Welfare settlements and racialising practices

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The interaction between concepts of ‘race’, ethnicity and national belonging in the making and remaking of the welfare state in Britain.

It is half a century since the consolidation in Britain of what has become known as the welfare state and since the first of the post second world war wave of migrants from the black colonies began to arrive on these shores. During that time much has occurred to alter the terms on which those migrants turned settlers, and also the terms on which their descendants have been inserted into the welfare relations which were organised by the Beveridge reforms.

These terms have been fundamentally altered by the new ‘settlements’ imposed by the Thatcherite reforms. In seeking to reconfigure the relation between ‘the people’ and the state, the reforms reorganised the agencies and professions through which welfare was delivered. But the terms have also been altered by the struggles of black people themselves to gain equality of access to welfare services and to resist the racist practices which conditioned both their use of, and employment in, these services. As we head for the new century, and are faced with the project of imagining and struggling for a new welfare settlement organised around more inclusive forms of belonging, we need to think about the terrains upon which ‘race’,
ethnicity and welfare have been articulated in the preceding decades.

**Beveridge**

It has long been accepted among all sections of the left that the creation and administration of the Beveridge welfare state in Britain represented a 'settlement' (or 'historic compromise') between capital, organised labour and the state. The components of this settlement were steady economic growth, apparently sustained by Keynesian policies with a commitment to full (male) employment, and public expenditure in key areas of welfare. Since the 1970s feminists have established that a hitherto unspoken, but nevertheless central additional component of this settlement was a familial ideology in which the normative family form was that of male breadwinner, dependent housewife, and their children.

However only since the 1980s has there has been a gradual, wider acceptance that deeply embedded in the conceptualisation and practice of the Beveridge welfare reforms there was also a notion of the nation, and with it one of 'race'.

**Universalism and equality**

Alongside these dominant aspects of the 'settlement' was another: that of universalism. Universalism in this context is to be understood in at least two senses. There is the sense inherited from the Fabian roots of much social policy, that the welfare state must be concerned with providing services and benefits for all rather than seeking to provide on a selective basis. Universal in this sense entails meeting need as need arises, a part of the contract between state, employer and worker which was encoded in the system of national insurance contributions.

A quite different notion of universalism emerged however in the actual delivery of diverse welfare services and benefits emanating from a plethora of agencies. As Catherine Jones pointed out in an examination of the relation between black people and social policy, in those areas of the welfare state which had a remit for the entire population - national insurance, national health and education - the brand of universalism was defined by varying notions of equality. In national insurance, equality was about treatment, while in health it was about equality of access and effectiveness, and in education (which was of course compulsory) universality was linked to the pursuit of equality of opportunity.

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Meanwhile, alongside these areas of provision were others which were never intended to be used by all or most of the population, such as housing and national assistance. There emerged therefore a potential distinction between the users of the more properly universal services, such as education and health, and those who also used the other *de facto* more selective services. Hence, the different meanings of universality and equality became attached to diverse constituencies of welfare recipients, and through this process, welfare carried the means of differentiation among them.

The welfare consensus which was articulated in the Beveridge reforms therefore already carried the seeds from which would be generated boundaries of inclusion/exclusion around notions of ‘race’, nation and/or ethnicity. This became apparent almost immediately since the implementation of this welfare state was accompanied by the arrival and settlement of people from the (ex) colonies. For these groups ‘race’ was the marker of differentiation around which exclusions were effected, but what ‘race’ signified was neither static nor uncontested.

As a consequence, in charting the history of welfare exclusion and marginality it is also possible to narrate a history of the reconstitution of the ‘coloured immigrant’ into her/his contemporary position as ‘ethnic minority’. In doing so one would also be considering the ways in which this shift accompanied a recognition of the permanency of settlement of commonwealth migrants. Nevertheless each moment in the history involved a replay of a constitution of difference organised around ‘racial’ or ethnic signifiers. In this way black people’s welfare needs and use was constructed as an essentialised particularity, measured against a de-ethnicised but ‘white’ universal which was treated as the norm.

The ‘solution’ of bussing

That the presence of black populations within Britain was seen as a problem of colour and nationhood which had to be managed early on can be seen in the field of education in general and the incidence of ‘bussing’ in particular. In 1963 the Commonwealth Immigrants Advisory Council (CIAC) recommended in the draft of its second report to the Home Office that school catchment areas should, where necessary, be adjusted to ensure a ‘racial’ balance. Published as *Second Report of Commonwealth Immigrants Advisory Conned, Cmnd 2266*, HMSO, London 1964.
not sufficient to ensure the appropriate degree of dispersal of 'immigrant' children 
then bussing should be implemented.

