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Marxism, racism and the construction of 'race' as a social and political relation: an interview with Professor Robert Miles

Interview conducted by Stephen D. Ashe and Brendan F. McGeever

Robert Miles made a significant contribution to the field of racism and ethnic studies. In his early work, Miles drew upon structuralist Marxist theorizations of capitalism to offer a historically informed analysis of racism and migrant labour (Miles, 1982). This perspective placed political economy at the centre of the study of racism. In addition, Miles' critical discussions with other influential contemporaries such as Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall (CCCS, 1982) raised crucial issues concerning the construction of 'race' as a social and political relation in Britain (Back and Solomos 2000). However, Miles became most renowned for his critique of the 'race relations' paradigm and his insistence that sociologists employ the concept 'racialization' rather than 'race' (1982, 1989; 1993). Overall, Miles' work was rich both in its theoretical clarity and historical depth, and his contributions warrant critical analysis today. The following interview was conducted in December 2009.

Keywords: Racism, racialization, Marxism, migration, anti-racism, capitalism.

What did you write during your first academic post at the University of Bristol (1973-1978), and would you say that you made any significant intellectual breakthroughs during this period?

Well, there was the edited volume *Racism and Political Action* (1979) that was very much shaped by the rise of the National Front. I think the importance of that particular book was that Annie Phizacklea and I made our first published contribution on the nature of working class racism. I still think, even after all these years, that it was a very important piece because we were trying to take working class racism seriously. That is to say, we weren't writing it off as some false ideology that had been imposed upon the working class. We argued that racism was grounded in the material, political and cultural realities of working class life in different locations. And I think that was a particularly

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important intervention to make at that time and I think it is very relevant to the debate the about the nature of racism. The project that Annie and I were involved in involved fieldwork in North-West London. All of the data collection and some of the writing of the book that subsequently became *Labour and Racism* (1980) was done while I was at Bristol. All the while that work was going on I was preoccupied with the issues that eventually got published in *Racism and Migrant Labour* (1982). For example, there was the continuing engagement with the 'race relations' problematic and you see a lot of that reflected in *Labour and Racism* which is grounded in perhaps a rather crude derivation from Althusserian Marxism in terms of theories of stratification and class fractions and so on.

Could you explain what you mean by the rather crude Althusserian Marxism?

At that point, we were trying to engage with what I subsequently called the 'race relations' problematic. In other words, to engage with the dominant paradigm that became dichotomised around the John Rex-Michael Banton debate. There were these two towering figures: there was Banton on the one hand with a very particular grounding in anthropology and a particular perspective that came from his own theoretical commitments, and then there was Rex who represented something very different, a kind of radical Weberianism. There was this intense disagreement between the two of them that was the background to what Annie and I did and others who subsequently published *The Empire Strikes Back* (CCCS**,** 1982). In other words, there was a

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group of us who were grounded in, to varying degrees, leftist/ Marxist theoretical positions that were trying to redefine the subject matter of research. At that point, Annie and I were very much persuaded by those debates that arose out of the work of Louis Althusser (Althusser and Balibar 1970). And so we rather simplistically adopted the notion of class fractions to give us a conceptual grounding in stratification and class theory. Althusserian Marxism, that structuralist analysis of the time, allowed us to then present an analysis of the working class that took account of its many political, cultural and indeed economic divisions. And I say it was rather crude because we simply hijacked the concept of class fractions and used that as a framework for the analysis of the data that we collected in North-West London in the mid-to-late 1970s.

Can you say something more about your thoughts on the work of Michael Banton and John Rex?

Either you where for or against Banton or Rex, or you had to take a stand against that debate from 'the outside'. There were a lot of us, such as Bob Carter, Floya Anthias, Stephen Castles and Phil Cohen who were outside of the debate. We found neither position convincing. That said there is a sense in which I found Banton's historical work much more persuasive and much more influential than a lot of the work that Rex did in the 1970's. That said John was, looking back on it, probably more theoretically sophisticated than Michael. But I continued to take the view that Michael's work on the history of the idea of 'race' and his notion of racialization were very important contributions to the field and there is no question that I 'hijacked' his concept

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of racialization because to me it spoke to a process. And what he was good at researching and writing about was historical processes by which the idea of 'race' took meanings in different contexts. I still think that was a very major contribution.

What were the motivations behind your book *Labour and Racism* (1980)?

