Sociology

Political Blackness and British Asians

Tariq Modood

The online version of this article can be found at:

Published by:

$SAGE

On behalf of:

BRITISH SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION
bsa

British Sociological Association

Additional services and information for *Sociology* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://soc.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://soc.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://soc.sagepub.com/content/28/4/859.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Nov 1, 1994

What is This?

POLITICAL BLACKNESS AND BRITISH ASIANS*

TARIQ MODOOD

Abstract   In the 1980s a political concept of blackness was hegemonic, but is increasingly having to be defended, even within the sociology of race. This is to be welcomed and seven reasons are given why the concept harms British Asians. The use of 'black' encourages a 'doublespeak'. It falsely equates racial discrimination with colour-discrimination and thereby obscures the cultural antipathy to Asians and therefore of the character of the discrimination they suffer. 'Black' suggests also a false essentialism: that all non-white groups have something in common other than how others treat them. The fourth reason is that 'black', being evocative of people of African origins, understates the size, needs and distinctive concerns of Asian communities. Fifthly, while the former can use the concept for purposes of ethnic pride, for Asians it can be no more than 'a political colour', leading to a too politicised identity. Indeed, it cannot but smother Asian ethnic pride – the pride which is a precondition of group mobilisation and assertiveness. Finally, advocates of 'black' have tried to impose it on Asians rather than seek slower methods of persuasion, with the result that the majority of Asians continue to reject it. The new emphasis on multi-textured identities is therefore encouraging, as long as we are not simply exchanging a political for a cultural vanguardism.

Key words: black, Asian, racial categorisation, anti-racism, identity, ethnic pride.

Introduction

In 1982 Salman Rushdie wrote:

'Britain is now two entirely different worlds and the one you inherit is determined by the colour of your skin' (Rushdie 1982).

He described such a condition as 'the new empire within Britain'. Since then he has come to see himself as battling within a different colour-dualism: this time rallying the forces of light against the forces of darkness (Rushdie 1989), in the process of which he has re-evaluated his view of the British Empire ('we were lucky to be ruled by Britain', (Mortimer 1992:2)).

Others with easier circumstances or more political steadfastness continue to see Britain in terms of the first colour dualism. For most people who have been active in British race relations debates over the last decade or so, whether at political, academic or administrative levels, have participated or acquiesced in the idea that an, perhaps the, important social fact about non-white people in Britain is their common participation in a political 'blackness'. The single most important and common manifestation of this idea has been the use of the term 'black' to describe people of African,

Caribbean and South Asian origins in Britain. Sociologists have been both at the forefront of this development, and amongst the slowest to abandon it. At one of the sessions of the 1992 British Sociological Association Annual Conference, in response to a query about terminology the Chair announced, without any consultation, that she was sure that most of those present were in favour of the term 'black' to cover all non-white people, so that is how she wanted the term used.[1] She was probably right about her colleagues (most of whom were of course white like herself), yet the need for such a ruling from the chair is an indication that even within the confines of sociology of race there is growing recognition that the concept of 'black' is in serious trouble.

Yasmin Ali, following the lead of Stuart Hall (1992: 252), has described the fortunes of the concept of 'black' in the following way:

> At the beginning of the 1980s 'communities originating in some of the countries of the old empire' would have been expressed unselfconsciously as 'black communities'. At the end of the decade 'black' is a much more contentious label than it was previously. 'Black' in its British usage was intended to convey a sense of a necessary common interest and solidarity between communities from the old empire (or the New Commonwealth); it was a usage predicated on the politics of anti-racism. As such 'black' 'became "hegemonic" over other ethnic/racial identities' in the late seventies and early eighties. The moment was not to last. From within marginalized communities and from without there was, in the 1980s, a steady assault upon this fragile hegemony (Ali 1991: 195).

As one of the people cited as responsible for contributing to the defeat of this hegemony (Ali 1991: 207), I would like to return to this topic to consider an aspect of why this hegemony was so vulnerable to criticism. It is important to be clear, of course, that what has been defeated is *not* the concept of 'black' but its hegemony, and even then, as far as terminology is concerned, the effect of the change in political writing and academic research is negligible. Hence, while the Commission for Racial Equality in December 1988 ceased to recommend that 'black' as an ethnic monitoring category encompassed Asians (CRE 1988), British academic writing on race has continued with the older terminology. While some explicitly acknowledge that 'black' is a political or ideological term that many of those to whom it refers 'would not accept it as referring to themselves' (e.g. Sarre 1989: 127), increasingly academic writers have been justifying their terminology, though this usually takes no more than a footnote, with the claim that they are merely observing conventional or standard usage from which no politics can be inferred (e.g. Nanton 1989: note 1; Mullings 1992: note 1; Saggar 1992: xii; Smith 1993: note 1).[2] Yet if one compares the 'quality' British newspapers and weeklies and the radio and television current affairs coverage in the years 1984–1988 with the years thereafter one will find, I believe, that in the majority of cases where 'black' was used in the earlier period to mean non-white people, the terminology in the later period is likely to be 'ethnic minorities' or 'black and Asian'. That is to say, that in quality current affairs

reportage and discussion the inclusive and political term 'black' comes to the fore in the earlier period and is replaced in the later period by a more specific ethnic usage where 'black' means sub-Saharan African origins or phenotype. I therefore understand the loss of the hegemony of 'black' to mean a pushing back from the mainstream public discourse to its original location, left-wing politics and race sociology, where, of course, it still flourishes.

