

How the British Working Class Became White: The Symbolic (Re)formation of Racialized Capitalism

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Abstract This article offers an explanation of how and why the British working class, from being marginal to white identity in the nineteenth century, came to adopt and adapt this identity in the twentieth century. The changing position of whiteness within the symbolic constitution of capitalism is discussed. More specifically, the transition from whiteness as bourgeois identity within Victorian, relatively laissez-faire, capitalism to whiteness as a popular, or mass, identity, within the more state interventionist capitalism of the twentieth century is used to exemplify the mutable nature, and political complexities, of the relationship between working class and white identities. The paper concludes with some observations on the implications of this argument for the theory and practice of anti-racism.

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[I] never knew that the working classes had such white skins.

(Lord Milner on seeing English soldiers bathing, attributed by Cohen 1988: 32)

Introduction

In the nineteenth century the notion that all Britons were white was asserted with considerably more force and conviction outside Britain than within it. From a colonial distance it was a commonplace to accord a white, and hence elite, identity to every inhabitant of the United Kingdom. On home soil, however, the assertion that everyone was equally white was more problematic. The British working class, for example, was marginal to the symbolic formation of whiteness and, sometimes, as Lord Milner's remark implies, actively excluded from it.

In mid-late twentieth century Britain, as in other European societies, the meaning and boundaries of whiteness have changed beyond recognition. Today politicians and other commentators feel apparently unconstrained about employing the concept to both depict and appeal to the majority of 'ordinary' working class Britons.

This article seeks to contribute to the explanation of this transition. Thus I wish to investigate why and how a group once marginal to whiteness could later come to actively employ this identity as if it was significant – or, indeed, central – to their own sense of self, nation and community. My analytical focus will be upon how shifts within the connotative repertoire of, and relationship between, class and whiteness have enabled, and been enabled by, different forms of

capitalist socio-economic organisation. The perspective I will be offering on these themes is an admittedly partial one. The ethnic and gendered nature of whiteness, which I have discussed elsewhere (Bonnett, 1998), are only briefly addressed (see also Ware 1992; Innes 1994). My intention is not to provide a panoptic survey of the diversity of white identities but something more limited: to offer a number of insights, based on the analysis of the changing nature of capitalism and the representation of class identity, into why and how working class Britons with a 'European ethnic heritage' adopted and adapted whiteness.

Historical studies of the relationship between class and white identity have recently enjoyed something of a boom. However, nearly all the new scholarship in this area has emanated from, and been concerned with, the USA (Roediger 1992; 1994, Ignatiev 1995; Allen 1994). Despite the value of this work the racial history of the latter country cannot be used as a template for other societies. White identity was incorporated into American politics and economics comparatively early, from the late seventeenth century. American workers were assertively white many generations before the British working class may be found politically organising around 'their' whiteness (a phenomenon which did not occur, to any significant degree, until the 1950s). Moreover, relative to Victorian Britain, American white identity was rarely explicitly class exclusive. Rather, the language of ethnicity came to submerge the language of class. Thus, for example, Irish and Italian immigrants were not initially construed as white, but all Anglo-Americans (and, from the late nineteenth century, all European heritage Americans), of whatever class, were.

Thus 'How the British Working Class Became White' is a different story to Noel Ignatiev's (1995) account of *How the Irish Became White* in the USA. The development of British white identity cannot be understood as representing a belated re-enactment of the American experience. Another seductively simple interpretative error also requires our attention. For it is, perhaps, just as tempting to imagine that the single catalyst for the assertion of working class whiteness in Britain was non-white immigration into that country: white identity arrived in working class politics when, and because, 'people of colour' arrived in Britain. The argument that working class racism developed out of a perceived competition between 'white residents' and 'non-white immigrants' for scarce resources, such as housing and jobs, has all too often, implied the same conclusion (for example, Phizacklea and Miles 1979). It is presupposed that the 'white working class' is an unproblematic category: that the white working class always were white, always knew they were white, and merely required the presence of non-white communities/competition in order to start

mobilising around this 'fact'. Thus any sense of historical transformation in white identity is lost and any discussion of how and why the working class were able to start drawing on a form of social symbolism from which they had once been marginalized, effectively prevented.

This article shows that, although non-white immigration provided a catalyst for white working class *deployment* of white identity, the fact that this identity was *available* to, and adapted by, European heritage working class Britons, demands an analysis of the changing symbolic constitution of racialized capitalism. There are three parts to my paper. The first two sections both draw on the accounts of those who, implicitly or explicitly, claim possession of, or a clear stake in, white identity. In the first part I look at the symbolic production of whiteness in nineteenth century Britain. Drawing on published sources written for and by middle- and upper-class Victorians, I suggest that metaphorical and literal depictions of racial whiteness were employed as a new paradigm of class hierarchy, a paradigm imported into Britain from colonial and settler societies. Whiteness was fetishized and idealised as an 'extra-ordinary', almost superhuman identity; an identity developed, in the main, for and by the bourgeoisie. The Victorian working class, most particularly the urban and immigrant working class, were positioned as marginal to this construction. In my second section I discuss the transformation of this tradition from the late nineteenth century. I suggest that whiteness became available to the working class because of changes within the socio-economic and symbolic structuring of British capitalism (more specifically, I discuss imperialism and the rise of the welfare state). The aggressively defensive articulations of working class whiteness examined in this section bare the imprint of these changes, more specifically a shift in emphasis from whiteness as a bourgeois identity, connoting extraordinary qualities, to whiteness as a populist identity connoting superiority but also ordinariness, nation and community. Appended to this discussion is a commentary on how recent reformations of welfare capitalism may effect its racialization. The third and concluding part of the essay emphasises the implications of my argument for anti-racism. In a nutshell, it is suggested that to construe whiteness as simply and purely an elite identity obscures its complex history and contradictory political character.

