Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

Black 1919: Riots, Racism and Resistance in Imperial Britain

Review Number:
840
Publish date:
Tuesday, 1 December, 2009
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ISBN:
9781846312007
Date of Publication:
2009
Price:
£65.00
Pages:
255pp.
Publisher:
Liverpool University Press
Place of Publication:
Liverpool
Reviewer:
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This long anticipated work forms a welcome addition to the growing but still sparse historical literature on colonised people?s lives in Britain. The seaport riots of 1919, in which white crowds attacked Black workers, their families and communities, have long presented a painful conundrum, prefiguring a century of conflict and harassment of people of colour in Britain. The book contains the most comprehensive and exhaustive account to date of British racial violence in 1919, examining not only the notorious and lethal June riots in Liverpool and in Cardiff, Newport and Barry, but earlier and less known incidents in Glasgow, South Shields, London, Hull and Salford. Although the author has published accounts of individual riots, this book brings them together, situated as part of the national and global wave of political violence common to Europe, the United States, the Caribbean and South Africa in the year following the Armistice. It locates the causes of the riots in the interplay between ongoing strikes, riots and other collective violence elsewhere in Britain and the Atlantic basin, and local contexts and meanings including housing shortages and unemployment. In this light, the British riots appear less an isolated eruption ?proving? British racism, as they have often been portrayed, than part of a broader political movement of resistance against postwar betrayals. Yet the nagging question remains: why in this instance alone did working people displace their anger against the state and employers onto fellow workers?

The book is based on an impressive volume and variety of research in national and local archives, the local

press in the nine ports, and even interviews with survivors of the riots. Methodology in this field is complicated by the unreliability of police and press reports on which researchers have been forced to rely heavily. Arguably these historical actors participated in shaping the environment in which conflicts occurred, as well as their subsequent interpretation. The book argues that the official response to xenophobic violence, removing first German ?enemy aliens? during the war, and later colonised people in 1919 and after, encouraged and rewarded rioters. The work offers the most exhaustive account to date of the state?s largely unsuccessful efforts to deport, repatriate, resettle, or otherwise rid Britain of unemployed workers of colour. This approach, the author argues, reduced port conflicts to ?a numbers game? (p. 182), whose purported remedy involved removing men to the colonies while failing to address unemployment or other underlying sources of social dissatisfaction. It also rendered violence a superficially successful strategy for British ?white? working people. Ultimately, however, the author argues that in displacing their violence from state and employers to the most vulnerable among them, rioters? ?success? proved hollow. This misplaced approach continues to haunt ex-colonial subjects and other migrants in Britain to the present day.

In an original and useful contribution, the book confirms the impression derived from cursory reading of press accounts, that police arrested the Black victims of violence out of all proportion to their numbers, and relatively few white perpetrators. In nearly all cases, white crowds numbering in the hundreds and sometimes thousands made up the aggressors and Black men and their families the victims, yet nationally police arrested nearly twice as many Black men (155) as white men (80) and women (9). Some even prosecuted men of colour taken into protective custody. Tabulating hundreds of arrestees and the outcomes of their trials, the author shows that although many more Black men than white men or women were arrested, nearly half of Black arrestees won acquittal, suggesting the courts acknowledged their innocence. The bench thus recognised and attempted to correct police bias. In contrast, white perpetrators of either sex were overwhelmingly convicted. Still, sentences of those Black men and white women convicted proved harsher than those of white men for equivalent crimes. This is attributed to the view of the former as immature, emotional and in need of discipline. Valuable in itself, this evidence might have been pursued: the courts, while less racist than the police, still clearly practiced institutional racism as well as sexism. A better developed discussion of possible reasons for disparities between police and courts, as well as the sources or reasons for discrimination by both, could have enriched the analysis, and offered other scholars hypotheses with which to approach institutional racism in other settings.

This data also reveals that the vast majority of Black defendants proved to be British subjects, repudiating their spurious denunciation and exclusion as aliens. Further analysis shows most men of colour arrested were seafarers of some sort, consistent with their position in the labour market. White arrestees, in contrast, practiced an array of working class occupations, but mainly labouring and other unskilled work. This evidence invalidates rioters? dismissal as mainly seafarers or else demobilised combatants inured to violence. Rather, the author argues, rioters represented a cross-section of the white working class, implicating all in racist violence. Further class analysis might have explored why unskilled men predominated in the crowds: perhaps they had the most to fear from the blurring of distinctions between themselves and colonised workers. In short, the work tells who, what, when and where, but the question of why colonised people in Britain became targets for displaced rage over longstanding domestic social problems such as housing shortages, and why only in 1919, remains open to further exploration and debate.