Because my primary concern is with the kind of current affairs reportage I have referred to, together with the speeches and documents produced by political parties, trades unions, big employers, central and local government officials and professionals and so on (this is what I mean by 'mainstream public discourse'), I would date the hey-day of the concept of 'black' differently from Ali. For her the high-point was the late 1970s and early 1980s (Ali 1991: 201) and others would confine it yet again to the earlier of these two periods when the concept of 'black', devised by New Left radicals to mark a transcendence of ethnicity and origins in favour of a new colour-solidarity and political formation, is said to have been taken up by Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities who found that their separate struggles were actually bringing them together; a moment that was soon to be lost when the concept was appropriated by the set of race professionals that emerged in the local and central government responses to the riots of 1981 (Sivanandan 1985; Gilroy 1989: 25). Yet it was the incorporation of these anti-racist pressures into the British polity that led to the ascendancy of the inclusive concept of 'black' within the mainstream (Banton 1987; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992: 159). For with the enactment of the 1976 Race Relations Act and particularly with local government racial equality initiatives after the 1981 riots a tranche of radical activists were brought into work with the state, with 'the system' (Dhondy 1987). It was their anti-racist rhetoric, often contradictorily mixed up with the very different 'black is beautiful' rhetoric of *ethnic* pride, which came together with the more social scientific and administrative language of statistics and policy recommendations, which, too, favoured a white–black tidiness, to create the favoured consensus which was around the term 'black' in early to mid-eighties, first within the specialist lobby and then more widely.

Hence, the important mainstream hegemony came to be established just as the original left-wing, extra-state radicalism and the consequent Afro-Caribbean-Asian solidarities that arose from community self-defence from skinheads or police harassment, were giving way to struggles within the Labour Party and the (local) state in which Afro-Caribbeans and Asians lobbied for ethnic or sub-ethnic interests (usually the distribution of jobs, social grants and control of state-aided community centres and projects) which belied the increasing and uncritical use of the rhetoric of political colour-unity. The contrast, then, between radicals, like Sivanandan, Hall, Gilroy and Ali, dating the hegemonic period as the late 1970s and early 1980s, and my dating it as early to late 1980s is primarily a difference in our

respective interests in radicalism and mainstream discourse. For those whose starting-point was extra-state agitation as a way of amplifying and connecting with idealised histories of class struggle and global anti-imperialism could not help but see the transformation of their 'black' movements into 'the race relations industry' and competing ethnic lobbies as, to use Sivanandan's phrase, a 'degradation'. For those like me whose community relations work perspective was, in the period of the 'degradation', increasingly obliged to adopt a 'black' discourse perspective which (as the radicals note) was inconsistent with the emerging ethnic realities, the problem was not about the decline of the concept of 'black', but how such a concept was ever foisted upon the various ethnic minorities.

Why 'Black' Harms Asians

While the concept of 'black' became part of the race relations discourse orthodoxy (even if this concept was a degraded version of earlier radical hopes), such that, as I can personally testify, it became a taboo to question it within certain activist, administrative and, even, research contexts, nevertheless it did attract several different kinds and sources of criticism. Yasmin Ali groups these as 'debates encompassing black cultural politics, anti-racism/multiculturalism, the growth of ethnicism, the laments for England of both the sentimentalist left and the social authoritarian right, and the rhetoric of "popular capitalism" ' (1991: 195). My concern here is very specifically focussed. My argument is that whatever strengths and flaws, good and harm, there may be in the hegemony of the concept of 'black', it has at least one critically undesirable aspect: it harms British Asians. I am aware that other groups too claim that it harms them. For example, cultural Africanists reject the term 'black' because they believe it strips members of the African diaspora of their African roots (e.g. Yekawi 1986; Dennis 1989); while in Britain this debate is only gradually reaching beyond poets and artists, it is a recurring topic of debate in the popular London Afro-Caribbean paper, *The Voice*, and it is interesting to note that parallel debates among black American intellectuals a decade or more ago have now led to the political replacement of the term 'black' in favour of 'African-American' (as before 'black' replaced 'negro' which previously had replaced 'coloured'), (Martin 1991). A more politically fractious example is that of the two African-origin councillors in the London Borough of Brent who, arguing that under cover of 'black', jobs and resources were going to Afro-Caribbeans at the expense of the less numerous and visible Africans, have successfully replaced 'black' as an equality monitoring category in favour of categories of origins such as 'African'. Again, having been persuaded that mixed-race children and teen-agers would suffer from low self-esteem and identity confusion if not told they were 'black', social workers are now finding that the majority of such

persons reject a exclusivist identity and yet have no special identity problems (Tizard and Pheonix 1993). I offer no comment on these other debates but focus on my single argument, for it is in the case of British Asians that I can speak with some personal authenticity, and it is an argument rarely found at any length in race relations writing.

Given, then, that the origins of 'black' lie in the egalitarian desire of grouping those people together who suffer similar forms of discrimination and marginality, so that their condition can be highlighted and remedial action taken, including ethnic mobilisation, law and policy, how can I argue that 'black' is harmful to Asians? I offer seven reasons below, most of which depend upon the fact that the term 'black' is not neutral amongst non-white ethnic groups. It has a historical and current meaning such that it is powerfully evocative of people of sub-Saharan African origins, and all other groups, if evoked at all, are secondary. It is not an empty term that can be picked up and given a meaning such that any group other than those of African origins can be the core group (just as masculine vocabulary, even when intended to be gender-neutral, as in legal and academic language, cannot but put the image of the male gender in the reader's mind). Some of the negative effects for Asians, in extending an Afro-based term to describe Asians are as follows (for a related viewpoint, see Hazareesingh 1986).

Doublespeak

Asians are sometimes 'black' and sometimes not depending not upon the Asians in question (i.e. upon whether they accept the terminology), but upon the convenience or politics of the speaker or writer. Examples are so commonplace that a report or conference on race in Britain where this did not occur would be most unusual, and I will illustrate my point with two examples. An expert Labour Party committee on racial equality argues:

> Too often when the party discusses membership of *black and Asian* people it centres on the level of public representativeness, magistrates and MPs, rather than on ways in which *black* people can play a role in the party without necessarily aspiring to hold office; this is not to diminish the important point that many more *black* people should hold such offices (Labour Party 1985: 20, my italics).

