

# History: the British Communist Party's mixed record on racism

A review of Evan Smith, {British Communism and the Politics of Race} (Haymarket, 2018), £24.99

Sunday 7 July 2019, by [BROWN Geoff](#) (Date first published: 1 July 2019).

**Evan Smith's book deals with the Communist Party of Great Britain and anti-racism from 1945 to the early years of Margaret Thatcher's premiership. Aiming for a better understanding of the impact the Communist Party had on anti-racist politics, he has made a close reading of the party's publications, its internal documents and the secondary literature. The result is a carefully written study of the party's policy on race. Starting with the Communist Party at the height of its influence, with around 50,000 members and two MPs, he covers four decades to the early 1980s when, wracked by internal arguments, the party split and lost its political significance.**

During the early post-war years the CP, as it was known, was the only party of any size that opposed the colour bar, and its best comrades put this into practice. As its paper, the *Daily Worker*, reported in October 1953, two leading local Communists, the black former boxer, Len Johnson and the white scaffolder, Wilf Charles, who was the local CP branch secretary, entered the Old Abbey pub in Hulme, Manchester. Charles recalled what happened:

Len...ordered two pints and they said we don't serve Black men... I insisted they would serve him or no-one else would get served. So they brought in the police and they asked us to go—we created a tremendous problem inside the pub.

Next day I went to see the Lord Mayor and the Bishop of Manchester and got statements that they deprecated this action and...we put on a mass picket of blacks and whites from the Communist Party and progressives—some 200 people—so the ban was lifted in a matter of two or three days. [1]

However, if *Daily Worker* reports are a guide, such actions were rare. The party was very clear in its opposition to racism. But, as Claudia Jones, founder of the *West Indian Gazette* and the party's most important black member, pointed out, the party "is judged among colonial workers by its policy, but much more so by its deeds". [2] And the members tended to see racism as a problem that would be eliminated under socialism. Kath Labinjoh, the 17-year-old daughter of an African father and a white mother, was considering joining the CP at the 1945 May Day march in Manchester. She recalls arriving at the demonstration:

The Africans wanted to march separate and this man said to me "What do you think?" And I thought "Ooh, asking my opinion!" So I said "I think that's right because of the Union Jack" and he got quite angry. He said to me, "Come the revolution we'll give you your freedom" and I thought "Well, everybody is born free," and there was a contradiction there and it was a dogmatic contradiction so I thought scrub that. So I

didn't join the Communist Party. [3]

Such "class before race" politics flowed from Stalin's pre-war "Popular Front" policy requiring Communist Parties across Europe to build alliances with bourgeois parties in order to meet the threat of Germany after Hitler came to power. It meant softening criticism of British and French imperialism and, with this, undermining the party's internationalism and its theoretical understanding of the roots of racism. As Smith points out, this continued after the war, with the CP insisting on its patriotism. The new party programme, *The British Road to Socialism*, published in 1952, assumed that "a colonial-like relationship between Britain and its former colonies would continue after decolonisation had occurred". [4] The main enemy was not British but American imperialism. [5]

It was only after the crisis of 1956, when a third of its membership left over the revelations about Stalin's crimes and the Hungarian Revolution, that the party's West Indian Committee "led a rare victory of rank-and-file CPGB members in changing party policy from grassroots level", and getting the programme changed to include "the complete independence and right of self-determination" of former colonies. [6] As the language used by Jones above shows, members of the West Indian and West African branches in London were referred to as "colonial comrades" until well into the 1950s. [7] In the late 1950s "for most of the party's non-white membership, anti-racism and the concerns of the black workers were on the periphery of the party's agenda". [8]

Smith makes it clear that fighting racism in the here-and-now was not the CP's priority. A 1957 report from the party's International Department complained that, despite producing the pamphlet *No Colour Bar in Britain* and the leaflet *Stop Stirring up Race Hatred*, the party's commitment to anti-racism "does not appear to have penetrated deeply into the party membership". [9]

Trevor Carter, also a leading black member of the party, later wrote:

My impression was always that the left was genuinely concerned to mobilise the black community, but into their political battles. They never had time to look at our immediate problems, so it became futile to refer to them. So blacks ended up in total isolation within the broad left because of the left's basic dishonesty. They still believe they know more. It's an inbuilt prejudice of people born in the country which was our colonial master. [10]