As the scholar with the most panoptic knowledge of the 1919 riots, the author might have pushed her evidence further to hazard some conclusions or at least hypotheses about causality. The book offers a series of ?interlocking causes? for the riots including postwar unemployment, the heightened visibility of Black wartime workers, ?social dislocation?, housing shortages, especially in the ports, and the global and national context of collective protest and violence by returned ex-combatants and others. But these are not submitted to rigorous analysis. While the nine ports affected shared characteristics including overcrowding, cultural and racial diversity, and segregation from the rest of their respective towns, for example, one wonders whether ports that saw no rioting, such as Southampton, differed in these respects. The implied multi-causality leaves the reader with little better grasp of the reasons for these riots than before. The author clearly deplores the injustice and mistreatment recounted here, but offers little explanation of why colonized

workers in particular became scapegoats for postwar ills.

For example, the decades since the pioneering 1987 dissertation on which this volume is based have seen an outpouring of scholarship on the relationship between racism and colonialism. The book itself appears in the Liverpool series entitled `Postcolonialism across the Disciplines?, intended to rectify the bias toward cultural and literary studies in postcolonial scholarship. While no scholar could be expected to master the whole of this vast literature, the author might have been encouraged to embrace this remit more fully. The book might have better served its purpose, and those of scholars generally, had it more explicitly engaged the most important and relevant of such works.

Indeed, despite a section devoted to the 1919 riots in the Caribbean, some of them involving men repatriated from Britain after the violence there, analysis of colonial power relations and their implications for Black men?s situation in Britain figures little in this work. Attacks on longstanding Black residents such as Charles Emmanuel and James Gillespie as well as on the Strangers? Home for Asiatic Seaman, which had stood in East London since the 19th century, suggest profound cultural and political shifts, of which the riots proved merely spectacular symptoms. Sudden hostility to long resident Black people surely partook not only of housing shortages and unemployment but of Britain?s altered global position, relative to its own colonies as well as other powers. Strikes, mutinies and other popular actions turned on what form the postwar world should take: equality for colonized people might imply colonial conditions of labour and life for the metropolitan working class. The book hints at this in observing that the war had altered `the balance of social and employment prospects of black and white people?, as well as in likening Black workers to women also pushed out of wartime jobs.

The book misses the point that the union did not simply oppose Black seafarers? employment, but rather colluded covertly in their relegation to colonial conditions of super-exploitation as Lascar or similarly underpaid contract workers: the number and proportion of Lascars actually increased between 1901 and 1938, displacing white and Black mariners alike from union-protected jobs. Like the riots themselves, the union?s deplorable racial politics thus took shape not only in a national but a global and imperial context, on terms largely dictated by employers, who took full advantage of the ambiguities of imperial linkages and disparities.

American scholars face increasing pressure to demonstrate the relevance of British history, from which historians in Britain remain mercifully free. Still, given their careful contextualization within global Atlantic disorder, the book might have reflected on and shared what the analysis of Britain?s riots might contribute to our understanding of social disorder in 1919 and generally.

This is a lot to ask, of course, simply indicating how stimulating this book has proven, and the many tantalising questions it raises for further research. It may yet prove useful to explore distinctions between violence primarily among mariners competing for work, as occurred in Glasgow, South Shields and Hull early in the year, and the more spectacular and lethal events of June, when huge crowds invaded neighbourhoods, destroying Black-occupied houses and businesses. Similarly, while aggregate tabulations show American and Dominion troops cannot be scapegoated for all the riots, the evidence does suggest they proved catalysing in Cardiff and possibly Newport. South Shields union official John Barnabus Fye, who twice precipitated violence by calling Arab mariners `black bastards?, originated in the United States.(1) Another intriguing dynamic was Black workers? use of the rhetoric of alien status to impugn the legitimacy of Scandinavians in Liverpool?s labour market. Turf wars with Irish migrants also emerged. Subtle differences in enforcement from town to town might also be explored, lending depth to the local particularities of this global phenomenon. Parallels between Black and women wartime workers might be pursued, helping to explain the hysteria over interrracial couples that accompanied some riots. Although the book dismisses rhetoric against racially mixed couples as a genuine catalyst for conflict, engagement with the literature on this question might nonetheless prove fruitful, perhaps within the context of postwar `gender trouble?. Finally, some attention to the possibility of `copycat? rioting of the sort occurring in 1915, 1958 and 1981, when press accounts of riots in one place apparently inspired rioting elsewhere, might assist in analysing events in Newport. Exploring some of these subtleties might enhance efforts to situate the riots in

the interaction of local and global dynamics, while perhaps offering some broader generalisations for scholars of the period and of collective violence generally.

For its painstakingly thorough reconstruction of a formative episode in Black people?s lives in Britain, its illumination of the tumultuous events of the immediate postwar period, and its effort to contextualise and explain these events within the intersecting frameworks of 20th century British and global history, the book deserves a wide readership. It will stimulate further debate into the numerous questions raised about race, class and empire.

The author is happy to see that someone so well known in her field has taken the trouble to provide a detailed critique of her work. While taking issue with several aspects of the review the author is not able at this time to provide the detailed response which such a wide ranging review requires and therefore declines to comment further.

Notes

1. Naturalisation case file of J. Barnabus Fye, TNA HO144/1498/364777.Back to (1)

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