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Thinking Black: Britain, 1964-1985

ROB WATERS

California, University of California Press, 2018

xiv+304 pp, ISBN 9780520293847 (hbk) (£66), 9780520293854 (pbk) (£27)

In the context of global anticolonial liberation movements and Black Power formations, ‘thinking black’ became an extremely influential agenda for postcolonial Britain. In this excellent book, Rob Waters traces notions of blackness in Britain between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s, demonstrating how these played key roles both in attempts to decolonise Britain itself, and in broader transformations in British society. Waters notes how concepts of blackness became widespread, due to activists ‘*bending the category [of black] into many different meanings, making more claims upon it than it seemed it could possibly hold*’ (p. 7).

The book is extensive but well-written and logically structured, firstly outlining the impact of transnational Civil Rights and Black Power movements before moving to considerations of uniquely British forms of blackness – expressions that were both intellectual and cultural: ‘*Reading and intellectual work, and dressing, dancing, styling, and corporeal work, were in many ways two sides of the same coin*’ (p. 53). Waters argues against characterisations of political blackness as merely a surface-level umbrella pragmatism, as figures such as Tariq Modood have suggested, instead painting a more nuanced picture of blackness in Britain. It is convincingly presented as ‘*a political culture of substantial depth and variety, even with the contradictions and displacements that locating oneself within it might sometimes produce*’ (p. 54).

The remaining chapters demonstrate the impact of thinking black in black politics and civil society, exploring the Mangrove Nine trial, black education movement, and increased confrontations with the police in the 1970s-to-mid-1980s.

Firstly, Waters demonstrates the significance of the Mangrove Nine trial – widely described as the ‘high-water mark’ of British Black Power – in a process of domestic decolonisation, challenging the imperial roots of key British structures through the legal system: *‘it was knitted into a wider clash with the state for which the theatrical didacticism of the courtroom was key’* (p. 109).

In a similar way, the centrality of education within postwar Britain made this another key site for challenging postcolonial racialised attitudes as the creation of supplementary schools, radical bookshops, and reading groups spread ideas of liberation through thinking black. Autobiographical and creative writing is discussed as forms of self-expression and empowerment, actively challenging racism through authors writing themselves into representations of everyday life in Britain: *‘recognizing the lives and validity of those marginalized in the colonial and neo-colonial order, and carrying forward the radical spirit of black liberation’* (p. 138).

Relatedly, a penultimate chapter explores confrontations with the increasingly authoritarian state and police in the 1970s and 1980s. It demonstrates, through close examination of the activities of four groups – the Race Today collective, Institute of Race Relations, *Black Liberator*, and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies – the resulting *‘explosion of black intellectual activity around policing, youth, race, and the state’* (p. 177) that emerged in part due to the increased prevalence of thinking black.

Concerns reappear throughout these discussions regarding the appropriation and subsequent sanitisation of such radical ideas by other actors – for instance, black studies in schools as a form of social control, state multiculturalism undermining a politically united anti-racism, and a British New Left often appropriating black politics for their own ends. The dichotomy existing between those calling for independence from and others favouring

cooperation with the state is commonly known, but Waters demonstrates how it was not always as clear cut as some suggest.

Further to fitting within recent historiography examining the experiences of migrants and migration in modern Britain, as well as a growing focus on British Black Power, Waters notes that his work focusses on a slightly later period than some other studies. Whereas writings often portray the so-called ‘second generation’ of the 1970s/1980s as being a break with previous migrant generations, Waters convincingly illustrates the longer history of activities which similarly demonstrated contradictions between moderate ‘respectable’ activities and more revolutionary movements.

Throughout, there is a truly impressive engagement with existing literature and primary sources – the extensive references and further notes, often full of suggested other readings or explanatory points, make themselves for an excellent resource. Indeed, one of the book’s main strengths is its deep engagement with a range of illuminating sources, including literary and other cultural sources, such as autobiographical writings, films, books, and archives of various organisations. As the author notes: *‘Without the efforts of black activists to archive their struggles, this book would not have been possible’* (p. 209). Without the efforts of Waters to widely engage with these sources, this book would not have been as valuable a contribution as it is.

As with any good book covering this amount of material, there are some aspects raising further questions than it alone can exhaustively answer. While concisely explored in an epilogue, a bit more space might perhaps have been valuable in considering why ideas of a unifying blackness began to disintegrate – and, indeed, to what extent they have, as debate continues regarding notions of political blackness. The level of detail donated elsewhere makes lengthy consideration of this difficult and is of course not this book’s central focus; but

increased assessment of this might have further strengthened arguments regarding the depth of blackness as a political culture in the period.

Also, despite Waters situating events in Britain within global black liberation movements, at times this feels like quite a London-centric story. This is a minor point as other regions are not ignored and such focus is of course largely due to the centrality of London in black organisations and activities. Some excellent recent local studies, such as works by Shirin Hirsch and Kieran Connell, allow regional locations to be considered in more detail and space than is available here.

Further to being essential reading for those working on modern race and ethnicity history, this book has a far wider appeal for anyone interested in modern Britain. By examining the impact of a global black radicalism on ideas and activities within postcolonial Britain, *Thinking Black* illuminates wider questions of both what it meant to be black and to be radical in Britain.

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