

# **Anti-Racist Cultural Politics in Post-Imperial Britain: The New Beacon Circle<sup>1</sup>**

Brian W. Alleyne

Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London

Published as a chapter in:

Utopian Pedagogy: Radical Experiments Against Neoliberal Globalization. Edited by Richard J. F Day, Greig De Peuter, Mark Coté. University of Toronto Press, 2007.

## **Introduction**

The British liberal elite has come to recognize the complexity of the racial and ethnic composition of Britain, which manifests in often fervent and self-congratulatory pronouncements that contemporary Britain is a foremost “multicultural society.” For many on the liberal left, multiculturalism is that “judicious” mixture of ethnic communities and identities. It is my view that the discourse of multiculturalism tends to obscure more than it reveals. In particular, it glosses over the long, complex, and contradictory history of anti-racist struggle, radical intellectual work, and autonomous cultural initiative that Britain’s non-white populations have undertaken, and through which these populations have forged potent and often insurgent forms of “cultural capital,” shaping and re-shaping the space they occupy in the British social formation and in the national imaginary. In other words, the

multicultural reality of Britain has come about not as a gift of the British nation-state but through decades of political and cultural work, central to which has been a struggle over meaning -- in short, “cultural politics.” Education has been both a recurring element of and a historic condition of possibility for many of these struggles.

This chapter explores the activist-pedagogy of one group that sought to negotiate an inclusive place in Britain for the descendants of Black and Brown migrants: New Beacon Circle, based in North London, England.<sup>2</sup> Whereas many contributors to this book have addressed contemporary alternative educational initiatives, I consider one that started in the mid-1960s and is still active today. In this way, I emphasize the continuity in radical experimentation in utopian pedagogy. In the case of New Beacon Circle, such experimentation has been a component of contestatory responses to specific situations of class and “race” domination, and which have been, simultaneously, attempts to build progressive educational alternatives that might endure into the future. Bringing a particular reading of anti-colonialism in the British West Indies to their activist work in London, the New Beacon Circle is centred around the New Beacon publishing house and bookshop, which was established in 1966. Over the next four decades, New Beacon Circle’s activities encompassed and wove together Black cultural production, anti-racist organizing, and community education. This chapter explores a number of initiatives of the New Beacon Circle and concludes by analysing them through the lens of cultural politics. To guide that discussion I must first provide some historical context with respect to education and the colonial British West Indies.

## **Education and Colonialism in the English West Indies**

Bourgeois-liberal conceptions of education have had profoundly paradoxical outcomes. In the industrialized North, expanded schooling at the secondary- and post-secondary level was largely intended to equip persons for the various economic roles required in such societies, and also to instil in them the civic virtues of liberal democracy, respect for person and property, and law and order. The liberal-humanist ideal of the “cultured” person was, in many respects, a motive force of the expansion

of schooling, where reading and debate were seen as “culture” in its “nurturing” sense.<sup>3</sup> This notion of “culture” as nurturing the “good citizen” was, of course, differentially available to persons who were differentially situated in the social structure by class, “race,” and gender. Nonetheless, the “cultured citizens” that were produced did not always accord the status quo the loyalty felt due to it by the ruling order. Therein lies the conundrum of literacy and schooling: on the one hand, they could and did produce citizens committed to a dominant ideological project; on the other, they produced literate, critical dissidents with the means to disseminate radical ideas through the printed word to an increasingly literate public.

Examples of this antagonistic dynamic abound. In the plantation societies of the Atlantic, unfree persons were prevented from acquiring literacy, often by law, and always by custom;<sup>4</sup> some of the earliest instances of activism that combined cultural and political issues in the Atlantic world saw literate radicals bringing reading skills to socially subordinate persons.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the imaginations of progressives all over the world have long been gripped by the possibility of infiltrating the apparatus of schooling and turning it toward the end of revolutionary change and of the importance of building educational processes into the machinery of radical movements. Here we might note as just a couple of examples the place of alternative media and reading circles in early nineteenth-century British radical culture, as uncovered by E.P. Thompson;<sup>6</sup> or Paulo Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed” and literacy campaigns, first centred on Latin America but eventually circulated around the globe;<sup>7</sup> or the worker’s education aspect of the International Working Men’s Association, with which Marx and Engels were key associates;<sup>8</sup> or the call by Italian communist Antonio Gramsci for the making of working-class “organic intellectuals.”<sup>9</sup> As these examples suggest, one consequence of expanding literacy and general schooling has been the creation of spaces for oppositional education outside the control of the State.

