

Racism, National Oppression and Free National Development

This is a contribution to the debate, now taking place in the RCL, on our line in relation to the struggles of national minority people.

This article argues that a policy of free national development is crucial to a strategy for revolution in Britain, taking into account both the strength which imperialism derives from national oppression and racism, and the strength of anti-imperialist struggle which resides within the oppressed nationalities. It does not deal with the question of the oppressed nations of Scotland and Wales. Its scope is limited to the position of the oppressed national minorities in Britain, who originate mainly, although not exclusively, from the Third World. In particular there is a need to examine the phenomenon of racism in this context.

There are many excellent critiques of racism produced by modern social and biological scientists. A classic description is given by the ethnographer Dr. Alfred Metraux:

"Racism is one of the most disturbing phenomena of the great revolution of the modern world. At the very time when industrial civilisation is penetrating all points of the globe and is uprooting men of every colour from their age-old traditions, a doctrine, speciously scientific in appearance, is invoked to rob these men of their full share in the advantage of the civilisation forced upon them.

"There exists in the structure of Western civilisation a fatal contradiction. On the one hand, it wishes and insists that certain cultural values, to which it attributes the highest virtues, be assimilated by other people. But, conversely, it will not admit that two-thirds of humanity is capable of attaining this standard which it has set up. Ironically, the worst sufferers from racial dogma are usually the people whose intellect most forcibly demonstrates its falseness." (1)

This illustrates three important points about racism. First, that it is based on a spurious pseudo-scientific theory of a correlation between physical attributes and mental traits. This is brought out in the definition of race by Pierre L. van den Berghe as:

"a human group which defines itself and/or is defined by other groups as different from other groups by virtue of innate and immutable physical characteristics. These physical characteristics are in turn believed to be intrinsically related to moral, intellectual, and other non-physical attributes or abilities". (2)

Second, that even while this uncouth version of racism is still prevalent, there is a more sophisticated version of racism reinforcing it, and waiting in the wings to take its place if it is popularly discredited. This is that, while physical characteristics may not justify the assumption of a hierarchy of races, there is a hierarchy of cultures, the superiority and infer-

iority of which may depend on some complex factors like geography, climate, historical accident or inherent weakness. Third, that it is the cultures of Europe within recent centuries which have been responsible for the creation and dissemination of the ideology of racism. Professor Essien-Udom points out:

"The modern ideas about race and the modern manifestations of 'racism' are of European origin. Their spread in Asia and Africa, in America and the Caribbean derives from superior technology, which made it possible for Europe to establish colonial rule in those parts of the world." (3)

Marxists have not developed any unique analysis of racism. Marxists do, however, locate the origins of racism in the material conditions of colonialism and imperialism. While an overall analysis of imperialism begins with an understanding of its internal economic development, the development of monopoly capitalism and the fusions of industrial capital with finance capital, in its external development its material base lay in the subordination and subjugation of nations. The relationship between racism and national oppression is clearly stated in the Programmatic Document of the RCL, 1981, para 70:

"Racism is a total ideology originating in the slave trade of developing capitalism and only becoming fully defined with the development of capitalism into imperialism. Imperialism oppresses and superexploits the nations and peoples of the Third World and theories of racial inferiority were developed in the late 19th century to justify the wholesale colonial enslavement of the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America. The economic basis to racist ideology continues to be national oppression by imperialism, although principally by neo-colonial means."

Imperialism did not develop this ideological justification primarily for the consumption of those nations themselves. To the extent that a self-deprecating form of it permeated the oppressed nations, this was a temporary bonus. The justification was meant for the populations of the white European nations. It was aimed at dissenting views among the bourgeoisie itself, and at the intellectuals. That this was essential can be seen from the 'heretical' views expressed by Darwin:

"As man advances in civilisation, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point being once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to the men of all nations and races."

(4)

Primarily of course, the racist creed was meant for the subordinate classes in the white countries, and, above all, for the emerging proletariat.