Working Class Marginalization from White Racial Identity in Victorian Britain

The racial categories 'white' and 'European', whilst first intellectually delineated in Europe, had their earliest and profoundest socio-economic articulation outside of Europe (Segal 1991). Thus, for example, we find these racial categories being employed, as early as

the sixteenth century, to legally and economically structure colonial and settler societies in South and Central America and, from the seventeenth century, to perform the same task in North America. In these non-European settings, ascriptions of whiteness translated directly into socio-economic status.

In marked contrast, even by the early nineteenth century, discussion of racial whiteness in Britain was focused outwards, being dominated by references to colonial and settler societies and, more generally, Europe's role in the world. It is within this debate that we first find the character and nature of whiteness being explicitly fleshed out in Europe; its scientific delineation amplified into a moral and aesthetic vision. Thus, for example, colonial influence and racial science were creatively woven into Charles White's 1795 depiction of the 'white European' as

being most removed from the brute creation, may, on that account be considered as the most beautiful of the human race. No one will doubt his superiority in intellectual powers; and I believe it will be found that his capacity is naturally superior also to that of every other man. Where shall we find, unless in the European, that nobly arched head, containing such a quantity of brain? ... In what other quarter of the globe shall we find the blush that over spreads the soft features of the beautiful women of Europe, that emblem of modesty, of delicate feelings and sense? (cited by Fryer 1984:168-9)

In the course of the nineteenth century, racial and class meaning became increasingly blurred into a mutually constitutive set of associations and images. The influence of class as a paradigm for racial inequality has been asserted by a number of commentators (Lorimer 1978; Malik 1996; Benedict 1940). However, just as apparent by mid-century was a flow of ideas in the opposite direction. In other words, racial categories associated with the colonial project and settler societies were having a clear impact upon the British elite's metaphors of class domination and hierarchy. Thus, for example, images of colonial voyaging and the conquest of 'dark' regions were drawn upon to narrate and justify bourgeois incursions into working class environments (for example, Booth 1976). Similarly the influence of the colour-coded language of hierarchy used in settler and colonial societies provided an alluring formula to articulate Britain's own social divisions. The influence of the binary 'black and white' model of social difference associated with the USA appears to have been particularly strong.¹ It is pertinent to note, in this regard, how influential novels and journalistic accounts concerning the 'colour divide' in American society were in Victorian Britain. Stowe's (1852) *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; or, *Life Among the Lowly*, which drew direct comparisons between American slaves and the English working class, was the best-selling novel in nineteenth century Britain.² Another influential cultural import from the USA that offered a dualistic vision of society were 'black and white minstrel' shows. First

appearing on the English stage in 1836, by the 1860s, as Lorimer (1978: 86) notes, 15 permanent minstrel companies had been formed and a 'craze for the minstrels had taken hold'. Lorimer (11) suggests that 'the Victorian (and Edwardian) looked upon the Negro as the photographic negative of the Anglo-Saxon'; that 'they seemed to get a clearer perception of their own supposed racial uniqueness from the inverted image of the black man.' This contention is supported by Pickering's studies of 'nigger minstrelsy' in nineteenth century Britain. The 'nigger mask', Pickering (1986: 90) claims, 'symbolised all that was the opposite of the bourgeois conception of the white English person.'

As we shall see, by late mid-century, allusions to, as well as metaphors and literal depictions of, racial and colour difference had become integrated into the way working class distinctiveness was understood by the middle and upper classes. However, the reason this happened is more complex than simply foreign and colonial 'influence'. We must also consider how this influence was mediated and enabled by Victorian capitalism.

As in contemporary Britain, the class order of Victorian Britain was legitimised through imputed class attributes and values. However, in the nineteenth century, this order had adapted only relatively superficially to the challenges of organised labour and the complexities of mass consumerism. As a consequence Victorian capitalism largely did without the welfare and other state interventionist, non-market, orientations that characterise its contemporary form. This *laissez-faire* phase of capitalist development both enabled, and was enabled by, the formation of ideologies that naturalised and reified social difference. More specifically, the inequalities of wealth and power between the working class and the bourgeoisie were legitimised and justified as reflecting a natural order of talent: the inevitable side-effect of the existence of economic growth (as explained by Adam Smith 1776) and superior and inferior types of people (see Faber 1971; Razzell 1973). The bourgeoisie's ability to situate themselves as the most authentic exemplars of racial and national ideals, such as the Anglo-Saxon, the Briton and the white race, were central to this naturalisation process and, hence, integral to the reproduction of liberal capitalism.

However, before exemplifying how this process acted to marginalize and exclude the British working class, it is necessary to note the existence of another, more indigenous, and pre-modern, tradition of white identity. It would be misleading to suggest that white identities (but not, I would emphasise, white racial identities) did not exist before the development of racial science or, indeed, colonialism. The two most significant examples of this pre-modern legacy are the association of whiteness with religiosity and purity (see Bastide 1968)

and the, related, association of whiteness with high social status (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996). The latter association, which is somewhat less well known than the former, links together aristocracy, leading a leisured and sheltered (both literally and metaphorically) life, and possessing pale skin. Indeed, the metonymic encapsulation of the nobility's superiority, namely the expression 'blue blood', is derived from the myth that aristocrats have skin so transparent, so white, that their arterial blood may be seen. In the context of an ascendant bourgeois class, it is interesting to observe that aristocratic pallor came to be used as a metaphor for the decadence of the upper class in the late nineteenth century and twentieth century. From the ash-white Count Dracula (Stoker 1897), with his thirst for rejuvenation, to the pale and dolorous inhabitants of Mervyn Peake's (1985) *Gormenghast*, a discourse emerged which depicted aristocratic social redundancy as physically incarnated in the faltering and feeble nature of their whiteness. These were white people who had lost their vitality; white people without blood, dusty and crumbling.