A sentence which boldly begins with one meaning of 'black' immediately gives way to an entirely different meaning without any suggestion of having done so. Consider also the example of when local authority job advertisements proclaim a desire to attract applications from 'black and ethnic minorities'[3] or 'black and Asian people'. That in each case the second half of these conjunctions is very definitely secondary, an irritating addition, is clear from the fact that regardless of how often these conjunctions are used their order always follows strict precedence. Rare indeed in these contexts would a

statement be made in terms of 'all ethnic minorities including black people'. And to expect a phrase such as 'Asian and Black' might not seem unreasonable given the size of the respective populations, or even the convention of alphabetical precedence, let alone the variety normal in the use of language; but it is an expectation which will invariably be disappointed.

It may be thought that these examples, being examples of mere language, are rather trivial and inconsequential. I hope to demonstrate, as I proceed, that this is not so, but at this stage it is important to note the *personam* point that advocates of the all-inclusive term 'black' cannot make this objection. For they believe no less than I do that the language and imagery of public identity is integrally linked with inequality, discrimination and exclusion on the one hand, and with group pride, mobilisation and liberation on the other hand. Hence the energy they put in opposing some words, e.g., 'coloured' and in advocating their favoured term 'black'. I also call upon the growing consensus for not using exclusively masculine language to describe situations which could equally apply to both genders: if 'men' were substituted for 'black' and 'women' for 'Asian' in the examples I have quoted above, we would have sentences that many will agree exemplify marginalisation or the making invisible of the second group. Just as such sentences would be sexist, so my examples are examples of anti-Asian language.

Too Narrow A Conception of Racial Discrimination

A focus on 'colour' as the basis of uniting and mobilising those who suffer from racial discrimination falsely equates racial discrimination with colour-discrimination. While there is good evidence that in the case of *face-to-face* discrimination, for example in the context of seeking accommodation or employment, colour is a decisive factor (Brown and Gay 1985; Commission for Racial Equality, 1990; Foyster *et al.* 1990), this is really only the ground floor of racism rather than the whole building. It is generally recognised that class is a factor which contributes to racial discrimination and to racial disadvantage. Inferior treatment on the basis of colour can create a subordinate class which, by virtue of its socio-economic location, could continue to suffer comparative disadvantage even were colour prejudice to wane. Thus, for instance, employers who prefer a public school, Oxbridge background will disadvantage the majority of society, but may have a disproportionately greater impact on racial minorities, and this fact is acknowledged in the British legal concept of indirect racial discrimination.[4] While proponents of the concept of 'black' recognise how class is interrelated with race, they overlook how cultural differences can also disadvantage and be the basis of discrimination, e.g., in employment on the grounds of one's dress, dietary habits, or desire to take leave from work on one's holy days rather than those prescribed by the custom and practice of the majority community. An emphasis on discrimination

against 'black' people systematically obscures the cultural antipathy to Asians (and, no doubt, others), how Asian cultures and religions have been racialised, and the elements of discrimination that Asians (and others) suffer. If colour (or colour and class) were the sole basis of racism in British society it would be impossible to explain the finding of all the white attitude surveys over more than a decade that self-assigned racial prejudice against Asians is higher, sometimes much higher, than against black people (e.g. Brown 1984: 290; Jowell *et al.* 1986: 150 and 164; *Today* 14 March 1990; Amin and Richardson 1992: 19–21). Moreover, explanations to do with length of settlement and mutual familiarisation belie the fact that the difference in the prejudice against the two groups may be growing (Young 1992: 181).

The emphasis on colour-discrimination and colour-identity denies what otherwise would be obvious: the hostility of the majority is likely to be particularly forceful against non-white individuals who are members of a community (and not just free-floating or assimilated individuals), which is sufficiently numerous to reproduce itself as a community and has a distinctive and cohesive value system which can be perceived as an alternative to and a possible challenge to the norm; this phenomenon is currently growing in Britain and disproportionately impacts upon Asians. It is what explains some of the contradictions in contemporary racism, such as the observation that white working class youth culture is incorporating, indeed, emulating, young black men and women, while hardening against groups like South Asians and Vietnamese (Cohen 1988: 83; Boulton and Smith 1992; Back 1993). A glance at the newspapers will quickly reveal that as many race relations battles turn on issues of culture and minority rights as on colour discrimination and socio-economic deprivation. 'Black' obscures this and prevents Asians from fully articulating and mobilising against the nature of their oppression.

One of the ways of appreciating how the condition and concerns of British Asians are overlooked and distorted because of a doctrinaire assumption about the nature of racial discrimination, is by observing and drawing an analogy from how 'black' British activists approach the issue in Europe. The observation I am referring to has been excellently put by Ann Dummett, who deserves to be quoted at length:

> There is a widespread belief among black people in Britain that you have to be black to be oppressed. This is putting crudely an assumption that is often not spelt out, but it is evident that this assumption is held from the way many black people who have become concerned about 1992 talk about racism on the continent. Instead of showing especial concern about Turks in Germany, who suffer anti-Turkish prejudice and discrimination in ways that are at least as oppressive as the way British blacks suffer, they often concentrate on the situation of black Germans – children usually of black American servicemen and German mothers – and of black immigrants to Germany like Ghanaians, Mozambicans and so on. These latter suffer frightening degrees of hostility and, in places, violence, but to single them out and ignore or give only secondary importance to the Turks is to take a seriously distorted view of racism in Germany (Dummett 1992: 8).