Another consequence has been a heightened interplay of education, politics, and cultural production. This was visible in the United States when education was considered a strategic front in the battle against entrenched racial segregation in the aftermath of the ending of slavery in the United States. W.E.B. Du Bois, for example, insisted that Black intellectuals must set to work disseminating

ideas beyond the academy and throughout the wider society. For Du Bois, Black intellectuals were under an injunction to get involved in activism -- to take their hard-won knowledge to the mass of oppressed Blacks in pre-Civil Rights United States. Du Bois also held that exposure to so-called high culture was a necessary element in the education of the oppressed. While conceding that Blacks needed technical and vocational education, Du Bois argued that Black Americans also needed to spawn their own sub-group of intellectuals who would in turn constitute a relatively autonomous field of social and cultural production that could confront White supremacy on the terrain of culture.<sup>10</sup>

In the colonial and post-colonial British West Indies too education was a pivotal but paradoxical site of anti-colonialist struggle. There as elsewhere capitalist modernity entailed forms of dissent wherein the class structuring of society was contested by people who employed tactics from inside, as well as outside, of the established institutional arrangements and terms of bourgeois liberal democracy.<sup>11</sup> Many of the key figures in the movement for independence began with the assumption that a schooled population is the soil out of which civil society emerges and expands, empowering people to become active agents in knowledge-creation and full participants in politics.<sup>12</sup> The transition from colonialism to independence saw attempts to implement western-style modernization, of which expanding mass secondary and post-secondary schooling were seen to be key elements. Perceived as an opportunity to form new nations and new political subjects, great effort was placed in achieving both expanded primary schooling of children and literacy for adults. Mass education was further seen to impel people to defend the post-colonial public sphere from authoritarian and neo-colonial tendencies.<sup>13</sup> That refiguring of the role of education reveals just one of the ways in which expanded schooling, at whatever level, had political and cultural consequences which were unintended by the developmentalist states and individuals which set these programs in train.

We can take as an example the Trinidadian intellectual-politician (and, for a time, subversive pedagogue), Eric Williams, whose teaching and writing offered trenchant critique of colonialism while also being oriented toward promoting popular participation in post-colonial government. Williams' "People's University" in 1950's Trinidad was an educational counter-initiative. Remembered for his slogan "[t]he future of the nation is in the school bags of its children," Williams, a renowned historian

of Atlantic slavery, delivered a programme of public lectures on economic history and politics to audiences of thousands at a square in the heart of Trinidad's capital city.<sup>14</sup> These lectures made critical ideas on colonialism available to the wider Trinidadian public, most of whom had been denied access to any education beyond basic literacy, in a social formation where most Black and Brown people were destined to join the labouring mass in the service of colonial power. The lectures were part of a series of public meetings that saw Williams crossing the island, bypassing the conservative media in his attempt to prepare the populace for post-colonial citizenship. Williams became the elected leader of an internally self-governing Trinidad in 1956, and again at full independence from Britain in 1962. His post-colonial governments would find that expanded education could produce enemies as well as supporters of the status quo. Ultimately, the great promise of Williams' People's University was unfulfilled: he did not appear to trust Trinidadians to be the agents of their own history. He could not imagine popular participation beyond the limits of a bourgeois democracy that carried over many of the authoritarian elements of colonial British rule. By 1970, Williams found himself as the Black leader of a country populated mostly by non-Whites, in the paradoxical position of being opposed by a wave of Black power activism: he was unable to deal with a militant Black cultural politics coming out of the turbulent 1960s.

Formal education in the colonial British West Indies was also interwoven -- in contradictory ways -- with the cultivation of anti-colonial thought and politics. At the turn of the twentieth century in Trinidad there was a close correlation between "race" -- marked off by skin colour -- and social-class: the middle- and upper-classes were occupied by a cross-section of persons but with Whites disproportionately present, while the lower strata was overwhelmingly peopled by those of African or South Asian (Indian) descent. The chief route to social mobility for the mass of Black and Indian people at the time was secondary education, to be followed by some kind of career in the civil service, commerce, or, if they managed to acquire higher education, the professions.<sup>15</sup> Such schooling often had the unintended consequence of playing a central role in the formation of a Creole intelligentsia -- many of whom eventually became radicals in Britain itself.