By contrast, bourgeois whiteness came to provide the category's hegemonic meaning, symbolising a wide, and highly aspirational, set of social ideals; a synonym for a healthy and vigorous civilisation and also, by extension, for ambitious and expansionist capitalism (Cairns 1965). To indicate its excessive, fetishistic, character I term this racial formation, 'hyper-whiteness'. By the mid-late century this excessive idealisation may be found contributing to the ideological legitimisation and formation of almost every aspect of the social and political life of Britain and the territories it dominated. In *Colonial Desire* Young (1995) provides a number of examples of the extraordinary depth and breadth of Europeans' investment in white identity. Much of Young's material refers to the way the racialization of whiteness necessitated a set of prohibitions and moral panics around inter-racial sex. However, Young also discusses the demands racial whiteness made upon the nature of war and the writing of history. On the former point he (7) quotes the German anthropologist Theodor Waitz's claim of 1859 that 'All wars of extermination, whenever the lower species are in the way of the white man, are not only excusable, but fully justifiable.' Dreams of genocide also seem to structure the English racial scientist Josiah Nott's (1844: 16) historical studies, particularly his conclusion that the 'adulteration of blood is the reason why Egypt and the Barbary States never can rise again, until the present races are exterminated, and the Caucasian substituted.'

Victorian racial whiteness was an extraordinarily ambitious social project. It made enormous demands upon its progenitors. The central irony of this process is that these expectations were placed on societies riven with, and based on, the existence of harsh and highly

exclusionary social hierarchies. Whiteness, as the phenotype of civilisation, must simultaneously be made available to all Europeans within the colonial imagination, but denied to those deemed unfit or unwilling to carry its burden within Europe itself. Thus the British working class was 'white' in colonial settings (including imaginative transposition of colonial settings to Britain; for example, Robert Sherard's (1897) *White Slaves of England*) but something less than, or other to, white in the context of Britain's internal social hierarchy. In the latter context, the excessive nature of the bourgeois construction of whiteness, its exclusionary zeal, brings about its own impossibility: most whites, at least within Britain, were unworthy of whiteness.

The refusal of authentic racial whiteness to the working class may be witnessed operating in two main ways: through imaginatively aligning them with non-whites and by asserting that they are literally racially distinct from the middle and upper classes. I shall introduce examples of both representational attitudes, starting with the first. I shall also be touching upon the fact that the class rationale of these processes was often mingled with, or overlain by, distinctions between the urban and rural working class as well as between Irish and English.

One of the most widely used metaphors applied to bourgeois contact with the working class was drawn directly from colonial practice, namely exploration. The writers of such explorations cast themselves as gallant yet concerned denizens of a more civilised land. They embodied the characteristics of hyper-whiteness: figures of tremendous energy and moral rectitude who had little in common with the 'heathens and savages in the heart of our capital' (Booth, quoted by Keating 1976: 19). Thus the mere act of travel from one class-identified area of the city to another was frequently expressed in the racialized language of imperial voyaging and conquest. 'As there is a darkest Africa, is there not also a darkest England?' asked William Booth in *Darkest England and the Way Out* (1976: 145; first published 1890). As with the other accounts cited here, Booth employs 'black Africa' as his central simile of 'dark England'. Within 'a stone's throw of our cathedrals and palaces', he continues, exist

similar horrors to those Stanley has found in the great Equatorial forest ... The two tribes of savages, the human baboon and the handsome dwarf, who will not speak lest it impede him in his task, may be accepted as the two varieties who are continually present with us - the vicious, lazy lout, and the toiling slave.

In *How the Poor Live*, George Sims (1976: 64-65; first published 1883) drew the same parallel. There exists 'a dark continent that is within easy walking distance of the General post Office ... the wild races who inhabit it will, I trust, gain public sympathy as easily as [other] savage tribes.' In *London Labour and London Poor* (published 1861) Henry

Mayhew (1967, see also Humphreys, 1977) drew a related comparison between civilised, stationary 'races' and London's 'wandering tribes' of 'Bushmen' and 'Hottentot Sonquas' (for discussion see Himmelfard 1971). The only occasion when Mayhew named any of his working class subjects as white is also worthy of mention. For it is marked both by an inference of racial unreliability and by its displaced colonial context. The reference comes in a passage depicting 'Negro beggars' on the streets of London. In the same section Mayhew mentions 'white beggars' emulation of these 'negroes' particular practice of pretending to be ex-slaves. '[M]any white beggars,' Mayhew writes, 'fortunate enough to possess a flattish or turned-up nose, dyed themselves black and "stood pad" as real Africans' (1950: 391). The account demonstrates more than 'white beggars' physical proximity to blacks. It also suggests that their whiteness is perfunctory, that it is merely a logical function of the imaginative transposition of a colonial scenario onto Britain (an imaginative process triggered as a consequence of 'negroes' living in London) and that it carries none of the connotations of superiority and civilisation accorded to hegemonic conceptions of white identity.

It is also noticeable, in mid-late Victorian commentary, how often comparisons are drawn between the social roles of the non-white subjects of colonial and settler societies and the white working class. Malik (1996) has recently examined the way black people and the English working class were routinely understood by reference to each other. Thus he cites Edwin Hood's observation that 'The negro is in Jamaica as the costermonger is in Whitechapel; he is very likely often nearly a savage with the mind of a child' (97). Lorimer (1978) also draws attention to such depictions. He cites *The Daily Telegraph* (from 21st August, 1866) as referring to white working class rioters as 'negroes'.

There are a good many negroes in Southampton, who have the taste of their tribe for any disturbance that appears safe, and who are probably imbued with the conviction that it is the proper thing to hoot and yell at a number of gentleman going to a dinner party.

The Daily Telegraph's diatribe was not a case of mistaken identity, but rather a self-consciously ironic application of an increasingly influential metaphor of social difference, namely colour. The focus on the aggressive nature of the urban working class evidenced in the passage also suggests that the 'darkening' of the British working class may have been encouraged by the development of middle class fears about the rise of a politically rebellious, foreign influenced, proletarian culture. Thus we find that, although no section of the working class was actively included in whiteness, the most actively excluded were the urban working class, or 'this new city race' as

Charles Masterman termed them in *From the Abyss* (1976: 242; first published 1902). In 1864 *The Saturday Review* (cited by Malik 1996: 93) provided the following overview of working class life: 'The Bethnal Green poor ... are a caste apart, a race of whom we know nothing, whose lives are of quite different complexion from ours.' Drawing on an American model of race relations, the article continued, 'distinctions and separations, like those of the English classes which always endure, which last from the cradle to the grave ... offer a very fair parallel to the separation of the slaves from the whites.'