A False Essentialism

Talk about 'black' people, especially where this is supposed to be or in practice becomes the predominant way of conceptualising the people in question, suggests a false essentialism, namely, that all non-white groups have something in common other than how others treat them. The harm to Asians is that usually what happens in the manufacture of a 'black' commonality is that a set of features are plucked from Afro-Caribbean history or contemporary experience and said to be paradigmatically 'black' (Bonnett 1993: 43–44); Asians are then shown to approximate to this paradigm, or sometimes the writer fails to show any approximation and simply insists that if one looks hard enough one will find it. In my original discussion I cited the much-praised Paul Gilroy's, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, as the worst case of this (Modood 1988a: 400). A more extended critique of that text along the same lines has been made by Robert Miles. In an article published in French, Miles argues that Gilroy, having:

> posited the existence of a 'black' social movement involving people of Afro-Caribbean and South Asian origin . . . ignore[s] the nature and content of cultural forms of South Asian origin. As a result, we are left with an analysis in which it appears that people of South Asian origin are granted a 'walk-on' part in a cultural context shaped largely, if not exclusively, by young British people of Caribbean origin (Miles 1991: 150–151; p. 14 in English typescript version, kindly supplied by the author).

'Black' Obscures Asian Needs and Distorts Analysis

Because 'black' is powerfully evocative of people of African origins, its usage inevitably gives prominence to Afro-Caribbeans, to the point that it obscures the fact that amongst non-white groups in Britain, Asians form an ever-growing majority. While this is not usually quite as gross as the two recent academic assertions that, of non-white groups, people of West Indian origins are most numerous (McIlroy 1989: 235; Waldinger *et al.* 1990: 85), this error does represent a genuine state of mind in this country, not least amongst race egalitarians. Ken Young and Pat Gay's claim of an Afro-Caribbean under-representation amongst Community Relations Officers is typical of occupational analyses which are only coherent on the false assumption that Afro-Caribbean and Asian populations are roughly of the same size (Young and Gay 1988: 83–84 and 95). I have elsewhere given examples of how this marginalisation of Asians is widespread in research and political literature (Modood 1988a: 399–400), so it is not therefore surprising that it should also exist at the level of practical action. For example, Bonnett found that 'most of the "Black Studies" courses introduced in inner-city schools in the early 1970s were dominated almost exclusively by African, Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American self-image and history' (1990: 4). Of course this is a 1970s example and therefore pre-dates the institutional use of the inclusive 'black'; but what, then, is the explanation behind the following two 1989 examples.

Linbert Spencer, a prominent race equality professional, managed to get through a whole BBC Radio 4 programme on case-studies of racial discrimination in employment without a single Asian appearing, and the TUC workbook, *Tackling Racism*, much of which was in the form of photographic cameos, was notable (except that nobody noticed it) too, for a virtual absence of Asian faces. Perhaps these are all errors and over-sights that can be corrected in due course. What, however, is one to make of the deliberate and institutionalised expression of this inequality in the Labour Party's Black Sections' resolution in early 1989 that, despite their over 2:1 population ratio, Asian and Afro-Caribbean MPs should be in equal numbers?

Where there is a mental and numerical marginalisation, it naturally follows that the distinctive concerns of the Asian communities will be marginalised. It is notable, for example, that despite the high levels of attacks on Asians and their property from the 1960s onwards, attempts to get the police and policy makers to address this basic issue of security had, till very recently, been less effective than the attempts to get them to focus on the equality of treatment of offenders by the criminal justice system, an issue up to now of far less importance to Asians. Immigration rules, transmission of parental culture to children, minority religious observance in schools, support for large families and self-employment are a number of issues which are of greater importance to Asians than to others, but because Asians have not been in a position to push them to the top of the agenda, these have received relatively less attention in the race equality movement than Asians have felt they deserved. The shock of the Rushdie Affair to this movement is a very good example of the lack of understanding there is of Asian community concerns (Modood 1989 and 1990). Yet, as we all know, it is shocks such as these, though the Rushdie Affair was far more peaceful than is usual with anti-racism explosions, that lead to paradigm-shifts, and I am pleased to note that the point I am making here has begun to get recognition. Malcolm Cross (1991) in a *New Community* editorial has asked for the putting aside of simple social science conflations and for a new agenda for policy and research built out of the self-expression of ethnic minorities and their own critiques of their oppression. More specifically, John Rex, whose perspective is well known for giving primacy to metropolitan social structures and distributive processes over ethnicity, has recently stated:

> It can be argued that amongst social scientists and policy makers, the structure of the various Asian communities and the problems which Asians face have been seriously misunderstood because of the focus on the disadvantages suffered by, and discrimination against, Blacks (1991: 93).

A Too Politicised Identity

Asians (and for that matter any other group) need a richer and more rounded public identity than one focussed on politics can allow. People of

African origins can use the concept of 'black' with a historical depth and a cultural texture through freighting it with an African diasporic ethnic pride, as famously captured in the 'Black is Beautiful' slogan, or in the newer idea of 'black Atlantic' (Gilroy 1993). For Asians, 'black' can be no more than 'a political colour', a reference to a limited aspect of their being, which inevitably requires them to give greater prominence to an aspect of their political being than is important to them or than they consider sensible; and, willy nilly, it gives a leadership role to those Asians who, whatever their standing in or commitment to the various Asian communities, can identify with and internalise the politics of anti-colour discrimination. This is too gross a strait-jacket for Asian community concerns and qualities which Asians may wish to promote.

Interestingly enough, as a result of *The Satanic Verses* affair, some Muslim activists are simplifying the range and variety of Muslim values and practices into a simple oppositional, political Islamism, so that the very term 'Muslim' becomes identified with their own political causes. It is interesting that many of those who have been at the forefront in homogenising non-whites under 'black' now forcefully criticise Muslim activists for manufacturing, out of a Muslim heterogeneity, a homogeneity to suit their political ends! Thus the Southall Black Sisters responded to the political Islamism of the Rushdie Affair by setting up Women Against Fundamentalism 'to challenge the assumption that minorities in this country exist as unified, internally homogeneous groups' (Women Against Fundamentalism 1990: 2; see also Yuval-Davis 1992: 284), and in particular to oppose the 'seemingly seamless (and supra-racial) Muslim consensus in Britain' (Connolly 1990: 6). In a similar vein, the ESRC Centre for Research into Ethnic Relations at the University of Warwick has deemed that ethnic mobilisation around Islam is 'potentially negative' because it offends liberal and secular values and distracts from work towards colour-equality, while 'social and political action based on racial considerations' is thought to be 'creative' (CRER 1990: 4–5). My point is not simply to show how a pro-'black' point of view can easily become an anti-'Muslim' one; the critical point is that those who deployed, or went along with a coercive, essentialist, political concept of 'black' have no principled arguments against a coercive, essentialist, political concept of 'Muslim' – hence their opposition must turn on a secular prejudice against religious mobilisation despite all their arguments about the dangers to heterogeneity (Modood 1994).