It is a common oversimplification among progressive people that racism exists to divide the working class. Thus in para 64 of the Programmatic Document it is said that, *"the fundamental aim of racist oppression is to divide the working class"*. While there is some truth in this, it is far from an adequate picture. Most obviously, it cannot explain the function of racist ideology at its inception, for the simple reason that at that time the working class was all white. And if it cannot explain it at that stage, then it is also incapable of analysing the nature of a cultural phenomenon which has existed for at least a century.

For, although racism may be re-structured by the ideological apparatus of the ruling class in each phase of imperialist development, in order to relate it to the changing specific needs of that phase, it is also transmitted from one generation to the next within the working class.

Undoubtedly there are aspects of this "divisiveness" function even in the early stages of the development of racism, because this development was very complex. On the one hand, the concept of race is so amorphous that it can be applied to differences between nations, even when those nations do not exhibit marked physical differences from one another, such as skin colour. Thus in Britain racist antagonism was generated towards neighbouring white nations at the historical point when the doctrine of white supremacy was in its infancy. The obvious example is racism towards the Irish people. On the other hand, colonial penetration took the form of emigration of the surplus labour force from the imperialist nations, and racism played its part in dividing poor settler from indigenous population - as in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

But what must be grasped conceptually is the principal function of racism, which has been the ideological concomitant of imperialism's oppression of nations. As far as the subordinate classes in the imperialist countries were concerned, racism justified the subordination of other nations to the nation of which they were members. A former officer of the Indian Civil Service at the turn of the century pointed out that there was :

"a cherished conviction shared by every Englishman in India, from the highest to the lowest, ;..the conviction in every man that he belongs to a race which God has destined to govern and subdue." (5)

A conviction, it might be added, shared by almost every Englishman in England. The results of this were to prevent any opposition from the working class of the oppressor nation to the oppression of other nations and to take the edge off their opposition to their own exploitation by the ruling class of their own nation. Racism enlisted the support of the subordinate classes, principally the working class, in the process of subjugation and depredation of the oppressed nations.

Divisiveness, in various forms, is apparent at all stages in the history of racism. Racism has operated to prevent the proletariat of the imperialist countries from seeing their common interest with the oppressed colonial peoples since the 1st World War and the Russian revolution. With the advent of relatively large-scale immigration from the Third World to Britain, racism has prevented the white workers from seeing their common interest with black workers. But it would be to underestimate the true nature and strength of racism in the white working class to mistake these secondary aspects for the essence of racism, which is to create an alliance, however temporary, shifting and contradictory, between the classes of oppressor nation, directed against the oppressed nationalities.

For the oppressed nationalities, and particularly for the fragments of the oppressed nationalities in the imperialist countries, (national minorities) this development of racism has important consequences. Far from being a phenomenon distinct from national oppression, and one susceptible to a less radical solution than the national question, racism is an ideology derived from national oppression and intimately bound up with it. The objective form which racism takes in a racist society, which may be termed racist oppression, is the highest and most vicious form of national oppression. For the oppressed, their primary struggle is against that oppression, and it takes the form of a struggle between nationalities. So long as the alliance between the classes within the oppressor nation continues, it must be a struggle even against the subordinate classes of that nation.

It is a feature common to both right and left forms of opportunism on this question to regard the struggle against racism as a class question alone subsumed within the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The rightist form, seen within tendencies like the CPGB and 'left' Labour, is to call for the assimilation of the national minorities with the majority nationality. They regard all as "British", and argue that the contradiction posed by racist oppression will disappear once the assimilation is complete. The means of effecting it are state conciliatory bodies like the CRE, equal opportunities legislation, and certain liberal adjustments in society which recognise some superficial elements of the culture of national minorities. The leftist form is to reduce everything to the contradiction between workers and capitalists, and thus to condemn any attitudes which are seen as dividing the working class. The racist supremacism of the white working class and the assertion of identity of the national minorities are treated as equal or nearly equal, enemies. The roots of this chauvenism lie in the traditional Trotskyist downgrading of the national question in any context, exemplified by the Militant Tendency's arguments for replacing national liberation struggles by some imagined unity between workers of the oppressor and oppressed nations - British and Irish workers, Israeli and Palestinian workers etc.