The paradoxes of this process were especially visible in the competitive “scholarship” contests that took place across the British West Indies. A lower-class Black or Indian boy (the avenues at the time were open mainly to males), through grinding study, might win a scholarship to one of the island’s secondary schools. There, over a five- to seven-year period, the youngster would be exposed to a British-style grammar school education, which, if he did nothing further in terms of formal education, would fit him out to take up a clerical position in the colonial civil service. From the initial thousands of young boys in primary school, a few hundred would gain places in secondary schools, for which they had to pay fees that only the middle-class could normally afford, and of these just two or three would emerge as scholarship winners. And there were yet more hurdles to come: if the student was very “bright,” he might win one of two or three island scholarships and then proceed to England to study at university for a profession. What has been called the “cult of the Island Scholar” was more highly developed in Trinidad than elsewhere in the colonial West Indies.<sup>16</sup> According to Ivar Oxaal, “of the greatest importance in accounting for the high level of competitive scholarship in Trinidad was the fact that the colony’s secondary schools were the first colonial institutions to participate in the external examinations of Oxford and Cambridge.”<sup>17</sup> Many of the critical artists, radical intellectuals, and activists who would later gather in and around the New Beacon Circle made their passage to Britain through this most competitive selection process.

It was on these margins of the modern Western world system, especially in the elite colonial classrooms, that we can see the formative context for an Anglo-Caribbean radical consciousness that was schooled (in the sense of acculturated to ruling cultural capital) and at the same time rebellious. Educated in the English version of the Western high-culture canon, in schools set up in the West Indies but emulating the British grammar school, some of the “bright boys,” by virtue of being Black or Brown, colonial, and marked for future greatness through triumph in the scholarship contests, came to feel strictures imposed on the possibilities for their personal development by a social system which boasted ideals of humanity that were seldom realized. The schooled radicalism that sometimes ensued was a decisive influence on the formation of New Beacon.

## **New Beacon Circle: Beginnings**

Established in 1966, New Beacon Books is a North London-based Black and Third World publisher and bookseller. People who have remained in close association with New Beacon Book's founders, and who have been involved in some or all of New Beacon's various projects, constitute what I call "New Beacon Circle." This is my term, not theirs: I use "New Beacon" because the New Beacon bookshop was the locus around which I came to learn about these activists and their projects; I suggest the people engaged in these various initiatives constitute a "circle" because they are linked through friendship, kinship, and comradeship. Central to my account in what follows is Trinidadian migrant John La Rose and his close associates, as each of New Beacon Circle's projects had or have in common their decisive involvement.<sup>18</sup>

From coordinating legal defence campaigns for Black youth to supporting dissidents imprisoned by repressive regimes, New Beacon Circle have engaged in more traditional forms of political organizing over the last four decades. Most of their activism however has been centred in the realm of culture: cultural form, cultural production, and the struggle over meaning. Their projects bring oppositional political awareness to areas seen as "cultural" in bourgeois discourse, such as artistic creation and publishing. Distinctively, New Beacon's cultural activities are bound up with a set of discernible political commitments: socialist, anti-racist, and popular-democratic. Education has been both a central element of and a recurring thematic object in their activities; self- and community education are at the core of their work. In what follows I briefly describe five of New Beacon Circle's activist-pedagogic contributions to the making of an anti-racist cultural politics in post-imperial Britain: promoting Caribbean art and anti-colonial literature and politics; publishing and bookselling; initiating supplementary schools; organizing struggles against racism in State schools in the UK; and participating in international radical book fairs.

But first let me situate myself in relation to New Beacon Circle. I learned of New Beacon as publishers when I became interested in the radical writings of C.L.R. James. I met John La Rose in

Trinidad in 1994, at a pan-Caribbean Assembly of Caribbean Peoples, which brought together creative people, activists, and other elements of civil society from the French, English, Spanish, and Dutch-speaking Caribbean. One of the main organizers was the Oilfields Workers Trade Union (OWTU) -- the most influential trade union in Trinidad and one of the key workers' organisations in the English-speaking Caribbean. At that event I was working as a volunteer for the organizers, having previously met the OWTU's Education Officer, David Abdulah. La Rose is the European representative of the OWTU, and he was introduced to me by Abdulah. I was at the time about to begin graduate studies at City University, New York, in sociology, with the intention of writing a study of C.L.R. James.