Not Conducive to Ethnic Pride

Even if there is a descriptive, sociological concept of 'black' based upon statistically inferred colour discrimination (and I have already suggested that the concept of racial discrimination is more complex than colour discrimination), this concept is of a negative condition, of how *others* treat

oneself, not the basis of a positive identity likely to foster pride in one's origins and establish a secure psychological platform for active participation in British society. For, while mobilisation to secure rights requires a dynamic of group pride, 'black' serves to obscure Asian identities and smother the basis of ethnic pride.

The crux of the issue here rests on a distinction between the values, aspirations, and community structures of an oppressed group (its mode of being) and the social structures and ideological forms which oppress that group (its mode of oppression). A cardinal error of 1980s anti-racism is to substitute mobilisation around opposition to a mode of oppression (racism) for the freedom to be what one is and aspires to be, for one's mode of being. By understanding minorities such as Asians *primarily in terms of racism and anti-racism*, anti-racists in effect create group identities exclusively from the point of view of the dominant whites and fail to recognise that those whom white people treat as no more than the raw material of racist categorisation have, indeed, a mode of being of their own which defies such reduction (Modood 1990a). Many anti-racists' interest in Asians is not in Asians but in the condition of victim; Asians who experience racial discrimination are reduced to discriminated beings ('blacks') who happen to be Asians, and who should publicly proclaim their mode of oppression as their primary identity, while confining the symbolic power of their mode of being to secondary occasions. But this is too superficial a view of oppression and of ethnic mobilisation against racial subordination. We need a concept of race that enables us to understand that any oppressed group feels its oppression most according to those dimensions of its being which *it* (not the oppressor) values most; moreover, it will resist its oppression from those dimensions of its being from which it derives its greatest collective psychological strength. We see this very clearly with working class Asians (and other) Muslims. Despite being the most racially disadvantaged group in Britain, measured in terms of unemployment, over-representation in manual work, educational qualifications, poor housing, attacks on person and property and so on (Jones 1993), they have borne this marginal and oppressive condition with stoicism and kinship self-help, but exploded on an issue of religious honour, when it was perceived that *The Satanic Verses* not only limited one's material opportunities but attacked the very core of one's being (Modood 1990a, 1990b). It is most revealing that the Muslim protesters neither looked for nor were offered any 'black' solidarity and that one of the leaders of 'black' politics, Paul Boateng MP, dismissed Muslim anger as having nothing to do with 'the black discourse' (Kramer 1991: 75).It has been argued that as all identities are situational, individuals are capable of identities of several sorts, and that Asians can be found who have a strong Asian identity and a sense of political blackness, even if not fully acknowledged by themselves (Drury 1990). Drury offers as evidence that 92 per cent of a sample of about a hundred teenage Sikh girls in the early 1980s rejected the term 'black' as a self-description,

but a significant number thought there were commonalities of experience between all non-white people. Yet this surely confirms that a sense of being 'black' is for most Asians a forced identity, on the periphery of their conception of themselves and not a source of pride or even of self-defence. The general point I am making is not peculiar to Muslims or Asians. Materialistic theories of anti-racism typically underestimate the defence of group dignity and the positive role of ethnic pride. The 'black is beautiful' campaign in the long term reached far more American blacks than the civil rights campaign and, indeed, provided a personal and collective psychological dynamic which fed into the latter, and which enabled blacks to take advantage of the socio-economic opportunities created by the politics.

Some advocates of 'black' have themselves latterly argued that British anti-racism has been overconcerned with a white audience and too little concerned with understanding, relating to, or giving space to, the rich history of black self-emancipation, especially in respect of forms of expressive culture, and yet these forms of black resistance are critical to racial equality, broadly conceived (Gilroy 1987). This could perhaps be an important bridge for the acceptance of a parallel argument on behalf of Asians.

The Coerciveness of the Advocates of 'Black'

The final reason I offer is perhaps not inherent in the concept of 'black' but rather the way it has been promoted by its advocates. Given the various reasons why I think the concept is harmful to Asians, it was perhaps not likely that the majority of Asians would embrace it; and yet, with its simple appeal of political mobilisation and inter-group unity directed at a pervasive dimension of constraint affecting all non-whites, it was not impossible that Asians could be persuaded of its merits. The advocates of 'black', however, understandably impatient to build political power and effect change, operated as if the consent of Asians (and perhaps others) could be taken for granted and that the selling of the concept to the grass roots was unnecessary. This, however, while typical of a certain kind of militancy, may have been a fatal error (Bonnett 1990: 8–9). Working in racial equality administration and training in the mid and late 1980s, I have witnessed at first hand how 'black' has been, and continues to be, imposed in these contexts. I have had race equality activists and professionals flatly deny that there is an issue here to discuss, and have been ostracised for persisting with my argument and have been called, including in print, a trouble-maker and an anti-black racist.[5] Moreover, I know many Asians, blacks and whites who have said they have been intimidated from questioning the appropriateness of the concept of 'black'.

