local authorities to plan properly for the integration of newcomers to the country, with adequate housing, educational, and welfare provision; provision that supplemented available resources, rather than attempting to shoe horn us all into inadequate jobs, housing, schools, and hospitals.

So this policy, one broadly canvassed by Ukip and the Tory right, of blaming foreigners for our economic and social problems, and the left's designation of this outlook as "racism" has resulted in great cities like Sheffield and Birmingham rejecting traditional political commitments by voting with Farage and Johnson, and has left socialists with little or nothing to say.

We had no independent politics before the referendum, and none after it. Instead we have a raft of our own prejudices and shibboleths, which often involves us in denouncing those opposed to mass immigration as racists and xenophobes. This response reflects a major problem with left wing thought and entrenches our inability to engage with the population at large.

The movement of large numbers of people about the world is quite evidently a product, not simply of war, and the failure of states, but is largely caused by globalisation – the same process that has undermined the capacity of governments to shape their own national economies. While some regions have industrialised others have lost factories, mining, steelmaking, and shipbuilding, only to see jobs exported to foreign countries, while foreign workers have flooded in to work in food processing, hospitality, catering, and a mass of other service industries.

In such circumstances the experience of many lower middle and working class people is of being squeezed by foreign workers, both those at home, and those abroad. It will simply not do to call the resulting dismay, cultural tensions, resentment, and hostility “racism”. If we want people to listen to us we must develop a way of talking about these issues, and making concrete demands, which respond positively to the pressures created by big movements of population and the pressures imposed by globalised supply-chains and the rapid shifts of centres of production from one place to another.

We must find a way of arguing against protectionism, whether in trade or in the movement of workers about the world, in which a positive set of demands and objectives can be articulated that breaks the ideological and cultural influence of Ukip, the Tory right, of traditionalist trade unions and those in the Labour Party calling for immigration controls. Calling for immigration controls is akin to calling for tariffs on foreign goods – it’s saying that the problems we face are caused by foreign workers or by the goods produced by foreign workers. It is a recipe for an intensification of international strife in which working people are encouraged to blame each other rather than the system under which we all live.

Protectionism is not going to shield us from globalisation – indeed it is likely to lead to stagnation or a renewed and sharper series of recessions. People on the left have to develop a concrete response to these issues, rather than opposing free trade and the free movement of working people around the globe.

If we don’t, right-wing populists will drag us all to Hell in a handcart, because denouncing the mass of ordinary people enamoured with the reactionary outlook of the *Sun*, the *Mail*, or Boris Johnson, as “racists” will simply guarantee that we continue to linger in the political shadows, more dead than alive.