In New York I met Jim Murray, who ran the C.L.R. James Institute, an open and radically democratic project in the autonomous spirit of James himself.<sup>19</sup> Out of his Upper West Side Manhattan flat, Murray collected James' papers, built up a small yet comprehensive library of the Black Atlantic, and together with his colleague Ralph Dumain, assembled an exhaustive catalogue of work by and on James and his political milieu. The C.L.R. James Institute was a place where Murray provided resources and support for people engaged in any kind of creative work. The Institute was in turn connected to Keith Hart, who played a major role in bringing James' American Civilization to posthumous publication.<sup>20</sup> Hart supervised my doctoral dissertation at Cambridge after I moved to Britain in 1995.

After my first London interview with La Rose in 1996 I felt that I had to rethink completely my research project. When he agreed to begin a series of life history interviews with me I quickly came to the realization that I was gaining privileged access to a space where politics met intellect and action. In the six years since that first meeting I have come to focus much of my intellectual and political interest on La Rose and his closest associates. More than being research correspondents, the New Beacon activists have in some cases become friends. They provided me with a political home in the UK, as I became involved in a number of their ongoing projects. I came to share their political imagination, and in the old ethnographic term, "went native." In learning about activists as a sociologist, I became a part-time activist myself, even though my main occupation is that of a conventional university teacher.

The origins of New Beacon Circle lie in the early 1960s, a time by which a number of writers, artists, and graduate students from the Caribbean -- many of whom travelled to Britain on scholarship -- were well established in Britain, particularly in London. Among them was John La Rose, a Trinidadian who came to Britain in 1961 to study law but who soon got involved in activism. After his arrival, La Rose met Edward Brathwaite -- a poet and student in West Indian history from Barbados -- and Andrew Salkey -- a BBC journalist from Jamaica.<sup>21</sup> Perceiving a lull after the initial impact in the 1950s of the first works of George Lamming, Roger Mais, Samuel Selvon, and Vidia Naipaul, the three men felt that something needed to be done to place Caribbean arts and letters back into the cultural spotlight in Britain. In 1967, the three migrant Caribbean intellectuals and artists decided to start a forum -- Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) -- for the meeting of Caribbean-descent students, artists, and writers living in Britain. Concerned with the history, politics, and culture of the Caribbean and its growing Diaspora, CAM was a space for discussion, work was presented and critiqued, public meetings were held, and an arts journal was launched. Active until 1972, CAM events helped to expand interest in Caribbean and other Third World literature, which contributed in important respects to the growth of the New Beacon publishing house and bookshop.

New Beacon Books started in 1966 as a publishing house in North London, by La Rose, with the support of British-born Sarah White. New Beacon positioned their publishing and bookselling activities in relation to a radical intellectual tradition in colonial Trinidad that went back to the end of the eighteenth century. "New Beacon" was meant to invoke the Trinidadian "Beacon" literary and critical circle of the late-1920s, early 30s, which was a high point of sorts in the development of a relatively autonomous -- in the sense of "native" -- intellectual tradition in Trinidad.<sup>22</sup> A group of intellectuals started, for example, two pioneering cultural journals: The Beacon and Trinidad.<sup>23</sup> These intellectuals, of which C.L.R. James was one, were not, as some have suggested, merely "non-whites seeking their way in a white literary world,"<sup>24</sup> but rather were descended from and contributed to a history of struggle against colonial domination that goes back to the early 1800s. From a liberal-humanist standpoint, these critical intellectuals attacked the Eurocentricism, arrogance, and the anti-intellectualism of the Trinidadian middle- and upper-classes. Although their positions were often

contradictory, they were unrelenting in their drive to contest White supremacist and colonialist thought and practice in the Caribbean and elsewhere in the Black Atlantic.<sup>25</sup> There was an enlightened, humanist vision, informed, if not always critically, by ideas on “race.” When Trinidad and Beacon were formed in the 1920s, the intellectual space in Trinidad was actually fairly complex, with a network of literary and debating societies, and several attempts to produce literary journals. Further development was constrained in a context of restricted access to secondary schooling, to local universities, and to an established publishing house.

Republishing works from this critical intellectual tradition of Trinidad was a central part of New Beacon’s early publishing activity in the UK. As La Rose recalled, “I saw publishing as a vehicle which gave an independent validation of one’s own culture, history, politics -- a sense of one’s self -- to break the discontinuity [caused by lack of information in colonial society].”<sup>26</sup> In 1969, for example, New Beacon republished a book written by a nineteenth-century Trinidadian autodidact, John Jacob Thomas, a black rural schoolteacher who was perhaps the most important Trinidadian intellectual of the nineteenth century. Thomas published a foundational text of the radical tradition in Trinidadian literature, 1889’s Froudacity.<sup>27</sup> This was a response to James Anthony Froude’s The English in The West Indies, which was highly critical of the capacities of the formerly enslaved to govern themselves.<sup>28</sup> Froude was an Oxford professor of history and a defender of the British Empire and its ideology of White supremacy. Thomas countered Froude’s reactionary work by demonstrating the great advances made by Blacks in the decades following emancipation in 1838, and he documented the many obstacles set up by the British colonists in order to prevent Blacks from acquiring land and education. One of the central values of Thomas’ work lay in establishing that there was a tradition of scholarly writing by Black people in the colonies.