The charge of coercion is difficult to substantiate (hence my resort to anecdotal evidence), but one way in which it could be done is to demonstrate that the majority of Asians did not embrace the concept that the majority of

the professionals and activists were promoting; if this could be shown it could suggest not only that Asians did not support the professionals, etc., but that the Asians' failure to register their dissent in any major way was because they felt intimidated. When I first elaborated my critique, I naturally contended that the majority of Asians did not accept 'black' as a public identity. Yet I had to recognise that there was very little evidence to support my view (though I noted that those who could have gathered the evidence, namely, race relations researchers and those who fund them, had a vested interest in not doing so), though someone of the authority of Professor Bhikhu Parekh, Deputy Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality (1985–90) had explicitly stated that 'the term black is rejected by the bulk of the Asians' (Parekh 1987: xii). No one had thought the issue worthy of an opinion survey, in the absence of which Parekh has estimated that 'about 70 per cent resent it, 10 per cent identify themselves as black, and the rest do so with qualifications' (Roy 1988). This has so far proved to be an extremely insightful estimation. For when the BBC Asian television programme *Network East*, the audience of which is weighted towards the young, carried in March 1989 an item on this issue, even though several speakers accused Asians who objected to be called 'black' of being racist, stupid and divisive, this did not prevent, nearly two-thirds of the over 3,000 who took part in the subsequent telephone poll rejecting the term 'black' for Asians.[6] A battery of questions on identity are included in the PSI-SCPR Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities which will be the first time that the issue of 'black' and Asians will have been surveyed nationally. Till these findings are published in 1995 nothing superior to the BBC poll is available.

New Identities

These then, I suggest, are some of the reasons why the hegemony of 'black' over other ethnic/racial identities was doomed. If one single remark combines and epitomises these criticisms it is Yasmin Alibhai's contention that when most Asians hear the word 'black', they are unlikely to think of themselves, so many fail to apply for jobs where advertisements specifically welcome black people (*Woman's Hour*, BBC Radio 4, 17 November 1988). It is, therefore, not surprising that in 1988 some Asians decided that an anti-racism which was so out of touch with or defiant of basic Asian community concerns had to be challenged. The year began with the National Association of Asian Probation Staff boycotting the Home Office staff ethnic monitoring exercise because it classified Asians as a sub-division of Black, and was followed by an on-going debate in the minority press, especially in *New Life, Asian Herald* and the Afro-Caribbean *Voice*, with occasional overspills into the national media (Modood 1988b; Roy 1988; Uppal 1988; Kogbara 1988; *Heart of the Matter*, BBC TV, 10 July 1988) and academic journals (Modood 1988a).

This critique bore fruit when in December of that year the Commission of Racial Equality (CRE) decided to cease to recommend that people of Asian origin be classified as Black and in the following month the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) announced that they were proceeding to the next stage in the ethnic question trials for the 1991 Census with the same categories as the CRE. It is perhaps an open question as to the significance of these administrative decisions: were they just petty terminological changes or did they mark an important milestone in the philosophy of race relations? The CRE, which was disinclined to read too much into them, was told by a *New Statesman and Society* editorial that it 'should be publicising its decision with confidence instead of weakly whispering out an important decision, almost hoping nobody will notice' (23 December 1988). Phillip Nanton has argued that 'these attempts to capture an acceptable ethnic categorisation suggest that a fundamental change has taken place in the definition of ethnicity, for ethnic categories can no longer be regarded as 'given' but are open to interest group pressure and negotiation' (1989: 556). I would go further.

Race equality thinking consists of a number of different ideological strands. I have in mind ideological outlooks such as universalism which emphasises uniformity of treatment; or social utilitarianism which focuses on remedial state action to overcome racial disadvantage; or the anti-racism which is a dimension of class struggle; or the ethnic pluralism which emphasises the diversity of values, the cultural dimension of oppression and the non-political ways in which ethnic groups contribute to social outcomes including racial equality. Each of these is an important ingredient of egalitarian theory and practice, but different times and situations will see a different balance between them. With the possible exception of multi-cultural education, the balance in the 1980s was in favour of universalism and social utilitarianism wrapped in a rhetoric of anti-racism, and one of the expressions of this mix was the acceptance of the political 'black' into the mainstream. In taking the decision that utilitarian and anti-racist perspectives are not decisive on the question of ethnic monitoring, for monitoring classifications should harmonise with people's self-perceptions, the CRE and OPCS has limited these perspectives in favour of the principles of ethnic pluralism and respect for ethnic identities. It may be that this is an intimation of a new balance amongst the competing and complementary strands of our concept of racial equality. It may be that the decision to cease to officially impose the term 'black' upon people of South Asian origin will in retrospect be seen as marking the limit of the influence of militant anti-racism and the opening towards a new balance in the concept of racial equality.

One response of theorists such as Hall and Ali to the end-of-the-hegemony-of-'black' has been to shift attention from organised politics and social structures to cultural identities and their manufacture and communication, from 'a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics

of representation itself' (Hall 1992: 253). With this goes a celebration of 'new ethnicities' and cultural hybridity, and a critique of 'ethnic absolutism' – the idea that ethnic identities are simply 'given', are static and ahistorical and do not (or should not) change under new circumstances or by sharing social space with other heritages and influences. The emphasis on the *historical* nature of ethnicity (as opposed to conformity to an atemporal essence or an imagined golden age), on hybridity without loss of integrity or self-respect, on cultural openness and multi-textured identities, rather than on the coercive simplicities of 'black' absolutism, is to be welcomed, and may allow Asians to develop a more authentic repertoire of self-images than 'black' allowed. Yet this new turn is not without its dangers. If 'new' simply comes to describe the *avant-garde*, then it is clear that most British Asians will once again suffer marginalisation. A rejection of theories of primordial ethnic absolutism should not prevent us from accurately describing where most Asians are, regardless of whether it seems sufficiently 'new' or progressive. We must not pit 'new' and 'old' ethnicities against each other: we must avoid the elitism of cultural vanguardism that devalues and despises where the ordinary majority of any group or social formation is at – an elitism so thoughtlessly exemplified in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, to the loss of us all, new and old. And yet in the loss of hegemony there may be wisdom. For in place of a 'two-worlds' Britain, Rushdie now urges that we must stop thinking in binary, oppositional terms for 'the them-and-us rhetoric of victimisation, no matter how legitimate it may seem, creates as many cultural problems as it addresses' (Rushdie 1993).