Such approaches are intended to facilitate two consequences: the elimination of antagonism between nationalities and the provision of conditions for a successful re-structuring of power relations in society (right) or revolution (left). In fact they achieve the opposite. Denial of the existence of contradictions between oppressors and oppressed nationalities not only creates greater suspicion, fear and hatred in the minority nationalities, it also endorses racism. An assimilation policy reinforces the claims of racism of the superiority of the majority nationality (because it is always the minority which must assimilate into the majority). And, far from increasing the potential for revolution, these approaches put the roadblocks of chauvenism in its path. They ignore the weaknesses within the working class of the majority community which have historically held it back from developing its revolutionary potential. And they fail to recognise the tremendous force for revolution within the struggle of the oppressed national minorities, the manifestations of which, like the summer 1981 uprisings, have already shaken imperialist reaction and exposed the unholy alliance between the capitalists and the labour movement representatives more than any movement which the white working class can produce at present.

To reduce the struggle against national oppression to a class question, in the terms of the labour:capital contradiction, or to subordinate it to the struggle of the working class of the imperialist nation, leads only to the chauvenism which has characterised successive betrayals of the revolutionary cause in the imperialist countries. The contradiction between the oppressed national minorities and the majority nationality, emerging from national oppression and exacerbated by racism's recruitment of the white working class to the side of imperialism, must be recognised. The revolutionary force released by it has an integral part to play in the struggle to overthrow imperialism. The alliance brought about by racism is weak and vulnerable. The struggle of the working class against their subordination and the struggle of the national minorities against their oppression can only succeed by overthrowing imperialism. Mutual recognition of these two struggles, facilitated by the presence of most of the oppressed nationalities in the working class camp, can strengthen each by destroying the racist alliance. The present conditions of imperialist crisis are very favourable for this development: the shifting of the balance of forces internationally in favour of the Third World; the intensification of the revolutionary Republican struggle in Ireland; the growing dissatisfaction of the unemployed and underemployed; the disillusion and unrest among the youth; the weakening of the traditional organs of the labour movement and thus their control over the disenfranchised

masses of British society. The catalytic element in this situation would be a revolutionary alliance between the working class and the national minorities.

The potential for, and necessity of, such an alliance is indicated by history. The Russian revolution and the 1st World War, events related to the development of imperialism as a world-wide system, brought about an objective alliance, on the international level, between the proletariat of the imperialist countries and the oppressed nations of the colonial and semi-colonial countries. The struggle for socialism and the struggle against national oppression were from that point welded together in a single world revolutionary movement. National movements before that, which were part of the bourgeois revolutionary stage, may have contradicted the struggle for socialism. The October Revolution was the product of the alliance between the proletariat and the oppressed nations within the Russian empire. The Chinese revolution was based on a co-ordination between the struggle of the whole Chinese people and the struggle of China's minority nationalities against Han chauvenism.

From the experiences of these countries certain general elements can be abstracted. Firstly, only the alliance between the struggle of the subordinate classes and the struggle of the oppressed nationalities can provide the necessary conditions for revolution. Second, socialism destroys the objective basis for national oppression, but it does not complete the process of the emancipation of the oppressed nationalities, nor extinguish the contradictions between dominant and subordinate nationalities. Third, positive measures must be taken, in the post-revolutionary society, to promote the oppressed nationalities and allow them to develop their national potential. Fourth, far from being a period of assimilation of nationalities, whether by force or by voluntary development, socialism is a period of the flourishing of oppressed nationalities, necessarily because only with the revolution have the shackles to their development been removed. The policy which sums up this process, and which can bring together the subordinate classes and the oppressed nationalities in the revolution, is "free national development".