The purpose of the book was at one level to simply report on the research that we'd done in North-West London. It was very much grounded in the theme how do you explain working class racism? What is its foundation? What is its dynamic? And there was also in our minds the connection between how to explain it and then how to respond to it politically. I mean working class racism, depending upon how you define it and analyse it, has implications for how it's managed politically. Now anybody coming to that debate from some kind of leftist or Marxist perspective must inevitably grapple with the notion that the working class are not supposed to be racist. You know, if there is any substance in Marxist theory, racism is inevitably seen as a barrier to the development of 'a full class consciousness', if we go back to the language of the time. We were concerned about that not just theoretically and academically, but also because at that period of time the fascist organizations had a major influence and there was a great deal of concern about how pervasive that influence was and what it might become. So our motivations were theoretical and academic but they were certainly not divorced from this more pragmatic, practical issue of how does one deal with working class racism. There was also the question in our minds of what does the expression of that racism mean for

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the development of both trade union politics and a wider politics because the area where we were doing our research was one where the population was primarily, although not exclusively, of Afro-Caribbean origin. These people were all working in the same factories, working in the same neighbourhoods and were dealing with working class racism on a daily basis. What did that mean for their own political involvement and consciousness?

In 1978 you published 'Between two Cultures'. What was it that attracted you to research and write about Rastafarianism?

I used Rastafarianism as an opportunity to make an intervention into the conception, which was very strong at that time, that young people of Caribbean origin were somehow between two cultures. There was also a lot of debate about the significance of Rastafarianism as a political/ religious movement. Certainly in Bristol at the time, there was a very clear Rasta presence in the city and you couldn't not rub up against that in some way or another. And I remember knowing a number of people who were Rasta's, and they were adopting a lifestyle and a perspective that was clearly one way of responding to racism. That was interesting at the time because it didn't fit a standard mechanistic Marxist perspective in the sense that they were drawing upon other cultural traditions to engage in resistance.

You said that Rastafarian culture was a way of responding to racism. Did that interest you politically?

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I certainly saw it as such and I certainly saw it as inconsistent with a mechanistic Marxist perspective whereby there would be a move towards a united class consciousness on the part of those who were oppressed. For me it was a measure of the particularism of the resistance that would come from the expression of racism in British society. It was another way of responding that drew upon a cultural and political heritage that was part of what was then represented in Britain by the migration that occurred during the 1950s and arguably earlier, depending upon how far you want to go back.

Paul Gilroy obviously thought that there was a lot of political capital to be gained in this type of resistance to racism. Given that you didn't write about this after your 1978 paper, is it fair to say that you were far less favourable about this as a form of resistance?

Well I'm always in favour of resistance by those who are oppressed, those who are dominated, and those who are excluded. It impresses me: I applaud those who fight back in whatever form is appropriate. I think the question that became an issue between myself and not just Paul Gilroy, but also those who contributed to *The Empire Strikes Back*, was that Rastafarianism was not an ideology that was going to mobilise a large number of people beyond the particular sub-culture that it represented and grew out of and was built upon; which is not to devalue the resistance as such. It was only really to say something about the potential of that particular resistance and ideological framework of resistance to mobilise large numbers of people. At that time and still to this day, I would take the view that it was not a movement that was

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going to mobilise large numbers of people outside of the British-Caribbean community.

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) published *The Empire Strikes Back* (1982) in the same year that you published *Racism and Migrant Labour* (1982). Can you give us an overview of your relationship with the CCCS group?

The Empire Strikes Back spoke to a group of people at a particular historical moment, who were moving beyond the Marxist paradigm and, at least in several cases, were on a trajectory that would lead them to abandon that paradigm. One could see why. Real divisions had been created, and cultural and political movements were claiming an autonomy of political practice quite separate from the working class tradition. That had a certain justification in what had happened as a result of the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1960s and the rise of the Black Power Movement. I mean these were movements that gave credibility to something that we might loosely call an autonomous 'black politics'. That was clearly represented in the book and there was a real foundation for that. They weren't responding to it ideologically in the old simple sense of a false reality. I remember being very aware that there was this trajectory being initiated in several chapters of that book that were moving beyond where I was in terms of working within a Marxist tradition, still seeing Marxism as a rather broad church without trying to be too sectarian about it. But it was clear that some people who were writing there had already strayed beyond the boundaries shall we say. It was challenging because that

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meant that you had to respond. And so in that sense it was a very challenging book and there's no question, despite my disagreements with it, that I'd be the first to claim that it was a very important book and still is.