As my examples imply, these imputed identities were not necessarily considered to be simply class based. They were often also understood as distinctly urban and/or non-English. Before returning to the distinction between urban and rural I shall briefly address the latter theme.

Concern with 'immigrant' groups in nineteenth century British cities drew on an extensive and, in part, well established repertoire of xenophobic and racist categorisations of 'other Europeans' as, metaphorical or literally, less white than the natives. However, the group that attracted the most opprobrium was migrants within the British Isles, namely the catholic Irish. The late nineteenth century saw a hardening, an increased literalness, of interpretations of the catholic Irish as racially other to, and as darker in complexion to, other Britons, more especially the English. The scientific identification of the 'so-called black Celts' (Huxley 1979: 167; first published 1870) or 'dark Euskarian type' (Allen 1979: 241; first published 1880) amongst the Irish population gave credence to pre-existing mythological genealogies. Thus, for example, in an analysis that draws the representation of the Irish and Jews together with that of Africans, Cohen (1988: 74; see also Innes, 1994) notes that 'the special name given to the Irish - Milesians' exemplifies the transgressive role assigned them in English constructions of whiteness. Milesians, he explains, were 'descendants of the legendary Spanish King Liesus. This "race" was supposedly the product of interbreeding between Moors and marrains, that is between Africans who had Hispanic roots and Spanish Jews ... This hybrid status did more than confirm the Irish as a "monstrous race". It set them apart, made them a special case.' The trend towards literalising the darkness of the Irish may be exemplified by the anthropological investigations of John Beddoe (1885), the founder of the Ethnological Society. Beddoe applied his 'Index of Nigrescence', a quantitative measure based on hair colour, across the British Isles. Noting a 'greater tendency towards melanosity' (Beddoe, quoted by Curtis, 1997: 20) within western, Celtic areas of Britain and Ireland, Beddoe coined the term 'Africanoid' for certain Welsh groups and peoples from west Ireland. In his analysis of cartoons of Irish rebels in Victorian comic weeklies

Curtis (1997) allies Beddoe's analysis to a general simianisation of the Irish in Victorian culture. Disputing Foster's (1993) account in *Paddy and Mr. Punch*, Curtis makes a point of asserting that the representations of non-white Britons found in such magazines signified racial not class division in Britain. '[P]lebeian *Englishmen* with apelike features,' he argues in the recently revised edition of *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*, 'were very much the exception to the rule in English comic weeklies ... English comic artists, in fact, saved their best simianising efforts for Irish rebels' (Curtis, 1997: 121). However, Curtis's singular focus on simianization in comic weeklies should warn us against extrapolating his observations onto all Victorian representations of the working class. Comparisons with apes were not the only, nor necessarily the most important, way non-whiteness was connoted. The material I have already cited from the Victorian 'urban explorers' is suggestive of the range of similes and metaphors used to distance and define the poor as the dark other of bourgeois whiteness. Indeed, it is far less the race of the working class that is noticeable from this material than their geographical location: it is the *urban* poor that are excluded from whiteness.

As a consequence of the large-scale migration of rural families to the city that characterised the late nineteenth century, the British (and, again, more especially the English) working class was often construed to be losing its national and racial rootedness. 'Traditional' rural folk were being lost to racial degeneracy (Rich 1994). In *Rural England* Rider Haggard (1976: 218; first published 1902) noted that this migratory flow 'can mean nothing less than the progressive deterioration of the race.' In *The Poor and the Land* the same author contrasted the 'puny pygmies growing from towns or town bred parents' with the 'blood and sinew of the race,' the 'robust and intelligent' countryman (Haggard 1905: xix). A similar view was proffered by the Dean of St. Paul's, W.R. Inge, in 1919. In the towns, he noted, the English were 'becoming darker in each generation' (Inge 1919: 18). The racialized contrast between urban and rural relied, in part, on an association of the urban with immigrant labour. However, the perceived threat of the urban also drew upon an existing and specifically English discourse of national and racial romanticism which placed the essence of Englishness in 'the people[s] ... natural breeding and growing grounds' (Lord Walsingham quoted by Low 1996: 19), the countryside. Indeed, the similarities between the stereotypes of the 'rosy cheeks' and 'healthy complexion' of the English peasant and the 'vigorous' nature of bourgeois whiteness are suggestive of Victorian 'middle class writers investment in rural nostalgia as a kind of origin myth of their own ascendance. This impression is strengthened by the fact that rural workers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century tended not be subject to horrified explorers

but rather to reverential cultural retrieval. By 1911 folklore studies had been published on 29 of England's 40 counties. Colls (1986; see also Howkins 1986) observations of the development of 'folk study' in the period draw a direct contrast between the valued purity of the rural past and the racially degraded urban present. Citing the "Warwickshire peasant," Joseph Arch, a figure introduced 'to the nation' by the Countess of Warwick, Colls notes that,

When the black American 'cake walk' dance was introduced to the London music halls [in 1898], so dreaded was miscegenation with 'old, healthy sensual (but not sensuous) English dances' that cake walking was said to show 'why the negro and the white can never lie down together.' That the South Londoners had mixed cake walking with their own swagger to dance the first Lambeth Walk in 1903 was so much the worse for them. (Colls 1986: 47)

In describing the urban working class the use of the language and logic of race became so commonplace that it may be argued to have formed a new and distinctive kind of racialized discourse. In other words, the original point of reference for the association of the working class with 'blacks' or 'browns' seems to have faded as the former's racialized othering took on a linguistic, and socio-economic life of its own (see also Stedman Jones, 1971). Not unrelatedly, a transition, or slippage, from race used as a metaphor of otherness to race used as an objective description of working class difference can be witnessed. The working class were increasingly not simply *like people* who were different they *were* different. By late century it became increasingly common for social and scientific theorists to use race as a kind of general principle of hierarchy. Thus, for example, Count Gobineau (1966: 120) noted (in the influential English translation of *The Inequality of Human Races*, published in 1915), that

every social order is founded upon three original classes, each of which represents a racial variety: the nobility, a more or less accurate reflection of the conquering race; the bourgeoisie composed of mixed stock coming close to the chief race; and the common people who live in servitude or at least in a very depressed position.

