Racial violence:

facing reality

Jon Burnett

1   See Jon Burnett, 'After Lawrence: racial violence and policing in the UK', *Race & Class* (Vol. 54, No. 1, 2012).

2   The IRR maintains a unique database on racial violence in the UK, within which racist attacks and incidents that are reported in the media are routinely entered. From this, racial violence can be analysed and key trends can be identified.

3   The IRR has published three investigations into the UK's new 'geographies' of racism, examining racial violence in the cities of Peterborough, Plymouth and Stoke-on-Trent. These reports can be downloaded here: http://www.irr.org.uk/research/geographies-of-racism/ The lessons drawn from them are set out in more detail in the following article: 'Britain 2012: racial violence and the politics of hate', *Race & Class* (Vol. 54, No. 4, April, 2013).

Introduction

Violent racism in the UK is generally seen as something consigned to history. When it is brought to public attention, it is largely presented as the preserve of isolated, ill-adapted individuals motivated by personal prejudice and hate. This is a perception that was reinforced with last year's conviction of two of the men involved in the 1993 murder of Stephen Lawrence in south London. The general narrative is that racism has been 'dealt with' though reforms to the criminal justice system (largely those which have been implemented as a result of the Macpherson Report, published in 1999).[1]

Racial violence, however, remains an every-day experience for some.[2] And, as research conducted by the Institute of Race Relations (IRR) shows, it is no longer confined to the major urban centres with which racist attacks have been historically associated.[3] The geography of racial violence is changing, violent racism is spreading to areas which had hitherto no such tradition. With a few exceptions, this spreading of racial violence has gone unnoticed.

Yet, as austerity measures begin to bite and welfare changes and benefit caps take their toll, it is likely that such violence will intensify. Already, cities are experiencing internal migrations, with welfare recipients – many of whom are from BME communities – being relocated outside richer boroughs and people being decanted out of the capital. They arrive in towns and cities which are already suffering cuts, where unemployment may be high and which are unprepared in any way for their arrival.

Violent racism can be fatal

Violent racism has not gone away, and, at its most extreme, is fatal. In 2011/12, police forces recorded over 37,000 racially or religiously aggravated crimes – over 100 per day, in England and Wales. The Crime Survey for England and Wales suggests that this is just a fraction of the number that took place. Even taking into account the limitations of official statistics, they give some indication of the verbal abuse, taunts and harassment that have come to form a backdrop to some peoples' day-to-day lives. This racism can take the form of anything from persistent name-calling, graffiti, damage to cars and homes, harassment of shop-keepers to extreme, lethal attacks. Since the murder of Stephen Lawrence, at least 105 people – about five

people, on average, per year – have been murdered in racist attacks.[4] Although some, such as the killing of Anthony Walker in Liverpool, made national headlines, the majority pass unnoticed and unremarked beyond the local vicinity and family affected.

Racial violence is spreading

Although there is still a threat of racist attacks in those inner-city areas with which racial violence has most commonly been associated, the contours of such violence have broadened, spreading to smaller cities as well as towns across the UK. In part, this is related to demographic changes. Whereas less than 6 per cent of the population of England and Wales were from a BME background in 1991, this had risen to 13 per cent in 2001 and about 20 per cent in 2011. And whilst the UK's ethnic 'diversity' remains a predominantly 'urban' experience (about 45 per cent of the BME population live in London, for example), this itself is changing. It is in the towns and cities which are experiencing new forms of 'diversity' where racial violence is, in many cases, intensifying.

On the one hand, it is the UK's 'new' migrants – often finding themselves in localities which have until fairly recently had a majority white British population – who are being targeted in racist attacks. Asylum seekers, for example, whilst their claims are being processed, have, since 1999, been sent as part of a dispersal policy to towns and cities across the UK where they are isolated and marginalised. Accommodation is given on a 'no-choice' basis and is frequently based in hard-to-let properties. Recent changes in the provision of asylum support contracts have compounded this, with private companies penetrating the housing market further than they have been able to previously and asylum seekers being re-dispersed into more remote towns where properties are cheaper. Migrant workers, meanwhile, have been targeted in racist attacks as they have found employment in areas where local economies have been transformed.[5] And international students have found themselves at risk in localities where colleges and universities have encouraged their presence as part of internationalisation strategies.