In your 1984 paper, 'Marxism Versus the Sociology of Race Relations', you claimed that the authors of *The Empire Strikes Back* ignored some of your earlier work. You also claimed that your book *Labour and Racism* (1980) was described as 'sociologistic pseudo Marxism' by some of those in the CCCS group and that this was '… no more than academic invective and political abuse' (Miles 1984, p. 230). How did *The Empire Strikes Back* affect you, and why did you feel that part of your work was being ignored?

Those were sharp words that you've just quoted. I was frustrated by the way in which I was being caricatured and to some extent ignored. This is an important question, so I'm trying to get this right. I felt it was important to engage and I did by virtue of the piece that I wrote that you've just quoted. If I recall correctly I wasn't necessarily very kind. I mean I was equally sharp would you not say? And intentionally so, because I felt the way in which they remained within the 'race relations' paradigm, I thought then and still think now, that they compromised themselves, politically and academically. By that point, I was very clear about what I thought about the 'race relations' paradigm, about the role of the notion of 'race' and its impossibility of functioning as an analytical concept. I mean that was very clear to me by 1982 as *Racism and Migrant Labour* testified. And so I really wanted to take them on on that question. Not because I disagreed that there was a political resistance that was

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culturally autonomous and sought to take autonomy as a key feature of the resistance, one could not have been unaware of that since the late-1970s, if not earlier, because of the ways in which the resistance to racism had been structured around the idea of 'race', and around a 'black' identity. But because I remained very focused on the significance of class analysis it was significant to me that even then there was a clearly evident 'black' petite-bourgeoisie. Many of the migrants who had come from the Indian sub-continent, particularly from Uganda and to a lesser extent from Kenya, were people whose material circumstances were very different from those workers at Grunwick who went on strike. I felt strongly at the time and still believe now that those were real class differences and that they had manifestations and consequences and that, therefore, some of the arguments in *The Empire Strikes Back* were in my view mistaken.

Would it be fair to say that the manner in which certain members of the CCCS group used the notion of relative autonomy was problematic for you? More specifically, did you feel that they had taken Poulantzas' notion of class fraction too far and had completely separated cultural issues from class issues?

Yeah, absolutely. For me you cannot isolate or separate those two things in the way that they did. I mean there is a rootedness to be found in a relative autonomy. Yet relative disappeared very quickly from the perspective that they offered and then a great deal was then made of the significance of that politically. You know it wasn't just that there were issues of class in relation to

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culture within these migrant communities. There were worlds of difference between the young unemployed men and women of Caribbean origin living in Brixton compared with the restaurant owner in Bradford running a curry house who'd migrated from Uganda or from India. Those cultural expressions in my view then and still today have a rootedness in material conditions.

Did you ever feel that there were processes of racialization at play in these debates and exchanges with the CCCS group and perhaps in the field more generally? For example, did you ever feel that you were being racialised as a 'white' researcher in the study of racism?

Well there was a sense of an undercurrent of that kind in some of what was being written. If you're asking me more generally, well, how's the best way to describe this? I suppose the polite way would be to say that it often appeared an abhominom attack that related to my phenotypical features, from which the conclusion was that 'nothing sensible could come from somebody who looked like him'. I was involved in debates at times in which my position was ruled out of court because I was a 'white' man. I wasn't surprised, I mean, if you spent a lot of time listening to John Coltrane and Archie Shepp and understood something about the context in which they were making music then you knew that being the 'white' man was, for a lot of people, a problem by definition. I wasn't surprised when this current of opinion would occasionally bubble up in a public context. I was irritated, sure. But not really surprised.

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What did you feel was the best way to get over that particular issue and to get your message across in the public forum?

For me it wasn't particularly relevant and so my concern was always to say what I wanted to say rather than to get too distracted. At the end of the day there's nothing to be gained out of that. If you're not careful you end up in a slanging match: 'I'm white, you are black', 'So?' I do remember there was one occasion where I was going to speak, let's just say in a foreign country. I was invited by somebody who had never met me and I'd never met them, and it became very clear when on arrival at the airport that I was being ignored because the person meeting me expected me to be 'black' and was self-evidently disappointed, when I wasn't the right colour. I mean it's an anecdote, at one level a trivial story, but as somebody who takes the position that I do, about the social construction of the idea of 'race', this was a wonderful personal experience of how the racialization process was operating in a way in which I didn't meet the criteria of 'blackness', and one can't be anything other than amused over and above attempting to understand that conceptually and theoretically, which is what a lot of what I have written has been about. The signifier varies and different meanings are put on the signifier. And you know that process of signification can work very differently in Belfast or London as opposed to arriving at a foreign airport where you're expected to be 'black'. It's a common process, but how it plays out varies enormously.