In similar vein, Gustav LeBon (1912: 29), another translated French writer, noted that 'The lowest strata of the European societies is homologous with the primitive men.' In time, LeBon (43) continued, 'the superior grades of a population [will be] separated from the inferior grades by a distance as great as that which separates the white man from the negro or even the negro from the monkey.' In Britain Francis Galton (cited by Malik 1996: 99; though see Galton 1979; Pick 1989) opined that he found it hard to distinguish 'the nature of the lower classes of civilised man from that of the barbarian.' Galton continued that 'classes E and F of the negro may roughly be considered as equivalent of our C and D.'

I have sought to show that working class Britons in the Victorian era (most especially the urban and non-English working class) were marginal to the symbolic production of white identity. My sources have been derived from the bourgeois class, from men who saw a profound gulf between themselves and the people of the 'dark' regions upon which they speculated. In the next section my sources will also derive from those who situate themselves, and their audience, at the centre of white identity. Yet, as we shall see, these are different voices, not bourgeois voyagers but exponents of 'ordinary people'.

Symbolising the Ordinary: The Transformation of Whiteness in Britain

From being marginal to whiteness in the nineteenth century the working class came to adopt and adapt this identity in the twentieth century. With the rise of mass non-white settlement in Britain it may be supposed that the colonial imagination was re-articulated as a discourse about a 'newly multi-racial' British society. In other words, the working class 'took up' whiteness from the available repertoire of colonial and hierarchical terms in 'response to' the presence of non-white Britons. Although this analysis usefully highlights the colonial heritage of certain ideas about whiteness (especially its continuing association with superiority), it fails to engage with either the particularity of white working class identity or the history of white identity's location within British class society.

The reformation of the symbolic economies of race and class cannot be abstracted from the reformation of British capitalism. The two processes which I offer as explanations of the transformation of white identity, are the formation of popularist imperialism and the transition from liberal to welfare, or advanced, capitalism. I shall be suggesting that these two phenomenon are related. More specifically, that the former presaged the latter.

The extent of the influence of popularist imperialism in working class life is the subject of some controversy (Pelling 1968; Colls and Dodd 1986; MacKenzie 1985). It seems certain that its grip on middle class culture was more profound, more intimately constitutive of everyday class experience, than for other groups. However, the number of pointers to the significance of the imperialist and nationalist propaganda disseminated by large swathes of the voluntary and education sector and media/entertainment industries, is also impressive. Intriguingly, given the representations of urban darkness previously discussed, for some critics of the period it was precisely the degraded nature of city living that made the working class pliable to the baser forms of nationalism and imperialism. Thus, for example, in his *The Psychology of Jingoism*, Hobson (1901: 7) asserted that

xenophobic nationalism was associated with the 'bad conditions of town life ... lowering the vitality of the inhabitants.' The notion that, when articulated within working class culture, national and racial ideologies are marked by their irrationality and crude parroting of elite ideologies finds echoes across a range of early twentieth century social commentary. This theme of debasement has been challenged recently by Crowhurst (1997) who argues that working class audiences in Victorian and Edwardian music halls identified with, and represented themselves through, stereotypes of blackness. Crowhurst's contention is interesting but speculative. Far more overwhelming is the evidence that suggests that, from the late nineteenth century, populist nationalist and imperialist activities brought imperialism and racial categories into ever closer proximity with working class lives. Autobiographies from the period are one measure of this process. For example, Fred Willis's (1948) account of learning about racial divisions in his Victorian school and Alfred William's (1981) memories of the patriotic fervour that dominated the railway factory where he worked. At the end of his study into how military youth organisations, such as the National Service League and the Territorial Force, recruited successfully in working class Birmingham, Michel Blanch (1976: 119) concludes that through their work 'imperialist and nationalist sentiment obtained real roots in working class opinion.' The masculinist ideologies and recruiting practices of these organisations may suggest that imperialist sentiment and categories were more actively developed amongst working class men than women. This gender difference is less apparent, however, in another influence on working class views on race, the popular press. In his discussion on the historical development of working class racism Miles (1979), drawing on Street (1975), argues that, because of limited literacy and education 'the articulation of racism was probably the prerogative of the dominant class up to and including the nineteenth century' (118). However, the introduction of mass circulation fiction with imperialist themes in the late nineteenth century enabled, Miles continues, 'the reproduction of those racist notions of the bourgeois world-view, some of which were, in turn, derived or developed from scientific racism, to an audience of the working class' (119).

However, the relationship between the changing racial identity of the British working class and imperialism was more than simply a question of the dissemination of imperial and/or bourgeois cultural ideologies. It also reflected imperialism's impact upon the economic and political restructuring of British capitalism. One particular aspect of this latter process that interests me here is the way imperialism introduced significant non-market, state interventionist and social consensus (most importantly, popularist nationalism)

tendencies into British society. These tendencies, I would suggest, inevitably unsettled the established symbolic economies of Victorian free-market liberalism. Government manipulation of socio-economic conditions in Britain and around the world, combined with the development of a range of media institutions and philanthropic and civic initiatives in British cities, enabled the formation of a truly popular 'national community' (a community in which the standard of living of working class people and their ideological integration into the nation was enhanced beyond recognition – the economics of this process are detailed by Hobsbawm 1968, the nationalist and other ideological connotations by Pieterse 1990). Imperialism signalled a shift within capitalism, a move away from *laissez-faire*ism and the exclusion of the 'British', 'white' working class from key national-racial symbols and towards an interventionist, social consensus oriented, form of capitalism. In such a society symbols of social status and images of the national ideal could begin to be adopted and adapted for popular usage.