The party followed the top-down, social democratic approach taken by the Labour MP Fenner Brockway who, through the 1950s into the 1960s, put forward a private member's bill outlawing racial discrimination eight times. While "divide and rule" was recognised, it seems that at no point did the CP discuss Marx's argument about how the ruling class uses racism as a key weapon to keep control over an increasingly organised working class. [11]

The CP was very proud of its members' record of fighting fascism at home and in Spain in the 1930s. But this led to a problem when it came to understanding the need to change tactics when facing other forms of racism. They certainly didn't relate to the point made by Harry McShane, a founder member of the Communist Party who left in the early 1950s, in his article "Lessons of the March", published in *Labour Worker*, the paper of the International Socialists and a forerunner of *Socialist Worker*. Writing about the September 1963 "March on Washington", famous for Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, McShane pointed to the weakness of the left, in particular the Communist Party. He warned that the fight against racism was not the same as fighting the fascists:

How does this struggle affect the people of this country? Are we free from racial hatred?  
It is the easiest thing in the world to lead a mob of hooligans against the coloured

minority living in this country. Unfortunately there is a “politically active” section of the working class that finds it easier to smash a meeting of Mosley fascists than to stand by coloured people when they are attacked. [12]

Despite anti-immigrant legislation being introduced in 1962 and 1968, Smith points out that, as the 1960s “wore on, the party’s anti-racist work, performed by an older cadre of members in the International Department, started to lag, based on the politics of anti-colonialism, which was losing its immediacy in the mid-1960s”. [13]

Even with a membership many times the size of its new rivals on the far left, the CP was increasingly left behind. [14] The party’s growing emphasis on winning official positions in the trade unions meant it missed out on the rank and file revolts such as Britain’s first major strike led by black workers at the giant Red Scar mill in Preston in 1965. [15] It entered what proved to be a terminal crisis when its key allies Hugh Scanlon and Jack Jones, the leading left union leaders in the TUC, supported the 1974-9 Labour government’s Social Contract which led to a 10 percent cut in working class living standards. As the fascist National Front exploited disillusionment with Labour and aimed to win a million votes in the next general election: “The militant stance taken by the Communist Party in the 1930s was appropriated by the International Socialists/Socialist Workers Party and it was this Trotskyist group who founded the Anti Nazi League”. [16]

At times Smith’s respect for the hard work and sacrifice of the CP’s members leads to oversimplifying. It’s true that it “threw its weight behind initiatives such as the Anti Nazi League”, [17] despite the “hostile attitude which the Communist Party had always manifested towards rival leftwing traditions”. [18] However, given the very large number of MPs, trade union leaders, sports personalities, etc sponsoring the ANL, people the CP had always sought to back its own initiatives, surely it had no choice?

Smith follows Stuart Hall, an important intellectual influence on the CP’s Eurocommunist wing for whom Thatcher’s election in 1979 was the key moment leading to the rise of neoliberalism. The argument that Thatcher made a revolution which fundamentally shifted British politics derives from the view that the upturn of the late 1960s and early 1970s was bound to be defeated. Smith includes a section on “The Beginnings of the ‘British Upturn’ and the Radicalism of ‘1968’”. [19] But a proper assessment of the upturn, particularly in its international context, could have followed this. The term “British Upturn”, comes from Chris Harman. All the stranger, then, to read that:

The CPGB’s far left rivals, the SWP and the IMG, also suffered from the shift in left thinking after Thatcher’s victory, with the IMG becoming an entrust group into the Labour Party by 1982-3 and Tony Cliff, as leader of the SWP, claiming that the British labour movement was experiencing a “downturn”. [20]

Given the reality of the downturn in shop-floor militancy, would not facing this fact have helped rather than hindered organising the fight back?

No apologist for Stalinism, Smith could have been clearer that until the Russian crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968, the CP in Britain never seriously challenged the political line coming from Moscow. It’s important to remember that it was Stalin’s decision to soften criticism of British and French imperialism that triggered the most important split from the Communist movement on the question of race. George Padmore, working for the Comintern and editor of its publication *The Negro Worker*, left the Comintern in 1933 and established what became the Pan African Federation. This had a considerable impact in the 1940s, not least organising the 5<sup>th</sup> Pan African Congress in 1945. In a variety of forms—including active support by CLR James—its ideas continued to be important through to the 1960s and 1970s. It would also have been useful to consider if the CP could

have made use of the example set by the CPUSA in the 1930s when it successfully organised an anti-racist movement in Alabama and worked to recruit members in black communities. [21] This would have helped show how the politics of the Popular Front and what followed led to a much softer Communist Party cadre. It may have had a much larger membership but its politics focused on winning allies to its right and over the years it shifted towards them, seeking respectability and supporting “non-discriminatory immigration controls”.