The concern in official circles about 'immigrant' children in English schools 
was echoed amongst some sections of the white parent population. In Southall 
some such parents began to complain to their local education authority about 
the 'swamping' of local primary schools by 'immigrant' children. Their agitation 
resulted in the LEA sending a delegation to the then Minister of Education, 
Sir Edward Boyle, who in October of 1963 visited Southall in an attempt to 
'reassure' and calm the local white population. Further evidence that the 
general welfare consensus enshrined in the Beveridge reforms was accompanied 
by a 'settlement' on a discourse of race is provided by the fact that the incoming 
Labour government of 1964 reaffirmed the commitment to a policy of dispersal. 
This reaffirmation was contained in the (in)famous Circular 7/65 (*The 
Education of Immigrants*), and again in the White Paper on *Immigration from 
the Commonwealth*.

In the terms of this racial discourse, national integration in the face of the black 
presence could only be achieved if an upper limit of 33 per cent 'immigrant' 
pupil presence in any one school was maintained. The concern for the 
integrative effects of welfare had been a major concern of the Fabians for whom 
such 'integration' was centred on class divisions. But since ideas of 'race' and nation 
both underwrote Fabian socialism and were embedded in the Beveridge reforms, it 
was an easy jump to rearticulate the idea of integration to the presence of populations 
differentiated around 'racial' and/or cultural signifiers. Official discourse and policy 
and white parental 'fear' represented just such a shift but this did not mean that all 
LEAs adopted a policy of dispersal. Even so Townsend, in research carried out for 
the DES, found that 11 out of 33 authorities surveyed were in fact operating a such a 
policy including Ealing (which covered Southall), Bradford and Blackburn.'

What this story of 'bussing' in Britain demonstrates is the ways in which a 
settlement on 'race' and ethnicity was reached in one field of welfare. This had 
the effect of producing a racialising discourse in which the presence of black 
children in 'English' schools was constructed as a problem because they represented 
an erosion of what was seen as English homogeneity. As Boyle was to say in an

Slough 1971.
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... the opportunities children have in their homes for learning and gaining knowledge of England can be very unequal; and just as they can be unequal as between native children ... so there are greater inequalities of opportunity between native children and immigrant children... [for this reason] efforts must be made to prevent individual schools from becoming immigrant schools...

and ... one must recognise the reasonable fear of many parents that their children will get less than a fair share of the teachers’ attention when a great deal of it must of necessity be given to both language teaching and to the social training of immigrant children. 4

'Ethnicity' and welfare

This early example from education shows that the black presence required an adjustment in the terms of the welfare settlement. We can glimpse the ways in which the erstwhile immigrants became distilled into essential ethnic subjects in another site of welfare policy and practice - that of the personal social services in the 1980s. By now black populations had been positioned within a discourse of ‘ethnic minority’. The forms of exclusion and marginalisation from a normalised universal notion of 'need' were structured through this discourse, since 'normal' need was not an ethnic one.

Kobena Mercer has pointed out that

the term 'ethnic minority'... connotes the black subject as a minor, an abject, childlike figure necessary for the legitimation of paternalistic ideologies of assimilation and integration that underpinned the strategy of liberal multiculturalism.

The rise of 'ethnicity' as the predominant mode through which Britain's increasing multicultural population was articulated in British official and popular discourse had the effect of positioning those defined as 'ethnic minorities' as 'in' but not 'of' Britain/England. 'They' may be permanently 'here' but by casting them as culturally different and minor they were still constituted as 'other'. Ethnic belongingness continued to be tied to notions of what it is to be 'English/British', with all those whose ethnic ascription and/or identity was outside of this spatial, political and

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cultural 'imagined community' being subject to racialisation.

However the shift from 'immigrant' to 'ethnic minority' was accompanied by another struggle over the terms of the 'settlement' around ethnicity / 'race' within the welfare services. Black welfare users and professionals fought for inclusion in the development of policy and delivery of services. There was indeed much to struggle about, given the discursive and practical forms of exclusion which they had faced since initial arrival. However what I want to consider here is not the legitimacy of the claims for inclusion, but rather the discursive terrain on which such inclusion was sought. I will do so by considering social work, whose record on racial matters was the subject of much interrogation by black practitioners. Inclusion, here, was sought by taking on and inverting existing understandings of 'race' and ethnicity.

Take for example social work literature. Here much of the concern with 'racial'/ethnic difference has focused on how to ensure that the needs of 'ethnic minority' clients are met. Until very recently the predominant assumption has been that the 'black/white' divide equals the 'client/social worker' one. Given that, the key issue was defined as ensuring that in areas of high 'ethnic minority' populations, social work staff could become equipped to deal with clients whose needs were defined by 'race' or ethnicity and were therefore 'different' by definition from the 'normal' social services subject. 'Racial' or ethnic belongingness is not seen as something applicable to all people, so it is not a field of ethnic differences that is conceptualised but a difference from the otherwise universal structuring of need which is carried by the 'usual' social services subject.