On the other hand, racist attacks have also been directed at those BME communities that have been 'settled' in the UK over a longer period of time. Muslim communities, for example, have been targeted against the backdrop of hostility buttressed by the 'war on terror'.[6]

Number of people murdered in racist attacks since the murder of Stephen Lawrence

105

AN AVERAGE OF

5

PER YEAR

4   Harmit Athwal, 'Deaths with a (known or suspected) racial element 2000 onwards', *IRR News* (8 November, 2002-), http://www.irr.org.uk/news/deaths-with-a-known-or-suspected-racial-element-2000-onwards/

5   *The new geographies of racism: Peterborough* (London, Institute of Race Relations, 2013).

6   Jon Burnett, 'Attacks on Islamic institutions increase', *IRR News* (28 July 2011), http://www.irr.org.uk/news/attacks-on-islamic-institutions-increase/

Racial violence in context

Racial violence needs to be understood in terms of the interplay between local realities, national politics and global conditions. For over a decade, the idea that 'diversity' threatens solidarity within the UK has been normalised through the vernacular of policy initiatives such as community cohesion, and through restrictive changes to immigration law. The notion that multiculturalism undermines national identity has been politically mainstreamed – especially in the context of the 'war on terror' – and the Prime Minister is one of many senior figures to have publicly declared as much.[7] Reinforcing this, much national media coverage has portrayed the UK as on the cusp of being swamped or overwhelmed.[8] And locally, many newspapers and other media outlets have run campaigns against, for example, the number of asylum seekers or migrant workers coming to a particular area.

It is in this context that political parties have vied with each other to prove to be 'tougher' on issues relating to 'race', immigration and asylum, in part as a strategy to ensure that voters do not turn to far-right groups. Arguably though, the opposite has happened, with far-right groups benefiting from having their core messages legitimised. In the mid-2000s, the British National Party (BNP) enjoyed unprecedented electoral success. And in Stoke-on-Trent, to take one example – a city reeling from decades of industrial decline and marred by significant inequalities – by 2008 the BNP had become the second largest political party, with nine councillors and a party-line which described the city as the 'jewel in the crown'. Whilst the far Right has since fallen into electoral disarray, there has been the emergence of a range of other far-right groups, some of which have attempted to form political parties, whilst others have become established as street-movements against 'Islamification'. There are indications that this fracturing of the far-right has been accompanied by an intensification of racial violence.[9]

What these things have done is to exacerbate hostility around 'race'. But, at the same time, the conditions for racial violence are produced and reproduced by changes to the economy. As industries have declined, entire local economies have been completely transformed and such economic shifts have exacerbated the potential for racism. For example, certain economies have been restructured around agriculture and temporary work which has led to many local employers attempting to draw in migrant workers on the basis that they can be paid less. This, in turn, has opened up opportunities

7   Oliver Wright and Jerome Taylor, 'My war on multiculturalism', *Independent* (5 January 2011), http://www.independent. co.uk/news/uk/politics/cameron-my-war-on-multiculturalism-2205074.html

8   See, for example, Adrian Thomas, 'Asylum seekers continue to be stigmatised by the British press', *Guardian* (31 October 2012), http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2012/oct/31/asylum-seekers-stigmatised-british-press

9   Liz Fekete, *Pedlars of hate: the violent impact of the far Right*, (London, Institute of Race Relations, 2012).

for landlords to exploit migrant workers, accommodating them in areas of towns and cities where there may already be competition in housing. More broadly, in many areas which have suffered as a result of economic changes (such as former industrial towns), there has been a burgeoning night time economy and its subsidiary trades (such as taxi-driving and in fast-food outlets) within which people from BME communities are disproportionately employed. In such contexts where alcohol consumption amongst revellers is high and where workers are often isolated or alone, the potential for racial violence increases.[10]