The explication of these tendencies in imperialism provides a clear parallel with the more general shift within twentieth century capitalism towards state interventionism and welfarism. Although this trend has complex roots, two main influences may be abstracted, firstly working class struggle (which may be exemplified by reference to rising trades union membership and industrial militancy, see Hobsbawm 1969; though see Pelling 1968) and, secondly, the increasing complexity and consumer orientation of capitalist production and management. Although the former influence appears non-, or even anti-, capitalist and the latter part and parcel of capitalist reproduction, the interests of both were partially responded to by the expansion of 'national' and 'free' public housing, health, education and 'social security' schemes and benefits. Introduced fitfully throughout the century, and developed most fully in the immediate post-Second World War period, state welfare helped produce a population ideologically committed to, and capable of participating in 'state managed capitalism'. Thus welfarism both fused and recuperated contradictory and potentially explosively antagonistic social forces into a national project (see London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group 1979; CCCS 1981; see also Offe 1984; 1985). As this implies, the benefits of welfare were articulated as a national, and nationalistic, discourse. Welfare came wrapped in the Union Jack.

As the chasm of class identities apparent in the Victorian period was narrowed, the marginalization of the working class from whiteness became untenable. In this new British social formation racial and national identities once centred on the elite become available to the masses. These identities were also able to be adapted by the working class. As this implies the symbolic reconstitution of capitalism saw

changes within both the social boundaries of whiteness and its connotative range. As we saw earlier, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, whiteness connoted an idealised human being, a figure depicted in terms of its *extraordinary* qualities. These connotations, symptomatic of the bourgeois class meaning of whiteness, continue to influence twentieth century racial discourse, including the racial discourse of the white working class (see, for example, Rose et al 1969). However, they have entered into a, sometimes difficult, relationship with another set of associations, associations that reflect the new class politics of white identity. For now whiteness, as well as being a supremacist identity, is cast as the identity of the ordinary; it connotes lack of exceptionality, the homely virtues of quietness, tidiness, cleanness and decency. Thus the connotative emphasis of whiteness has been mutated and broadened, from being a virtually superhuman identity to a being, at least in part, a prosaic one. Both sets of associations privilege whiteness and reflect its racist implications. However, they do so in different ways and, at least within Britain, are indicative of different forms of capitalist class relations.

To exemplify this connotative reformation I will turn to a variety of assertions of white working class identity articulated by white, mostly working class, men from the 1950s through to the 1970s. The examples offered all share an aggressively defensive position against perceived challenges to white people's social and economic status. I would stress that they are not designed to be a representative sample of 'white opinion'. What they do provide are clear expressions of the political mobilisation of whiteness, of whiteness being 'put to work' in order to cohere a racialized community of solidarity and resistance. I shall, firstly, note the relation between whiteness and welfarism and nationalism and, secondly, the values ascribed to white identity.

Mid-late twentieth century British racist discourse is often characterised by its allusions to 'the national community' (within England an imperialistic conflation of 'England' with 'Britain' is also often apparent). Moreover such constructions frequently posit colour as the key site of exclusion and inclusion. This narrative has required the development of a new history of Britain/England, a narrative of a 'white country' defending itself against – as one British National Party candidate put in 1964 – 'coloured immigration into our ancient land' (Bean cited by Woolcott 1965: 40). A similar narrative is cited by Phizacklea and Miles,

Q: Why did you vote National Front?

A: Because our dads fought to keep this country a white man's country ... When I first went in [i.e. joined the National Front] I had visions of a united England, you know, England for the English. I know it's racist, but it appealed to me.
(cited by Phizacklea and Miles 1979: 115)

It is interesting to observe how often such appeals to a cross-class racial-national community evoke welfare structures. The use of the public education, social benefit, health and housing systems by non-whites appears deeply resented by many white Britons (see, for example, Rose *et al.* 1968; Runnymede Trust 1991). Thus, for example, Rose *et al.*'s (1969: 580) survey of white attitudes to the letting of council houses found that

[o]verwhelmingly the attitude expressed was that access to council dwellings should be limited to "our own people" that it was part of the benefits of the Welfare State that should not be shared.

The testimonies gathered by Rose *et al.* make it clear that 'our own people' means white people. Welfare structures are posited as 'ours'; they are implicitly or explicitly presented as symbolic and material rationales for working class identification with the national-racial unit. Non-white immigration is thus portrayed as a threat to working class 'gains'. 'Immigration has dragged us back twenty years' opined the Labour Deputy Mayor of Deptford (cited by Sherman 1965: 111), a working class London borough, in 1964. [I]t's all rights talking about the brotherhood of man, but our first job is to defend the gains we fought for here.' Such allusions to 'our' welfare state also have a central place in the ex-Conservative minister Enoch Powell's oratory on race and nation.

while to the immigrant entry to this country was admission to privileges and opportunities eagerly sought, the impact upon the existing population was very different ... they found themselves made strangers in their own country, they found their wives unable to obtain hospital beds in childbirth, their children unable to obtain school places. (1968: 185)

Once one accepts that mid and late twentieth articulations of white identity posit, and are enabled by, a consensual and welfare oriented capitalist social formation, one begins to hear echoes of this process reverberating throughout British popular culture. At the same time certain contradictory political dynamics come into view. Most significantly, that welfarism represents a partial achievement of class struggle but also enables and is sustained by a racialized vision of the national community. Unemployment benefit is another arena where this contradiction is played out, the labour exchange or social security office becoming sites of racialized class politics where the 'rights' of Britons, the working class and white people are conflated. The latter point is expressed in the remarks of one white youth, identified as a member of the youth cult known as 'Teddy Boys', interviewed by a BBC reporter in the immediate aftermath of the 1958 Notting Hill 'race riot'. Asked to explain the reasoning behind similar white youth's attacks on West Indian immigrants, he simply says the following:

I mean down the labour exchange, I mean you go in there, we were in there today, three of us, and we're standing waiting for our pay and we see one darkie go up, he drew eight - seven pounds something, we about six whites go up, draw three pounds, another darkie go up and draw eight pounds and so forth and so on. And it's nearly all blacks down there except for the few whites. Spades, I'm sorry - spades. (in Glass 1961: 264)