In *The Empire Strikes Back* you were also labelled a 'Eurocentric' and that was a criticism that you actually accepted (see Miles 1984, p. 231). Could

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you just explain the background to this and why do you think the CCCS group saw you as 'Eurocentric'?

The criticism is true in the sense that I was very focused on Europe. A lot of what I was trying to do was to re-situate what was happening in the United Kingdom in a European context as opposed to what I was arguing against which was a 'race relations' paradigm that was to a large extent, although not exclusively, drawn from the United States. I wanted to redress that by saying that the United Kingdom is part of Europe, not just geographically, but much more importantly in terms of the processes that were in play, in terms of migration, both post-colonial migration flows and labour migration and often the two were the same thing or at least in part the same thing. And so there was something to be learned from what was happening in the UK that could be derived from comparing the United Kingdom with France, to take a most obvious case, because clearly there the colonial and post-colonial migrations that were simultaneously, in large parts, also a labour migration. Not exclusively, although there was a clear relationship. I felt that this was an important corrective to the work that had been done under the race-relations paradigm.

Have you read Gilroy's 1998 paper '*Race Ends Here*', where he argues that we should abandon the concept of 'race'?

Yeah, Paul Gilroy did go on to write about. He does seem to have moved pretty close to a position that I articulated in 1982 which he vigorously argued

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against. I'm delighted that he's been finally persuaded. It's always nice to have somebody say you were right after all.

In your early work, especially with Annie Phizacklea (1979; 1980; 1984), there was a real sense of political urgency that came through in the writing and it was clear that these writings were rooted in the ethnographic study of working class consciousness, political values and political action. However, it seems to us, having read *Racism and Migrant Labour* (1982), that from then onwards, there is a shift towards a more historical and perhaps more structuralist study of racism.

I agree with all of that.

Was there any particular reason for this shift?

You ask good questions that force me to think back over a period of time. The description you give is a good one in the sense that I became much more focused on historical issues that related to theory and all those issues around the idea of 'race' and 'race' as an analytical concept. But there was also an interest in the book that I wrote with Diana Kay (Kay and Miles, 1992) on a very precise historiography of a very particular moment in British migration history: the European Volunteer Worker Programme that was set up by the post-war Labour government. I did that with Diana because it was both a prelude to the post-colonial migrations and because it was also an unexplored issue. We felt that it was a little piece of history that was important in itself but

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also because it added to that complex mosaic of British migration history which a number of historians had also been looking at. We felt that this was another part of the mosaic that was valuable to explore, in part because, to come back to something that I always come back to, which is that if you work within the 'race relations' paradigm, and in a very narrow sense of that paradigm, then you don't look at the European Volunteer Worker system. But these people were racialised too, and they were part of a series of migration flows that help you put what occurred in the 1950s and the 1960s, the migrations from the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent, in context. It makes you look at those migrations somewhat differently because it makes relative the issue of phenotypical feature and cultural origin and how they can be signified in different ways in different circumstances. And at a certain point it doesn't matter who you are, you can be signified and racialised. And that was a part of the motivation for that very particular historical focus.

I think the other key book that is probably implicit in your question is *Capitalism and Unfree Labour* (1987). It's a text that a lot of people don't read. But for me, it was one of the most important things that I ever wrote because it attempted to grapple with a broad theoretical, philosophical, historical issue that went to the heart of a series of debates within Marxist theory about capitalism as a mode of production, and what forms labour exploitation can be expected to take within the capitalist mode of production as an abstract concept that refers to many different historical realities. Grappling with those sorts of issues, over the fairly broad historical span that the book did, was a real challenge. I'm pleased that I did it.

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Was this a shift towards a more structural analysis rather than a more agency-centred analysis?

Yeah. I think one of the biggest critiques that you could make about the *Capitalism and Unfree Labour* book is that it is an almost exclusively structuralist analysis that makes little reference to historical actors and political practice. I'd accept that, and it was a criticism that was made before the book was published.