Such a conceptualisation of the issues resulted in two key and inter-related strategies to address them. There was the 'ethnic sensitivity' model in which white social workers would be trained to be 'ethnically sensitive' by learning the codes and rules of ethnic minority cultures. Accompanying this was the 'black social workers' model which aimed at recruiting people from these 'ethnic' communities to social work courses and social services departments. Such 'ethnic' social workers would provide a sort of in-house resource for white social workers, offering them an insight into 'the cultural background of their black clients, their life-styles, their norms and values, their use of words, the "do's and don'ts" of relating to other cultures'.

Such an approach constitutes black social workers as essentialised ethnic subjects, albeit subjects who have a lot to offer contemporary social services departments. For in this perspective, ethnicity can only be 'decoded' by 'insiders' who will then 'translate' it for 'outsiders'. The meanings which attach to ethnicity or ethnic belongingness are treated as self-evident, unquestionable and certainly uncontested. This is especially so in the context of 'cultural misunderstanding' which is assumed to be a major problem facing social services departments and their staff. 'Cultural misunderstanding' derives from 'cultural barriers' which are both 'natural' and immutable. Such an approach was to become condensed around that quintessential signifier of ethnic difference 'the Asian woman'.

The 'Asian woman' and the racialisation of need

In the context of social work, and indeed many other state organised welfare institutions, this signifier has a particular sharpness because it condenses the links between women and the family, and it is both women and families who form the main user base/target of social services. This linkage has provided the context for an articulation of ethnic theories of the 1970s to 1980s/90s social work theory and practice. For example in a book on social work in multi-ethnic Britain published in the late 1980s the authors cite the work of Roger Ballard as a good practice guide to understanding 'Asian families'.

Whites often believe South Asian family life to be too constricting. If an Indian or Pakistani woman is in conflict with her parents or husband, an outsider may assume that the subordinate role which South Asian women are expected to play towards their fathers and husbands... is at the root of the problem ... such an interpretation may be partially correct, but the woman would be unlikely to be seeking to alter her situation fundamentally. To do so would be to reject a major part of the cultural values of her own ethnic group. Her complaint is, in practice, much more likely to be about the particular behaviour of her own husband or father, measured not in terms of her own standards, but those of her own group.

This offers a powerful example of the links made between racialised or ethnicised commonsense about black populations and the construction of an understanding...
about the needs of such populations. Black feminists have long critiqued essentialising constructions of 'the Asian woman' and Nasir has recently made this point well in relation to social policy. For my argument what is salient about this approach is that whilst its stated aim is to ensure equality of service delivery, it does so in a way which reproduces and strengthens the racial, cultural, gendered and professional hierarchies which have been central organising principles in both the pre and post Thatcherite welfare state.

Black professionals in social services

That this is so is not however simply the result of the imposition of what some might want to call 'white values'. Many developments in social services and professional thinking in social work are the result of struggles of black professionals within this field to influence policy development and practice. This has been particularly influential in the highly politicised field of adoption and fostering policy. Just as the 'Asian Woman' became a sign of essentialised ethnic difference and 'otherness', the issue of transracial adoption and fostering became a site of intense struggle over the meaning and policy implications of ethnic diversity.

What the history of the transracial adoption debate makes clear is that white policy makers, managers and practitioners were not alone in viewing 'race' and ethnicity as fixed, essential categories. Thus it is possible to trace a convergence between New Right discourses on 'race' and what Gilroy has called ethnic absolutist ideas in statements emerging from sections of professional welfare workers. This has been most clearly and forcefully presented in writings from the Association of Black Social Workers and Allied Professionals (ABSWAP) which became fairly powerful in the 1980s.

This is a complicated story. It holds many lessons for those wishing to imagine a newly refigured welfare regime which recognised and resisted racism but which did not organise its structures and professional practices around essentialist notions of 'race', ethnicity and national belonging. For example it is clear from reports of the

founding conference of ABSWAP held in 1980 that part of the motivation for the organisation was to reveal, confront and undermine the explicit and implicit racism in much social work policy and practice. As such ABSWAP was part of a much wider tide of black activism aimed at fighting racism. This had the effect of challenging existing hegemonic notions of culture and identity.