This particular respondent was interviewed amongst a group of similarly racist white working class youth. Their attitudes to race also displayed the other characteristic of mid-late twentieth century white identity I mentioned above, its symbolic association with the 'ordinary'. Whilst white identities have been used normatively since their inception, their adoption and adaptation by the British working class has seen an assertion, less of whiteness as a universal ideal, the peak of humanity, and more of whiteness as 'ordinary' and 'decent'. The Teddy Boy's complaints about non-whites are uniformly prosaic, hinging on accusations of being 'filthy', not having 'good manners', and of 'causing scandal'. Indeed, the perpetration of racist violence, which the Teddy Boys readily admit to, is justified by another interviewee through reference to the most seemingly banal transgressions of 'polite behaviour':

You go on a bus - to a white conductor you'll ask for a tuppenny fare, they'll say thank you - you go on one with a darkie, you ask for a fivepenny fare, he'll say fares please and just walk away. They're as ignorant as I've ever met, and I'll have a go with them any day they fancy. (in Glass 1961: 264)

Similarly, Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech, made in 1968, which called for the repatriation of 'immigrants' (i.e., non-whites) repeatedly alludes to the concerns about immigration of the 'decent, ordinary fellow' (180), the 'ordinary, decent, sensible people' (186). Woven into this rhetoric are allusions to another, and within the English context, more immediately recognisable, form of class symbolism, namely, respectableness. The 'respectable street in Wolverhampton' beset by 'immigrants' that Powell uses to exemplify his general message, is designed to evoke images of a white working class assailed by non-whites. Indeed, the shift from white to non-white occupation of the street is symbolised as a move from the ordinary to the exceptional, the hum-drum to the extraordinary, 'The quiet street became a place of noise and confusion. Regretfully ... white tenants moved out' (187).

So far in this article I have sought to show how white identity, from being incorporated into the reproduction of Victorian *laissez faire* capitalism, became integrated into consensus-oriented, state managed capitalism. The racist commentaries cited in this section exemplify a shift in the symbolic constitution of this identity, a shift linked to the transformation of British capitalism. However, welfarism is not necessarily the end point of capitalist development. The past couple

of decades have witnessed a concerted 'rolling back' of the state in certain areas and the 'reduction of "welfare state" to "social insurance"' (Roebroek 1992: 660) in others. Bauman (1997) has recently highlighted signs of a transition in popular constructions of welfare. From something that is 'ours', a common good, welfare structures have, he argues, increasingly been cast as something that 'we' give to 'others'; in other words, an altruistic burden. He speculates that,

On the way from Beveridge-style social insurance as universal entitlement to means-tested handouts for 'those who need them most', there must have been a critical point, difficult to spot in time, yet quite real, at which the 'community' turned in the eyes of the majority from a safeguard of individual security into a noxious drain on individual resources; from something 'that is our right' to something 'we cannot afford'. (5)

Extending this train of thought, it is tempting to speculate on a shift in the racial meaning of the plural pronouns that Bauman places in inverted commas. From welfare being something the white national-racial unit awards to itself it has become something that that same unit awards to, and associates with, 'others' (i.e., ethnic and other marginalized minority groups). The temptation within this analysis is to imagine a return to a Victorian class-race order, with both visible minority groups and the white underclass being cast as a 'new rabble' (Murray cited by Piachaud 1997: 3), a congenitally inferior, and literally and metaphorically 'dark', section of society. Writing this I am reminded of the phrase I have heard used on several occasions to describe two of the virtually all-white, and highly impoverished and welfare dependant, areas of my own city, Newcastle, namely 'darkest Benwell' and 'darkest Scotwood' (see also Cambell's 1995, account of Benwell as 'little Beirut'; also Osmond 1995).

However, while these latter phenomena require our attention, they remain, as yet, only tendencies. Put simply, it appears, at present, that welfare capitalism is being reorganised but not scrapped. '[M]ore (or rather less) of the same' is how Taylor-Gooby (1989: 639) summed up those changes apparent by the end of the 1980s. Ruggles and O'Higgins (1987: 187) concur, observing that even New Right dominated governments 'have moved to acceptance of the structural role of welfare in democratic mixed economies and are now focusing on ways of constraining and redistributing its cost.' Welfare capitalism is still with us, if for no other reason than, as Offe (1984: 153) put it, 'The embarrassing secret of the welfare state is that while ... capitalism cannot exist with, neither can it exist without, the welfare state.'

Thus, I would conclude that, although the scale of contemporary reorganisation, and the emergence of socio-economic gulfs comparable with those of Victorian Britain, may suggest the potential for movement within the symbolic constitution of whiteness, it is premature to

announce the death of racialized welfare capitalism. Not unrelatedly, whiteness remains, at present, available as a mass identity. It is something claimed by, and claimed for, all European heritage Britons. It may, one day, retreat back to an elite identity or, more hopefully, lose its connotative power and fade into insignificance. One day maybe, but not yet.

Conclusions: 'White Studies', Anti-racism and the White Working Class

The last ten years has seen the development of an historical and sociological literature on white identities. The vast majority of this work, as I noted at the start of this article, has emerged from, and is focused upon, the United States of America. Noel Ignatiev (1997), a leading exponent of this new school, recently noted that his work was only applicable to the latter country, and that its explanatory framework should not be imposed on other societies. Unfortunately, the analytical categories and concerns generated within North American debate have an international influence beyond the control of their progenitors. Indeed, the imprint of American models of racial identity may today be seen across the globe, from indigenous rights campaigners in Japan aligning themselves with Black Power and the American Indian Movement (Siddle 1997), to the establishment of 'branches' of the Ku Klux Klan in southern England. This globalizing momentum demands, I would suggest, the homogenisation and Americanisation of the world's diverse racial histories. Thus, for example, representations of the struggles of racialized minorities in a wide variety of countries increasingly resemble the archetypes and stereotypes generated within and around African American and Native American history. I am not concerned here to evoke indignation at this process but rather to suggest that it is worthy of consideration and study and that it obliges scholars to apply a degree of circumspection to the limits and implications of current American histories of whiteness. Indeed, the value of this latter body of work will be considerably diminished if its geographical particularity, its localness, is not recognised. The study of the development of white identity amongst working class Britons necessarily includes elements (especially the role of imperialism and welfarism), as well as a time-scale, not found within the work of Ignatiev, Roediger and Allen. This is not to make a claim for a unique British 'national experience' – many of the themes narrated here may also be found within other European traditions of whiteness – but rather to explain why current discussion on whiteness needs to be internationalised; to be refocused as a global debate and not simply an American one.