There are clearly differences between the multi-national countries of the Soviet Union and China, where the oppressed nationalities existed, generally speaking, within their own territories and histories, for many centuries, and the situation in Britain, where the national minorities have immigrated only comparatively recently. It may be argued that developed capitalism provides the conditions for a fusion of nationalities, and that there is no historical potential of nation formation which has been frustrated by the oppressor nation. Such an argument neglects the contribution of imperialism and racism. Imperialism has brought about the suppression of national development for the whole nations from which these fragments have come, and their fragmentation is part of that process. The full development of the nationalities now in Britain has been truncated by a total process beginning with the slave ships in West Africa and the East India Company's occupation of South Asia, continuing through to the movements of Asian and Afro-Caribbean people to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, and the racist oppression which has followed. Racism has raised that process to a new level, within which the British working class has been actively recruited for national subjugation. It is thus impossible for the Third World peoples in Britain to assimilate with the majority nation. They themselves would refuse this option even if it were open. For racism has created its own counterpart and antagonist, the anti-white consciousness of Third World peoples, particularly Black peoples, which transcends geographical boundaries. The policy of free national development is therefore appropriate in Britain, although its content will be different from the situation in a multi-national country with relatively established national communities.

The elements of the policy were defined by Stalin as:

"to help the regenerated nations of our country to rise to their feet, to their full stature, to revive and develop their national cultures widely to develop schools, theatres and other cultural institutions functioning in the native languages, to naturalise - that is, to staff with the members of the given nation - the Party, trade union, co-operative, state and economic organs..." (6)

While China did not find appropriate the particular solution of a federation of autonomous republics necessary to the Soviet Union, she adopted a policy of regional autonomy. This is described in a recent article by Ulanhu, a CPC leading cadre from the Mongol nationality:

"Over the past 60 years, the Chinese communists with Comrade Mao Zedong as the principal representative have integrated the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism with the political situation of China's nationalities and formulated, implemented and developed a policy on regional autonomy of minority nationalities. The essence of our policy on regional autonomy of minority nationalities is the establishment of autonomous areas of minority nationalities on the basis of regions where minority nationalities live in compact communities within the country's integral and inseparable territories and under the unified leadership of the Supreme State organs. Autonomous organs are formed consisting mainly of personnel of the minority nationalities which practice autonomy. They can fully exercise their rights of autonomy on the basis of the principle of democratic centralism. In accordance with the State's general principles and policies and with reference to the practical situations of their own nationalities and areas, they can decide for themselves their specific principles and policies and act on their own in managing the affairs of their own nationalities and areas". (7)

The specific application of the policy of free national development must depend on the concrete situation of nationalities in Britain. But the general principles disclosed by the application of such policies by developed Communist parties are an important guide line, especially at this preliminary stage of development of theory.

Essential to the policy is a territorial component, the establishment of autonomous territorial units in the areas where "minority nationalities live in compact communities". There are "practical" arguments put forward against this in Britain, on the grounds that the communities of national minorities are too small, that the national minority people are too scattered among the majority nationality, that they are too intermingled with each other. The argument of size is itself a product of big nation chauvenism. In China, a country of over 900 million people, "Regional autonomy was even given to the Orogen nationality, which had a population of only about 2,000 in the early post-liberation period". (8). The argument of scattering among the majority nationality is essentially an argument relating to the fear of "domination" by the national minority in autonomous areas, and will be dealt with as such. The argument of the intermingling of minority nationalities stems from a failure to recognise the capacity of oppressed nationalities to co-operate with each other, once the fetters of national oppression are broken and the domination of the majority nationality removed. All these arguments are in fact quibbling over details, in order not to confront the basic question of whether to support the struggle against national oppression or to oppose it.

There are three facets of free national development, the political, economic and cultural. The first is a question of the distribution of power in national minority areas. In those areas decisions are made by politicians, officials, police and judges belonging to the majority nationality. The outstanding struggles today are in relation to the repression of the black communities by the police and the fascists. In this context the demand for the right to community self-defence has arisen. The seeds of the demand for

autonomy lie within this demand and related question like the police force and jury composition. But the Chinese example show that free national development goes much further:

"Nationalisation is the prerequisite for exercising the right to autonomy. There are several aspects of nationalisation. The key link is the nationalisation of cadres in autonomous offices. The organisations and work of autonomous offices should be primarily handled by personnel of local minority nationalities. This means: Principal leading posts in autonomous offices must be held by people of local minority nationalities, and the number of cadres of minority nationalities should be proportionate to the size of their population. It is imperative to guarantee that every cadre of a minority nationality be truly entrusted with the responsibility and authority that should go with his post". (9)