Is there not a sense of philosophical idealism in the way in which you employ the concept of racialization? For instance, you tried to rigorously banish the notion of 'race' as an analytical concept from your work, yet at the same time you frequently found yourself using the categories 'black', 'white' and 'brown'. This point has been raised by others too (see Anthias, 1995, p. 284). So, can we really break away from the concept of 'race' in the way you claimed to do so?

In an absolute philosophical sense, yes, you're right. The concept of racialization presumes that there is a product of the process of racialization. I resist talking about the concept of 'race'. I will talk about the idea of 'race'. And I try consistently to talk about the idea of 'race' and never talk about the concept of 'race' because here I like to think that I am rigorous in believing that there is a very clear distinction between an idea and a concept. Yeah, it is true that insofar that there is an idea of 'race' that is a historical reality, and to

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then use the notion of racialization to then seek to explain the origin, development and use of that idea, there is a dialectic between the historical phenomenon and the concept that your using to analyse it. To which I would then say, well, what is so dramatic about acknowledging that there is a historical reality to the idea of 'race'? What's the big deal?

What I was trying to do was to create a conceptual language, that made it much easier to understand that the idea of 'race' is a historical reality; that what is meant by it changes over time; that the contexts in which it is used and therefore applied to create typologies of human beings is always a process; that as a historical process it has particular determinants at particular moments in time; that what is signified in one context is not signified in another; that groups that are at one point in time racialised in order to exclude can be subsequently re-racialised or de-racialised to become part of the 'white' population or whatever other designation is given. So for me, while I have a certain sympathy with, shall we say, that position, I think the point that I would still hold on to is that by talking about racialization as a process you have a perspective and a concept that is inherently about process, and that opens the door to history, that opens the door to understanding the complexities of who get racialised when and for what purpose and how that changes through time. It much more easily allows you to avoid that fundamental mistake of drawing a very clear line between what happened to the Irish in the 1850s and what happened to Jamaicans in London in the 1950s. There are fundamental aspects of those two migrations, experiences, processes and all that was consequent upon them that are very similar. And if you get so tied up in the 'race relations'

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paradigm to see the 'black-white' dichotomy as what it was all about and that racism is only ever about that, then you have backed yourself into a huge cul-de-sac.

In 'Racism, Marxism and British Politics' (1988), you make the point that central to historical materialism is the dialectic between theory, empirical analysis and strategies of political intervention. Yet it seems to us that your definition of racism is rigidly defined in the course of your work and that you apply it to your historical analyses in quite an undialectical manner. It seems that you have defined racism and that this definition is then applied rather mechanically to history. In other words, your definition doesn't really change in your work after 1982. Shouldn't concepts always be provisional and subject to revision in light of the interrogation of new evidence when studying racism?

Well the residue of Althusser remains. Having put the jacket on it is difficult to take the jacket off, and having taken it off the lining remains or some aspect remains. I think it is a fair comment, whether it is a criticism I leave others to judge. A lot of times I've been very focused on conceptual-theoretical purity. There was a longstanding concern I had about Stephen Castle's writing for example. I was always of the opinion that Stephen's concept of racism was, as far as it was a concept, loose enough to be indefinable, which is really another way of saying that I was rigidly focused on definitions. I think there was another reason why I was very focused on definitions and probably still am, which actually comes out of the politics of racism. This is true particularly in

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the United States in the 1960s, given the political struggles that were taking place and the manner in which they were expressed. There was, as I sometimes called it, the inflation of the concept of racism to include not just what I seek to limit it to as an ideology, but as practices as well. As you are probably well aware, I continue to take a rather narrow and strict line on that. Well that's in part in response to an excessive fluidity that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, where it seemed to me that if you were formal about some of the apparent definitions there wasn't much that wasn't racism. At a certain point, once you've lost any specificity, everything is included. At what point then is there in any analytical concept? So yeah, I acknowledge and defend the fact that I'm very focused on definitional issues.

Whether I've been entirely consistent in maintaining a single definition since 1982, I'm not sure I necessarily agree with that. I think if you started to split some hairs, there was a point that I became much more interested in the notion of racisms. Now that of course still begs the question 'what do they still have in common?' And in that sense your point still stands.