Notes

*   This article is based on a paper given at the conference on 'The Mobilisation of Ethnic Minorities and Ethnic Social Movements in Europe', University of Warwick, 3–5 April 1992.
1.   The British Sociological Association's 'Anti-Racist Language: Guidance for Good Practice', states that 'some Asians in Britain object to the use of the word "black" being applied to them', but most British sociologists of race feel that an insufficient reason to seek a more appropriate terminology.
2.   Interestingly, the two British academics who have been stimulated to discuss the issue at any length have decided to abandon the term 'black'. One favours the less convenient but more descriptive, 'people who are not white' (Mason 1990), and the other has adopted 'Asian, black and other minority ethnic' (Cole 1993). Goulbourne's book (1991) is perhaps the first on British race relations to systematically replace 'black' with 'non-white'.
3.   This formulation is used by, for example, the London Boroughs of Haringey and Hackney. In private correspondence they have informed me that 'ethnic minorities' in the formula refers to Cypriots and Turks. Other uses of the formula mean the phrase to include Asians.
4.   Not that the position of non-whites in higher education is one of uniform under-representation, even at Oxbridge (Modood 1993).

5. Ali herself makes this charge against me (Ali 1991: 207); indeed, it was also made
    at the conference where this paper was given. It might therefore be appropriate
    for me to say that while I am aware of the mutual antipathies between Asians and
    Afro-Caribbeans (as described, e.g., in James 1986, and Bains 1988) I have
    always opposed them, treating them as no less a form of racial prejudice than that
    of whites for non-whites, and have endeavoured to develop my argument without
    conceding anything to them. For anyone interested in seeing how textual analysis
    can degenerate into misattribution, criticism by innuendo and character
    assassination, see Goulbourne 1993: 186–189.
6. A researcher with extensive knowledge of Asians, especially youth, in Southall
    was greatly surprised that as many as a third of all callers said 'Yes' to 'Black'
    and wonders whether all of those callers were Asians (Baumann, MS 1994).

References

ALI, Y. 1991. 'Echoes of Empire: Towards A Politics of Representation', in J. Cromer
and S. Harvey (eds), *Enterprise and Heritage: Cross Currents of National Culture*.
London: Routledge.
AMIN, K. and RICHARDSON, R. 1992. *Politics for All: Equality, Culture and The
General Election 1992*. London: The Runnymede Trust.
ANTHIAS, F. and YUVAL-DAVIS, N. 1992. *Racialised Boundaries*. London: Routledge.
BAINS, H. S. 1988. 'Southall Youth: An Old-Fashioned Story' in P. Cohen and H.
S. Bains (eds) *Multi-Racist Britain*. London: Macmillan.
BACK, L. 1993. 'Race, Identity and Nation within an Adolescent Community in
South London'. *New Community* 19:217–233.
BANTON, M. 1987. 'The Battle of the Name'. *New Community* 14:170–175.
BAUMANN, G. (MS 1994). *The Politics of Identity: Two Discourses of 'Culture' and
'Community' in a Suburb of London*, Monograph in Preparation.
BONNETT, A. 1990. 'Urban Struggle in Language: The Word 'Black' ', unpublished,
available from author at Department of Geography, University of Newcastle-Upon-
Tyne.
BONNETT, A. 1993. *Radicalism, Anti-Racism and Representation*. London: Routledge.
BOULTON, M. L. and SMITH, P. 1992. 'Ethnic Preferences and Perceptions Among
Asian and White British Middle School Children'. *Social Development* 1:55–56.
BROWN, C. 1984. *Black and White Britain*. Third PSI survey. London: Policy Studies
Institute.
BROWN, C. and GAY, P. 1985. *Racial Discrimination: 17 Years After the Act*. London:
Policy Studies Institute.
CENTRE FOR RESEARCH INTO ETHNIC RELATIONS. 1990. *Research Programme
1989–1993*. Occasional Paper in Ethnic Relations, no. 6.
COHEN, P. 1988. 'The Perversions of Inheritance: Studies in the Making of Multi-
Racist Britain', in P. Cohen and H. S. Bains (eds) *Multi-Racist Britain*. London:
Macmillan.
COLE, M. 1993. 'Black and Ethnic Minority' or 'Asian, Black and Other Minority
Ethnic: A Further Note on Nomenclature', *Sociology* 27:671–673.
COMMISSION FOR RACIAL EQUALITY. 1988. 'Ethnic Classification System Recom-
mended by CRE'. Press Statement, 7 December.
COMMISSION FOR RACIAL EQUALITY. 1990. *Sorry, It's Gone: Testing For Racial
Discrimination in the Private Rented Housing Sector*. London.
CONNOLLY, C. 1990. 'Washing Our Linen: One Year of Women against Funda-
mentalism'. *Women Against Fundamentalism* 1:5–8.
CROSS, M. 1990. 'Editorial'. *New Community* 17:307–311.

DHONDY, F. 1987. 'Speaking in Whose Name?'. *New Statesman*. 24 April.

DONALD, J. and RATTANSI, A. (eds) *'Race', Culture and Difference*. London: Sage.

DRURY, B. 1990. 'Blackness: A Situational Identity', paper given at New Issues in Black Politics conference. University of Warwick, 14–16 May.

DUMMETT, A. 1992. 'Problems of Translation'. *The Runnymede Bulletin*. February, 8.

FOYSTER *et al*. 1990. 'I Landed Twice as many Jobs as my Two Friends – But Then They Are Black', *Today*, 11 September.

GAY, P. and YOUNG, K. 1988. *Community Relations Councils: Roles and Objectives*. London: Commission for Racial Equality.

GILROY, P. 1987. *There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack*. London: Routledge.

GILROY, P. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: Verso.