In the field of economics, national minorities suffer from the worst living standards, the highest rate of unemployment, the worst housing and public facilities. Partly this results from discrimination, partly from the fact that racism has kept them, in general, in the lowest socio-economic echelons of society. In order to overcome this, free national development must include the allocation of a disproportionate share of the resources of socialist society to develop national minority areas and to ensure employment, training, and education for national minority people. Autonomy will ensure that the resources are administered by national minorities themselves.

In the field of culture, national minorities are gravely disadvantaged. It is always difficult for a smaller national group to retain its cultural identity in the midst of a dominating one. This is exacerbated by the dominance of the bourgeois materialist values of Western culture throughout the world, and the control of the basic technology of communications by the imperialist ruling class. Above all there is the racist assumption of the hierarchy of cultures. An example of how racism attempts to destroy cultures is the position of the languages of the Caribbean. While Western educationalists treat the syncretic language of an oppressor nation like Afrikaans, as a language, the Caribbean languages are downgraded as mere dialects of European languages - English, French or Dutch. National minority cultures can only flourish in all their aspects in the context of free national development.

The policy of free national development can only be implemented under socialism. But the adoption of this policy can provide a framework for the support of particular democratic demands of national minority people in imperialist society, such as the right to community self-defence, affirmative action and specialised education. In the longer term, the policy is the basis for the alliance between the twin streams of struggle against 'British imperialism' the struggle of the working class and of the national minority people. It is the means of freeing the working class from the ideological bonds which tie them to imperialism, and thus of winning the trust and co-operation of the national minorities.

Three arguments against this policy must be discussed. The first is that the policy is itself divisive, alienating the white working class from the struggle of the national minorities, and isolating the national minorities from the white working class. The logical conclusion of such an argument is the abandonment of the struggle against racism. The struggle against racist oppression is carried out by the oppressed. Such a struggle inevitably divides them from the white working class because racism is the predominant ideology within that population. If divisiveness is the test, the struggle against racism must stop. The argument also suggests that the anti-racists within the majority population will be driven back into the imperialist fold by the

policy of free national development. Those who are not genuine anti-racists may, but they would anyway exhibit their intrinsic chauvenism as the struggles of the national minorities are stepped up. The argument entails that the struggle against racist oppression must be waged at the pace which the majority nationality can accept. In other words, the national minorities must wait until the white working class (whose struggle against capital is, after all, much more important!) are ready to support them, and to divest themselves of their racism spontaneously. In essence, the argument transfers the responsibility for the divisiveness of racism from the imperialist bourgeoisie to the national minorities themselves.

The second, and related argument is that the policy will provoke antagonism from the majority population because of resentment or fear of "domination" by the national minority in the areas of autonomy. Such attitudes are inevitable when imperialism and racism prevail. Racist thinking endorses the domination of the oppressor nationality, and cannot conceive of the equality of nationalities. But under socialism the objective basis racism and national oppression will no longer exist. The majority of the whole population will be in command of the whole country. Ulanhu clearly demonstrates the fallacy in this "domination by the oppressed" argument :

"Because in many autonomous areas of minority nationalities, there are more Han people than minority nationality people, some comrades do not agree to the predominance in the autonomy organs of personnel of the nationalities exercising autonomy and even think that this is unfair to the Han people. This is obviously wrong. Here two points need explaining: First, citizens of all nationalities in autonomous areas of minority nationalities are masters of the country and they all enjoy equal rights and have to perform equal duties. This is a different question from having the predominance in the autonomy organs of the nationalities exercising autonomy. Second, when we say regional autonomy of nationalities, the word "nationalities" means minority nationalities making up the main body of the population there. The word "regional" means places where minority nationalities making up the main body of the population live in compact communities, and the word "autonomy" means autonomy of the minority nationalities making up the main body of the population there. The Han nationality makes up the great majority of the population of the country and there is no need for them to practise autonomy in the autonomous areas of minority nationalities, nor is it necessary to have Hans predominate in the autonomy organs... of course, all autonomy organs of autonomous regions of minority nationalities should definitely ensure equal rights among different nationalities, encourage different nationalities to respect one another, to learn from one another and to help one another, continuously strengthen solidarity among nationalities, make the relationship among nationalities closer and eliminate prejudice and estrangement among nationalities." (10)