I do remain pure, if you like, to my 1982 position. I say that only to indicate that, given a large part of your point is that a good historical materialism is one that is open to reflection and re-evaluation in the light of evidence which may be historical as well as conceptual and philosophical. My reference to the issue of racisms is one gentle way of saying that I'm not sure I was quite as boxed-in since 1982 as perhaps your question suggests. I still think that the inflation of the concept of racism to include practices, as I

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expressed it in my 1989 book *Racism*, remains an issue in both the academic and political discussion about racism and racisms. For my part, I remain committed to the essence of the position expressed in that book. But I think the other area where the 1982 position was in urgent need of development was the need to understand the concept of racism in relation to a concept of domination. I don't think that was there at all, it certainly wasn't there very clearly in 1982. I think there was an attempt to make that clearer in some of the later writing. Whether it was clear enough, you may be a better judge of that than I am now.

I also think that one is not only arguing for something, but that one is always arguing against something or some things. And my desire for a greater degree of conceptual precision was in order to make an argument about the widespread nature of racism. I felt that you needed to be more precise about what it was you were identifying in order to demonstrate its existence and to give you a framework that allows you to show its evasiveness. In other words, the irony being that the conceptual precision was critical to identifying the phenomenon as a pervasive phenomenon both historically and contemporarily. That was certainly part of my motivation.

It seems to us that your definition of racism requires the articulation that a said group of people have been racialised as a distinct biological group and assigned either positively or negatively evaluated characteristics.

Another change by the way! Thank you for adding to my argument.

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You also state throughout your work that this process can involve the signification of culture, religion, skin colour and so forth. However, this definition of racism perhaps limits our ability to identity particular types of everyday racism which are not accompanied by a verbal discourse of 'race' ideology.

I guess what is in your mind is a situation in Glasgow city centre where one Saturday night a person who happens to have brown skin, whose parents where born in Pakistan, is hit over the head with an empty bottle of beer by somebody who has emerged from a pub and is speaking in a broad Glaswegian accent and does have a skin colour that is a lot lighter than the person who has been assailed and there is no discourse between them. The guy is just bottled. And the question is: how do we understand that?

I would first of all say that the fact that there was no articulation other than the guy was banged over the head by a bottle, does leave open the question of what happened? Conceptually, theoretically, what happened? The guy was bottled. But why that happened and what explanation you then give for the fact that this particular individual was bottled by this other particular individual at this particular point in time, for me, is not by definition of the skin colour, or the difference in skin colour of the two people involved, inevitably a racist incident. Now if we pan-out a little, and we ask what was the conversation that was going on in the bar before the guy came out of the bar, and we learn that he was standing around having consumed three pints and

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three halves, that there had been a rigorous dialogue with his similarly skin coloured friends about the 'fucking Pakis', and then on leaving the bar had bottled this guy, then I wouldn't have a particular difficulty in calling that a racist incident. That is to say a violent attack that was a consequence, amongst other things, of the articulation of a racist ideology.

So language then is actually completely central to your definition of racism?

Yes. Yes. This is why I say you have to be context specific. What was going on? What preceded it? In what context did A do something to B, even if there was no verbal interaction between A and B? Out of what ideological context, to put it that way, does A come and behave in a certain manner that, in this particular example that we're talking about, involves an act of physical violence? I am not sure I wanted to be limited to the idea that there has to be a specific, immediately prior conversation or discourse between one individual and another. I would want to talk about a wider ideological context, and that may be the specific conversation that took place in the bar before the guy emerged, to go back to our example. It may be a more broader argument about the ideological context in which particular people have been brought up to see other people in a particular light whereby the racialization of a group has been historically grounded over a long period of time. If you analyse specific situations then you need to look at them in all of their complexity. I think it helps to bring a clear notion of the concepts, to the analysis of those situations. I think the two things are each equally indispensible.

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In 1977 you and Annie Phizacklea claimed that whilst racism persists, 'ethnic organization processes in the informal sphere of politics, particularly in the industrial sphere, is a necessary, indeed inevitable' response to racism (1977, p. 506). However in 1982 you claimed that the '… continued utilisation of that terminology [i.e. 'race'] ultimately hinders any attempt to counter racist arguments' (1982, p. 3). We think it was this shift in your position which led people like Gilroy (1987) to claim that you underestimated the emancipatory potential of mobilising around the idea of 'race'. More recently, Carter and Virdee (2008) have argued that your position left you 'advocating support for an idealized and unified subjectivity, hoping this would evolve out of a shared class position in the processes of production' (2008, pp. 663-664). Why did you become increasingly less sympathetic towards the necessity for racialized self-organization?