GOULBOURNE, H. 1991. *Ethnicity and Nationalism in Post-Imperial Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

GOULBOURNE, H. 1993. 'Aspects of Nationalism and Black Identities in Post-Imperial Britain' in M. Cross and M. Keith (eds) *Racism, The City and The State*. London: Macmillan.

HALL, S. 1992. 'New Ethnicities' in Donald and Rattansi (eds), *op. cit.* 252–259.

HAZAREESINGH, S. 1986. 'Racism and Cultural Identity: An Indian Perspective'. *Dragon's Teeth* 24:4–10.

JAMES, W. 1986. 'A Long Way from Home: On Black Identity in Britain'. *Immigrants and Minorities* 5:258–284.

JONES, T. 1993. *Britain's Ethnic Minorities*. London: Policy Studies Institute.

JOWELL, R. *et al*. 1986. *British Social Attitudes: The 1986 Report*. Social and Community Planning Research. London: Gower.

KOGBARA, D. 1988. 'When is a Black not a Black?'. *The Independent*, 30 November.

KRAMER, J. 1991. 'Letter from Europe'. *New Yorker*, 14 January, 60–75.

LABOUR PARTY. 1985. *Positive Discrimination: Black People and the Labour Party*, London.

MARTIN, B. L. 1991. 'From Negro to Black to African American: The Power of Names and Naming'. *Political Science Quarterly* 106:83–107.

MASON, D. 1990. 'A Rose by any other Name . . .? Categorisation, Identity and Social Science'. *New Community* 17, 1:123–133.

McILROY, J. 1989. 'The Politics of Racism' in B. Jones (ed.) *Political Issues in Britain Today*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

MILES, R. 1991. 'Le Jeunes d'Origine Immigrée en Grande-Bretagne'. *Les Temps Modernes* 540–541:133–165.

MODOOD, T. 1988a. ' "Black", Racial Equality and Asian Identity'. *New Community* 14:397–404.

MODOOD, T. 1988b. 'Who is Defining Who?'. *New Society*, 4 March, 4–5.

MODOOD, T. 1989. 'Religious Anger and Minority Rights'. *Political Quarterly* 60:280–284.

MODOOD, T. 1990a. 'Catching Up with Jesse Jackson: Being Oppressed and Being Somebody'. *New Community* 17, 1:87–98.

MODOOD, T. 1990b. 'British Asian Muslims and the Rushdie Affair'. *Political Quarterly* 61, 2:143–60.

MODOOD, T. 1992. *Not Easy Being British: Colour, Culture and Citizenship*. London: Runnymede Trust and Trentham Books.

MODOOD, T. 1993. 'The Number of Ethnic Minorities in British Higher Education'. *Oxford Review of Education* 19, 2:167–182.

MODOOD, T. 1994. 'Establishment, Multiculturalism and British Citizenship'. *Political Quarterly* 65:53–73.

MORTIMER, J. 1992. 'A World Apart', An Interview with Salman Rushdie. *The Sunday Times*, 16 February.

MULLINGS, B. 1992. 'Investing in Public Housing and Racial Discrimination: Implications in the 1990s. *New Community* 18:415–425.

NANTON, P. 1989. 'The New Orthodoxy: Racial Categories and Equal Opportunity Policy'. *New Community* 15:549–564.

PAREKH, B. 1987. 'Preface' in J. W. Shaw *et al.* (eds.). *Strategies for Improving Race Relations*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

REX, J. 1991. *Ethnic Identity and Ethnic Mobilisation in Britain*. Monograph in Ethnic Relations No. 5. Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations, University of Warwick.

ROY, A. 1988. 'Asians Protest, we are not Black'. *The Sunday Times*, 26 June.

RUSHDIE, S. 1982. 'The New Empire Within Britain'. *New Society*, 9 December.

RUSHDIE, S. 1989. 'Choice Between Light and Dark'. *The Observer*, 22 January 1989.

RUSHDIE, S. 1993. 'Muslim World Needs Progressive Voices, Not A Culture Frozen in Time'. *The Independent*, 7 July:21.

SAGGAR, S. 1992. *Race and Politics in Britain*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

SARRE, P. 1989. 'Race and the Class Structure' in C. Hamnett *et al.* (eds). *The Changing Social Structure*. London: Sage.

SIVANANDAN, A. 1985. 'RAT and the Degradation of the Black Struggle'. *Race and Class*, XXVI(4).

SMITH, S. J. 1993. 'Residential Segregation and the Politics of Racialisation' in M. Cross and M. Keith (eds). *Racism, The City and The State*. London: Routledge, 1993.

TIZARD, B. and PHEONIX, A. 1993. *Black, White or Mixed Race?*. London: Routledge.

UPPAL, I. S. 1988. ' 'Black': The Word Making Asians Angry'. *Daily Mail*, 28 June.

WALDINGER, R., ALDRICH, H. and WARD, R. 1990. *Ethnic Entrepreneurs*. London: Sage.

WOMEN AGAINST FUNDAMENTALISM 1990. 'Founding Statement'. *Women Against Fundamentalism* 1:1.

YOUNG, K. 1992. 'Class, Race and Opportunity' in R. Jowell *et al. British Social Attitudes*, the 9th Report, Aldershot: SCPR.

YUVAL-DAVIS, N. 1992. 'Fundamentalism, Multiculturalism and Women in Britain' in Donald and Rattansi *op. cit.*, 278–291.

Biographical note: DR TARIQ MODOOD was a lecturer in political theory before entering racial equality policy work, including at the Commission for Racial Equality. Subsequently he has been a research fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford and University of Manchester, and is now a Senior Fellow at Policy Studies Institute. His publications include *Not Easy Being British: Colour, Culture and Citizenship* (Runnymede Trust, 1992), *Racial Equality* (Institute of Public Policy Research, 1994) and (co-author) *Changing Ethnic Identities* (PSI, 1994).

Address: Policy Studies Institute, 100 Park Village East, London NW1 3SR.