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As we move into increasingly authoritarian, punitive and nationalistic times there is an acute need for critical and insightful analysis of the current conjuncture. Race and the Undeserving Poor provides an important intervention that is essential reading for all social scientists and politically concerned people. It is the perfect antidote to those arguments, common on both the left and right, that the current crisis is caused by uncontrolled migration and the metropolitan elite’s desertion of the “white” working-class. Whilst Shilliam recognises the re-emergence of class (so studiously avoided by New Labour) and the rise of the popularist right, his analysis places these within a long historic context as well as identifying some important principles that should underpin our pursuit of a more socially just future.

The book’s central thesis focuses on how “race”, racism and racialization have been deployed, both in the metropole and the colony, to manage subaltern classes. Shilliam charts this association over a lengthy period and the book is structured so that each chapter explores these links in a specific, consecutive, historical period. So, for example, the opening chapter explores the development of the New Poor Laws (introduced in 1834) and the abolition of slavery (also implemented in 1834). There are many (including some excellent) histories of both but it is their linkage, as part of a long history of welfare, together with the associated racializing of the undeserving, that is innovative. Shilliam demonstrates how the language of “race” – variations of which were utilised in both pro-slavery and abolitionist discourses – helped shape metropolitan debates about welfare from the eighteenth century onwards.

As the moral economy of the early modern period was replaced by the political economy of capitalism (which Shilliam prefers to refer to by its nineteenth-century name: commercial society) the reform of the poor laws sought to create a division between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor. Through a careful reading of early-nineteenth century discourses on welfare, Race and the Undeserving Poor identifies how analogies with slaves, negroes, Africans and Blacks repeatedly recur and were used discursively in ‘blackening the poor’ (p.11). Although Shilliam focuses on welfare reform, my own research on penal transportation from the British Isles to the Australian colonies has demonstrated that the same “blackening” was also a central feature of criminological and penological discourses, see for example the report of the
Molesworth Committee on transportation published four years after the ending of slavery (House of Commons, 1838).

_Race and the Undeserving Poor_ provides a history of welfare that challenges the metropolitan story of progress (at least up until Thatcher). A murkier history emerges which highlights, for example, the role played by the racist science of eugenics, which underpinned the case for welfare reform in the early twentieth century by advocating it as a strategy for the protection of the Anglo-Saxon race. The full extent of this link is highlighted by William Beveridge – who was to become the main architect of the post-war welfare state – attempting to set up a Department of Social Biology in the 1920s, whilst the Director of the London School of Economics (p. 51). Likewise, the establishment of the National Health Service was made possible by cheap skilled labour imported from the colonies (who had paid for the cost of their training) (p. 91). This strategy for staffing the NHS was not exceptional, for, as Shilliam argues, ‘Britain’s division of labour has never been national in constitution or scope’ (p. 178).

This is a theoretically rich book which introduces both new concepts and new interpretations of others. A full exploration of these contributions is beyond the scope of a brief review – for that you will have to read the book – but Shilliam’s analysis of the concept of the “white working class” made through an argument that “class is race” requires highlighting. The British state had for centuries to combine governing populations in both the metropole and the colonies. To do this required it to continually refine strategies of inclusion and exclusion; strategies which became increasingly racialized both through the racist exclusion of Brown and Black subjects and the selective “blackening” of some white subjects. Shilliam clearly distinguishes between being Black (a noun) and “blackening” (an adjective). ‘Those who become blackened’ he argues ‘are not apprehended as essentially Black. They are rather believed to have degenerated … Black is undeserving in and of itself; while the white undeserving might be rescued, regenerated’ (p. 133).

This insight provides a valuable theoretical tool which allows Shilliam to deconstruct the history of the “white working class”. Whilst constructions and understandings of the “white working class” may have changed over time, what has never changed is that it is a production that has always ‘lived and died as an artefact of political domination’ (p. 108). The relatively swift metamorphose of “Chavs” to the “left behind white working class” provides a recent example of how elites have strategically used this constituency and that ‘the granting and rescinding of … “deserving” status was at all times an act of political domination’ (p. 133). This process is highly racialized with “blackening” being used to

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stigmatise – he cites David Starkey’s infamous Newsnight quote ‘whites have become the new Blacks’ (p. 132) as an example – whereas deserving status has been facilitated through an emphasis on whiteness.

*Race and the Undeserving Poor* is a compelling read that comprehensively undermines claims that Britain’s imperial history belongs in the past. It is through recognising this history, and the extent to which empire has racialized our contemporary society, which Shilliam argues, is essential to any viable pursuit of social justice. ‘Criticism of marketization, deregulation and austerity’ he points out is inadequate ‘without a critique of the racialization of these processes’ (p. 178). In imagining the working class our focus needs to more be on ‘Grenfell’s working class’ (who even some radical and supportive commentary have engaged with in a ‘colour-blind’ way) than on ‘the white northern working class of Brexit lore’ (p. 171). Whilst some of the latter may have voted for Brexit they did so, Shilliam points out, not ‘from a class interest but to defend a melancholic racialized nationalism’ (p. 161). Attacks on working class people are consistently directed and experienced in racialized ways – for example, it was people seeking asylum who were the first to have an entitlement to welfare provision removed – requiring resistance to be organised where ‘policies detrimental to the living standards and securities of the majority first make their cut into the social fabric’ (p. 179). Race is class and organising for social justice must recognise this. To fail to do so will inevitably replicate the racialized divisions between those deemed “deserving” and “undeserving”.

**References**

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