Returning to community safety strategies

It is through understanding how the circumstances are established in which racial violence flourishes and returning to community safety strategies that we can begin to address the problem. Just to criminalise perpetrators once an attack has taken place, is only one part of remedying the problem – and always after the event. A community safety strategy tries to prevent such attacks taking place in the first instance and this demands that the national story be understood. First, with the austerity measures, inequalities amongst and between localities in the UK have deepened and tensions in some places have been exacerbated. Second, as a result of ongoing cuts, many organisations, which had been able to provide a service for victims (and potential victims) of racial violence, or help bolster preventative measures, have had to close. These include racial equality councils and organisations with dedicated workers. But they also include the myriad support organisations that have been established which have been able to link people to relevant services and lawyers. Those that have remained, such as citizens' advice bureaux, do not always have the expertise to work adequately in this area. Such is the extent of the funding cuts in this area that the TUC has described some parts of the UK as 'advice deserts'.[11]

And, following the lead of central government, those organisations that do still advise over racial violence, have had to widen their remit to take it on as part of a wider brief of 'hate crime'. This echoes changes to the state equality set-up in 2007 whereby the Commission for Racial Equality was dissolved into the Equality and Human Rights Commission – locating racism as one strand of equality among others, removing an understanding of racism from the specific context in which it is fostered.

10 Jon Burnett, 'Racial violence and the night-time economy', *Race & Class*, (Vol. 53, No. 1, 2011).

11 Sally Brett, *Two steps forward, one step back*, (London, TUC, 2012).

In many of the areas where racial violence is intensifying, those targeted are very isolated. There is frequently little or no history of community-based campaigning and the resilience and support infrastructures that this can generate. In this vacuum, those who experience such violence are having to seek help from voluntary groups who may have absolutely no experience or expertise in the field, or multi-agency partnerships which understate the influence and impact of racism.

Recommendations

■ Agencies, institutions and regulatory bodies need to understand how racism has changed, in terms of its geographical spread, the context in which it is allowed to flourish and the widening scope of targets.

■ Lessons have to be absorbed from the impact of asylum dispersal policies. Decanting a section of the population who have been vilified, into areas where they can be isolated and vulnerable, has in some localities had disastrous consequences. Such has been the extent and severity of racist attacks against asylum seekers after they have been dispersed that, in some towns and cities, police forces have called for the policy to be suspended. Lessons of good practice need to be learned from local authorities where dispersal has been managed effectively. There needs to be liaison between central government and local authorities in relation to demographic change, and adequate support needs to be provided for local services. These lessons need to be applied in current contexts (such as in relation to the movement of people caused by benefit cuts).

■ Rather than locating the cause of racial violence within the individual pathology of offenders (as is the tendency within the conceptualisation of racial violence as a manifestation of 'hate crime'), it is vital that agencies and institutions also understand the ways in which the conditions for violent racism are being reproduced. This includes – but is not exclusive to – the changing economic situation and the broader climate of hostility (such as that manifested by the by 'anti-migrant' rhetoric and the 'war on terror').

■ It is essential that agencies and institutions work to prevent the reproduction of racist ideas which perpetuate a climate of racial

violence, rather than focusing on the individual at the expense of a broader conception of community safety. 'Anti-racism' cannot be reduced to the criminalisation of offenders in isolation from broader measures to tackle the conditions which exacerbate racism.

- Despite the far Right now being something of a spent electoral force, it is vital that agencies do not see this as a sign that the influence of far-right ideas have waned.

- Trade unions and relevant regulatory bodies should work with those from BME communities employed in the night-time economy, as well as migrant workers in the services sector and agriculture, developing mechanisms to prevent the dangerously high risk of racist attacks.

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Jon Burnett is undertaking an ongoing research project for the IRR which draws on an extensive customised, faceted database of cases across the UK. The most serious or significant incidents are reported on IRR News (the online information service) on the website of IRR at www.irr.org.uk and in its weekly e-bulletins. To subscribe to this free service, click on www.irr.org.uk/subscribe/