In this context (which was also that of a second tide of municipal socialism) ABSWAP did some important work in challenging the myth of the pathological black (Caribbean) family and in revealing the practice implications of the discursive underpinnings of policy. For example John Small, the organisation’s first president writes:

the dominant construct [of the individual in society which operates in social work] excludes the black experience... Consequently, concepts, definitions of situations and descriptions of events are seen purely from a white perspective ... Operating within this framework, the social worker uses professional techniques to bring the individual or family into line with the built-in assumptions and values of the dominant constructs...

This statement is double-edged for, while it highlights the links between discourse and practice, it also has another effect. What is interesting about the formulation of this statement is its suggestion that there is an inherent opposition between ‘black’ and ‘white’ perspectives and experiences. For Small then, as for Ballard, there are fixed ‘black’ and ‘white’ experiences, understandings and perceptions of ‘self.

According to this perspective the purported dissonance between ‘black’ and ‘white’ conceptions has most profound effects in identity formation and it was on these terms that ABSWAP launched a major attack on transracial fostering and adoption policy. Certainly there was much to question about local authority policy in this area since it was often the case that black families were dismissed as automatically unsuitable as fosters and adopters. Similarly children of two black or mixed parentage were (and are) over-represented in the registers of children put forward for long term fostering or adoption. In this sense notions of black familial pathology acted to preclude diversification in the range of potential fosterers and/or adopters. The ‘Soul Kids’ Campaign in Lambeth from 1976, and the

mushrooming of similar schemes aimed at finding black families to join local authority registers of foster carers and adoptors, had some effect in undermining notions of the pathological black family.

But it is a long way from recognising the effects of racism on both social work and psychiatric practice to arguing that a 'healthy' self image and an 'integrated' identity is reducible to the single issue of 'race', or indeed to arguing that 'black' and 'white' are fixed binary opposites. Tizard and Phoenix have made the point that such a position denies heterogeneity and division within black communities along lines of gender, age, social class or place of upbringing at the same time as it constructs a fixed divide between 'black' and 'white'.

Nevertheless the ABSWAP position was sufficiently influential that by the end of the 1980s a new orthodoxy had emerged regarding the issue of transracial adoption and most local authority social services departments had adopted a 'same'race' placement policy for adoption and fostering. I would argue that ABSWAP was able to achieve this influence because they mapped their concerns and perspectives onto an already fertile terrain. By the time that they launched their intervention the black presence in Britain had already been discursively refigured as 'ethnic minorities', a shift from the earlier positioning as 'immigrants'. This reconstitution made possible belief in a particularity of need which derived directly from ethnic or racial essentials. This marked off these groups from the 'universal' needs associated with the white clients for whom service delivery was predominantly designed. Given this, it was not too radical a step to impose a policy prescription which was based on assumptions that 'black needs' could only be met by black providers.

'M New ethnicities' for new settlements

We still have a great deal of work to do to decouple ethnicity, as it functions in the dominant discourse, from its equivalence with nationalism, imperialism, racism and the state, which are the points of attachment around which a distinctive British or, more accurately, English ethnicity have been constructed ...

So far I have suggested that the ‘settlements’ around notions of ‘race’, ethnicity and national belonging contained within the welfare state since its inception have undergone a transition. In rather stark terms what I mean by this is that black people in the form of ‘immigrants’ have stopped being ‘done to’ (as in bussing). For example, they have emerged as combatative yet influential forces in a renegotiation of the terms of inclusion in some sites of welfare delivery (in the form of ‘ethnic minority’ professionals). Despite this transition I have contended that both forms of ‘settlement’ have been equally racialising. In the later model ‘race’/ethnicity is accorded a foundational status structuring all experience and producing a set of racially or ethnically determined needs.

How then to imagine a reconstituted welfare state which is simultaneously anti-racist yet avoids fixing black people in racialising social practices? This is of course the stuff of politics and the means by which it can be achieved cannot be determined prior to the engagement in struggle. However such struggle does need to begin from the premise that a new politics of belonging must reformulate the dominant meanings attached to ‘race’ and ethnicity, whether these meanings emerge from the radical right or the nationalist left of black politics. What we must aim for is a rejection of a politics of anti-racism which closes off the possibility of shared understandings, correspondences of experience, or fluidity of identities across group boundaries.

Stuart Hall has referred to this as the constitution of ‘new ethnicities’. As he says, what this means is both a disarticulation of ethnicity from notions of ‘race’ and nation and also a recognition that everyone speaks from within a particular culture, place or experience. For welfare this will mean a recognition that particularity of need is not something which only black people have, but white also. It will mean recognising the heterogeneity of all groups of ‘service users’, white as well as black. It will mean recognising that ‘universality’ in welfare policy must mean constructing a universality of opportunity and access whilst mediating particularity of position and need.