The third argument is of a different order. It begins from the premise that racist oppression is not national oppression, but racial oppression, a question of black and white. Therefore any autonomy would be racial autonomy - black regional autonomy. This would be wrong because black people are not a nation, and because it would perpetuate racial categorisation. The error lies in the premise, which elevates the concept of racial difference a product of false ideology, to the status of an objective basis for oppression.

It is useful, however, to examine the reasons which obscure national oppression in the context of the imperialist metropolis. Firstly, the development of racism against Third World (mainly black) peoples has made the oppression they face within Britain far more intense than the oppression of white national minorities. Second, there is the growth of anti-white

consciousness, by which the oppressed black nationalities resist national oppression and racism. This leads to an identification between the oppressed and a development of solidarity in struggle which, though as yet not complete is an important factor in the effectiveness of resistance to national oppression. It is impossible to say exactly how this will effect the policy of free national development. If the increasing unity of black people should lead them to demand black autonomy rather than autonomy on nationality lines, this will be a progressive development. It is certainly not for the majority nationality to seek to reverse it. A general policy of free national development can encompass the specific needs of the concrete conditions in any given country.

This development of a common struggle by black people shows the strength of the resistance of the nationally oppressed as a distinct stream of struggle against imperialism. The ideologies of black power and black consciousness are basic elements of anti-imperialism, and a rich and fertile theoretical and practical tradition for national minority peoples. The common struggle of black people provides a closer link with the increasing unity of the Third World against imperialism, with the spirit of Afro-Asian unity exemplified by the Bandung Conference. (11) In the British context, the ready identification by black resistance movements with the cause of the Irish freedom struggle shows their clear anti-imperialist nature.

The uprisings of summer 1981 demonstrate four elements, which are marked developments of the struggle in Britain: black consciousness, defence of national minority areas, anti-imperialism and rejection of the traditional methods and organs of the bought off sections of the labour movement. It is significant that the uprisings drew into the struggle against the state forces members of those sections of the white working class with the least identification with the social democratic and social imperialist tradition, in particular the unemployed youth. The concrete struggle of the oppressed itself develops the links between different streams of struggle against imperialism. The traditional framework of analysis, based on the reducibility of all contradictions to the terms of the labour:capital contradiction, is incapable of grasping the distinct elements of anti-imperialist struggle, and thus obscures the living relationships between those elements which are developed in the course of that struggle.

NOTES

1. *Unesco Courier*, July, 1950.
2. *Race and Racism*, New York, 1967.
3. "Tribalism and Racism", in Kuper (ed), *Race, Science and Society*, Paris and London, 1975.
4. Charles Darwin, *Descent of Man*, 2nd edn., 1875, pp. 187-8.
5. Collins and Lapierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, London. 1982, pp. 21-2.
6. Stalin, *The National Question and Leninism*, 1929, Works 11, p. 369.
7. "The glorious course of regional autonomy of minority nationalities", *People's Daily*, 14th July, 1981.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. "Race was an important criterion used for determining the countries which were invited to the Asian-African Conference at Bandung, Indonesia, in April 1955." Essien-Udom, op. cit.

"The number one thing that was not allowed to attend the Bandung Conference was the white man. He couldn't come. Once they excluded the white man, they found that they could get together. Once they kept him out, everyone else fell right in and fell in line. This is the thing that you and I have to understand. All these people who came together didn't have nuclear weapons, they didn't have jet planes, they didn't have all of the heavy armaments that the white man has. But they had unity."

Malcolm X.

Breitman (ed), *Malcolm X Speaks*, New York, 1965, p. 5.