There are two different kinds of criticism here. There's one that says that to a large extent my writing became silent on the question which is factually true. And then there is the Virdee and Carter piece that makes a projection about what that silence means. You can equally, and I think correctly, say that the *Racism after 'Race Relations'* book doesn't have a great deal in it that would constitute class analysis. In other words, silence is one thing, drawing a conclusion about what I really mean by that silence is something else. If you write a book about the European volunteer worker movement and spent a lot of time in libraries writing about that particular period, you're not writing about

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the anti-racist movement in England. So, in other words, the fact that you don't write about something doesn't mean that it's of no significance. I made certain choices to focus on certain things in the way that anybody ever does. As you can see, there is a sense in which I'm rather perplexed about the derivation from a silence and then the projection about what the silence is supposed to mean.

You quote the 1977 piece which, you know, if I was to do my auto-critique, there is some language in that piece which is certainly not acceptable by 1982 in terms of conceptual precision and a certain kind of ossification, if I can use that term too. That doesn't mean that I didn't recognise after 1977 that there were people organising themselves to resist racism around racialized labels. I chose not to study it in part because I remember on one public occasion I was berated for the work that we did in London for being the 'white' man messing around in 'black' people's business. I was publicly berated from a position of 'black' autonomous politics. I was told that it wasn't a place for 'white' people. So on the one hand, I'm criticised for focusing on it and in another historical moment I'm criticised for being silent about it.

We don't think it's the actual nature of the silence that is behind our comment, it's the actual shift in the political position that you take. For example, in 1977 you talk about 'ethnic organizations processes' as being 'necessary and indeed inevitable'. But five years later, you write that the continued utilization of that terminology 'ultimately hinders any attempt

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to counter racist arguments'. That seems like a rejection of your 1977 position.

I strongly disagree with that. There are two different things being said here. The first thing, I acknowledge that I wrote it. I admit it. And I would probably still write it today, whether the exact language would be the same now as it was in 1977 we can argue about that, and I would probably want to change some of the language, but it is a fact, I recognise it as a fact. I recognise it as an inevitability that if you put a particular label around a particular group of people, and exclude and discriminate them on the strength of that label, then the label is going to be the basis, at least in part, on which they resist. So in terms of the 1977 quotation, I'd still hold to that as a statement of what happens.

Now the question about the second quotation that you give, for me is a rather separate issue. It is the issue of what is the language of political intervention that is used in order to resist the exclusion and the discrimination. And I do still believe with considerable firmness that the language that you use, the discourse that is used to resist, is meaningful in a highly racialized world, where the phenotypical signifier is the cue to often extreme acts of violence in a very immediate sense, in that highly charged ideological context, how you choose to resist, the language that you use to resist, and the mode of organization and who you choose to reach out to to join in that process of resistance is very relevant to the potential outcomes. So to summarise, let's use the language without being critical about it: yes 'independent ethnic

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organization' is inevitably going to happen. What is not inevitable, in the sense of being predetermined, is the language and mode of resistance. And the decision to label an organization a 'black' organization, to take one example, is a particular decision. That's a particular moment in which a choice is being made and that choice has implications about who is included and who is excluded. I suppose to put it at its simplest, I'm not convinced about the strategy that wholeheartedly grounds itself in a discourse that continues to give legitimacy to the notion that there are such things as 'races'. I think you are handing a card to the racists. That's what I mean about there being a choice as to how you construct your resistance. And I think you need to be careful about how you do that in a deeply racist society.

Can you say something about your views on theories of postmodernism and post-structuralism?

I was very aware by the middle of the 1990s that a lot people that were writing about issues to do with racism, had, shall we say, deserted the Marxist paradigm to varying degrees quite consciously, and that these were people who'd previously been seen to be comfortable to be working within that framework. Some people were much more excited about post-structuralism and theories of post-modernity that were completely divorced from the materialist paradigm and that there was a sense in which I was aware of ploughing a more lonely furrow or ploughing a furrow in which there were fewer people around who were firmly rooted in that paradigm. There was a clear break by then on the part of the people who had originated in CCCS. I think I am right in saying

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that. And, you know, fashion changes I suppose, people change and that's understandable.

In conclusion, have you enjoyed going back over your work in this interview?

I've enjoyed, in a rather indirect way, engaging with my critics. It's an opportunity to respond to certain issues and there is a certain degree of self-satisfaction in doing so.

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