Another critique that will, hopefully, be stimulated by this essay concerns the limitations of contemporary anti-racism. If one accepts that white identity needs to be understood as historically and geographically variable and, moreover, that its symbolic formation is, at least in part, bound up with the formation and reformation of capitalism, then one is likely to be critical of most existing forms of anti-racist practice and theory. It is not just that anti-racisms tend to draw on, indeed rely on, a static, ahistorical conception of white identity (Bonnett 1996). For just as damaging is their blindness to the changing class connotations of white identity, a myopia that leads to an interpretation of white identity as purely and simply an elite identity. The inadequacy of abstracting anti-racism from class critique has been pressed home by a number of recent commentators. Perhaps the most significant of these, within a British context, was the Burnage Report (commissioned and then suppressed by Manchester City Council) into the murder of a British Asian boy by a white boy in the playground of Burnage High School. The report identified the typecasting of white working class pupils and parents in the schools' anti-racism policy as central to the policy's failure. If, the report concluded, 'white students are all seen to as "racist", whether they are ferret-eyed fascists or committed anti-racists,' then anti-racism becomes merely a 'moral' or 'symbolic' exercise (Macdonald et al 1989: 22-23). 'To deal with sex and race, but not class', it continued (Macdonald et al 1989: 33; see also Nelson 1990), 'distorts those issues ... This ostrich-like analysis of the complex of social relations leaves white working class males completely in the cold. They fit nowhere.' One of authors of the report, Gus John (1991: 85) went on to note 'the integral relationship between the struggle for social justice and the struggle for racial justice.' John (quoted by Young 1988: 40) also reflected that 'the most successful anti-racist policy once can have is one that assumes that white parents have got to own racism as an issue within the school.'

Such assertions have been mirrored in a variety of contributions to anti-racist debate in Britain (Cohen 1992; Gilroy 1989; Nelson 1990). Indeed, I am tempted to claim that, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new orthodoxy was in the making, one that concluded that effective anti-racism cannot 'ignore', 'leave in the cold' or 'exclude' the white working class. Yet these formulations remained vague. They offered a vision of 'the white working class' engaging in the anti-racist project. But what does this mean? Clearly it could lead in a number of directions, from non-threatening, white-inclusive anti-racism (for example, so-called 'softly-softly anti-racism') to attempts to inter-relate working class history with the study of the historical experiences of racialized minorities (for examples of both types of anti-racism see Bonnett 1993).³ Both these strategies are defensible as part of an

overall and integrated vision of emancipatory education. However, the history related in the present article suggests that such an education must also enable students to explore the racialized nature of different forms of capitalism. This seemingly innocuous suggestion carries with it a range of complexities, some of which run directly counter to anti-racist orthodoxy. The most important of these complexities is the relationship between welfare capitalism and white identity. Thankfully, the relationship between welfarism, left-wing politics and racism has recently attracted the attention of a number of European commentators. More specifically, Broberg and Roll-Hansen (1997) have opened up a debate on the role of eugenics in Scandinavian welfare ideology (for discussion of this issue in Britain see Freedland 1997; in China see Dikotter 1995). This research will hopefully enable further historical and geographical discussion on the connections between socialist and racist ideologies. As we have seen, white identity and welfare intervention are inextricably interwoven 'gains' of 'European heritage' working class Britons. Working class whiteness is a racist identity. But it cannot be effectively understood or engaged if it is understood as simply this and nothing more. If nothing else, the connotative range of working class whiteness, as discussed above, provides ample evidence that such a categorisation is only a half-truth.

Working class whiteness in Britain should be approached as a socio-economic achievement of the working class that is mired in racism. In the twentieth century the social formation that has enabled, and been enabled by, the symbolic constitution of white identity has combined social reformism (even, sometimes, class militancy) and racism. As this implies, a moment of social critique is contained within the history of white identity. Anti-racists should be engaged in the task of identifying and enabling this emancipatory dynamic, of harnessing it in the service of the transcendence of white identity, and its supersession with a politically defined identity. There is no room in such an approach for blaming or excluding the European heritage working class for 'being white'. Something more positive, and more daring, is required: something that encourages complex and contradictory responses to the question 'what kind of achievement is whiteness?'

Notes

¹ In *Colour, Class and the Victorians*, Lorimer (1978: 206) notes 'The popular stereotype of the Negro in the mid-nineteenth century owed more to the New World than to Africa. Even then American rather than West Indian images predominated in anti-slavery rhetoric, in the popular fiction of Harriet Beecher Stowe, and in the minstrel shows. The mid-Victorians had become so familiar with the Negro in these contexts that when an imperial

crisis did impinge upon their consciousness, as from Jamaica in 1865, the event made few new impressions and simply confirmed existing viewpoints.'

² Stowe's contention provoked widespread dispute in Britain. For example, *Uncle Tom in England: or a Proof that Black's White* (1852) sought to show that American slavery and the British class system could not be regarded as in any way equivalent.

³ I would submit, in passing, that the latter approach, which usually confines itself to the drawing of 'parallels' between working class and anti-colonial struggle, would be considerably strengthened if it were able to draw on some of the historical sources mentioned in first half of this essay. In nationalistic late twentieth century Britain far too few people are allowed to realise how recent the entry of working class people into the national-racial 'community' has been.

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