This connects with Satnam Virdee’s book *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider*. [22] Smith explains Virdee’s main ideas and quotes from the book frequently but dismisses its overall significance saying: “The Communist Party is not the main focus of [Virdee’s] book and discussion of its anti-racist activities beyond the 1950s is only mentioned in passing, compared with the rise of left-wing and black activist groups”. [23]

This is simply wrong. The CP is central to Virdee’s book and if its anti-racist activities beyond the 1950s can be described as “only mentioned in passing”, this is because of their weakness, not an omission on Virdee’s part. Smith needs to address Virdee’s argument about the CP’s politics, specifically how, in telling the story of how democracy developed in Britain over the centuries, *The British Road to Socialism* removed migrants from the story, in effect “whitewashing” the history of the working class in Britain.

Smith presents intersectionality as an important idea. In his introduction he tells us:

Overall, this book is the story of the relationship between British Communism and the politics of “race”, and how the juxtaposition between the politics of class and ethnicity has informed the contemporary debates on intersectionality, hybridity and identity politics in the twenty-first century. [24]

In fact he tells us little about these debates. He maintains that intersectionality is essentially what Stuart Hall was arguing in *Marxism Today* where he: “promoted the notion that an individual’s politics are informed by a multitude of experiences and identity formations—what could be described as ‘intersectionality’ in contemporary theoretical terms”. [25] It would have helped to look at whether this could also be seen as a retreat from the idea of the class struggle as the motor of history.

Smith does a thorough job in what he sets out to do, working with the documents. But this means he leaves out much of what was happening on the ground. It’s worth going to the section on “Racism in Britain” in John Callaghan’s history of the CP, 1951-68, to get a picture of the CP in action. [26] Howard Zinn makes a related point about writing the history of the Civil Rights Movement. He contends that concentrating on the events covered by the literature, overwhelmingly the big events, forgets that most of the time the struggle takes place on a much smaller scale, very often unreported:

The history of social movements often confines itself to the large events, the pivotal moments... Missing from such history are the countless small actions of unknown people that lead up to those great moments. When we understand this, we can see that the tiniest acts of protest in which we engage may become the invisible roots of social change. [27]

Len Johnson and Wilf Charles’s breaking the colour bar in a pub in 1953 and Kath Labinjoh’s refusal to march under a Union Jack in 1945 referred to in the book are significant actions. Particularly in the context of today’s urgent discussions on the rise of the far right, we have to understand what is going on in small-scale struggles such as these if we are to be able to make sense of the big events

when they happen.

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## **P.S.**

International Socialism

<http://isj.org.uk/tackling-racism-the-communist-party/>

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## Footnotes

- [1] *Daily Worker*, 1 October 1953 and 3 October 1953. See also, Herbert, 1992.
- [2] Smith, 2018, p255.
- [3] Okojie, 1995.
- [4] Smith, 2018, p36.
- [5] Smith, 2018, p37.
- [6] Smith, 2018, p65.
- [7] Smith, 2018, p64.
- [8] Smith, 2018, p68.
- [9] Smith, 2018, p60.
- [10] Smith, 2018, p111, Carter and Coussins, 1986, p140, italics in the original.
- [11] See Marx's letter to Meyer and Vogt—Marx and Engels, 1975, pp220-224.
- [12] McShane, 1963.
- [13] Smith, 2018, p119.
- [14] Smith, 2018, p119.
- [15] Prasad, 2016.
- [16] Smith, 2018, p4.
- [17] Smith, 2018, p162.
- [18] Smith, 2018, p190.
- [19] Smith, 2018, p93.
- [20] Smith, 2018, p217.
- [21] Kelley, 1990.
- [22] Virdee, 2014, see also Antony Hamilton's review in this journal—Hamilton, 2015.
- [23] Smith, 2018, p19.
- [24] Smith, 2018, p8.

[25] Smith, 2018, p14.

[26] Callaghan, 2003, pp105-113.

[27] Zinn, 1994, p24.