

Title—‘There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack’: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation

Author—Paul Gilroy

Year—1987

Categories: Race, Theory, Migration, Culture, Politics, Nationalism

Place: Great Britain

Time: 1947-1980

Argument Synopsis:

Gilroy’s book is focused on the theory of race and racism in the context of Black Britons. Racism as an idea assumes new forms and articulates new antagonisms in different situations. He argues that the idea that Black comprises a problem is expressed at the core of racist reasoning at the time of publication (1987). The oscillation between Black as problem and Black as victim is the principal mechanism through which race operates in modern society. Gilroy seeks to provide a corrective to studies that fail to represent a Black presence outside of these categories. His long-term task is to recover the representation of Blacks from the condition of isolated impoverishment. The book is a cultural analysis and does not attempt to deal with the full complexity of contemporary race politics. His overall approach involves political and theoretical opposition to the study of race as an issue which is marginal to the normal processes by which British society has developed.

The book is organized into six chapters. The first looks at the question of race and class—suggesting that class analysis should be substantially reworked in the light of its encounter with race. The second chapter addresses the relationship between contemporary notions of race and the ideas of nation and national belonging. By defining race and ethnicity as cultural absolutes, Black themselves and parts of the anti-racist movement risk endorsing the explanatory frameworks and political definitions of the right. The third chapter covers representations of the law as a national institution. The fourth chapter uses a comparative study of two different phases of anti-racist mobilization to further clarify the relationship between race and nation. The fifth chapter demonstrates that culture does not develop along ethnically absolute lines but in complex patterns of syncretism through an exploration of the expressive culture of Black Britain. The final chapter argues that much of what is commonly identified as racial politics can also be interpreted as fallout from the struggles of urban social movements for community and autonomy.

Gilroy’s study of the counter-culture and sub-culture of Black Britain leads him to argue that class analysis of contemporary Britain should be reconceptualized in the light of an extended exploration of race. He reveals the links between race and the urban environment. Britain’s race politics are inconceivable away from the context of the inner city—which provides firm foundations for the imagery of Black criminality and lawlessness. Gilroy claims that the idea of the city as a jungle where bestial predatory values prevail preceded the large-scale settlement of Britain by Blacks in the post-1945 period. Gilroy also demonstrates the central role of notions of community in shaping social movements of Blacks in Britain. The categories of race, community, affect, and kinship provide a contemporary example of how traditional ties are created and re-created out of present rather past conditions.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The organizational possibilities provided by race and the forms of consciousness which have emerged with the rejection of racism by urban communities are at least as likely to provide strong foundations for radical collective action as the equivalent appeal derived from class politics
- Society should be understood as a self-creating process rather than a finished edifice
- The right to be prejudiced is claimed as the heritage of the freeborn Briton and articulated within the discourses of freedom, patriotism, and democracy