Recovering Thomas’ work made a vital contribution to late 1960s anti-racist struggles in Britain by providing a kind of cultural capital for those engaged in struggle against a dominant view that Black children in Britain were intellectually inferior to their White counterparts due to their origins in the Caribbean or Africa, seen in racist discourse as places where literary culture was virtually non-existent. Thomas’ work was further seen by New Beacon as having great potential as

encouragement for Black Britons who could recognize positive constructions of Black intellectual subjects. Aimed at bringing Caribbean history and letters to a reading public in Britain, other early New Beacon publications included Caribbean Writers -- Critical Essays, by Ivan Van Sertima; Marcus Garvey - 1887-1940, by Adolph Edwards; and Foundations, a volume of poetry by La Rose himself.

Since its inception in the mid-60s New Beacon has grown into one of the major suppliers of Black and Third World literature in the UK. Their publishing arm has not grown at the same rate as their bookselling operation -- with nearly 20,000 titles in stock at present -- but New Beacon publishing house had published over sixty-five titles by 2004. These publications have included fiction by established and new Caribbean authors and republications of a number of classic Caribbean fictional works; they have also published works of contemporary Black British fiction, criticism, history, and politics. The geographic scope of their publishing and bookselling encompasses the Caribbean, the USA, Africa, and Britain. Mainstream booksellers have recently allocated more space to Black literature, but this space is occupied largely by better-known, usually American, authors, whereas New Beacon, by sourcing literature from across the majority world, occupies a specialist space, a point from which they have been able to make a unique contribution to the circulation of Black writing and anti-colonialist critique.

In addition to bookselling and cultural production, New Beacon has been involved in struggles against class and “race” domination in the English State schooling system.<sup>29</sup> By the late-60s the schooling of Black children was becoming a highly politicized issue in London and in other British cities that had seen Black settlement, as a generation of Black children brought to or born in Britain was entering the school system. The children of West Indian immigrants faced a number of challenges in British classrooms. Education in the colonial West Indies, as discussed above, was the main route to social mobility for non-Whites who were lower in the class hierarchy; even though only a handful of students made it through the hyper-selective system to finish with a secondary school diploma, the possibility was tangible enough to lend the manifestly unjust system some stability and legitimacy. In Britain, most Caribbean migrants found even that narrow route to mobility blocked: it was overdetermined by the class base of schooling, where working-class young people were intended for

working-class jobs -- but Black working-class school-leavers were not programmed for any jobs at all.<sup>30</sup> Education seemed to serve different functions for British working-class people than for those from the West Indies and Africa.

One specific practice in UK schools -- “streaming” or “banding”-- was a locus of struggle to which New Beacon made important contributions. Like many Black parents, La Rose was outraged when he became aware of the tendency of British schools to direct Caribbean-heritage children into so-called Educationally Sub-Normal (ESN) streams, or “bands.” La Rose was a member of the North London West Indian Association, whose parents vigorously opposed ESN policy in the London Borough of Haringey. Proposals in 1969 for banding in Haringey was the impetus behind the creation of the Caribbean Education and Community Workers Association. Caribbean-descent as well as British schoolteachers who were opposed to banding joined to challenge the education authority’s reliance on IQ-testing and the assumptions on which such evaluative mechanisms and their interpretation were based.<sup>31</sup>

New Beacon mobilized its publishing capacities in support of this struggle. The then fledgling publisher organized meetings of activists, teachers, and parents in order to help formulate a collective response to banding. In addition, in 1971, New Beacon published, How the West Indian Child is made Educationally Sub-normal in the British School System.<sup>32</sup> This work, by Grenadian-born Bernard Coard, documented the racist underpinning of the ESN policy, and highlighted that the self-image of Black Caribbean children was being damaged by low expectations by teachers, which only compounded what was already a hostile social environment; Coard also exposed the racist tone of much of the teaching material used in UK schools. Apart from its obvious relation to anti-racist struggles being waged at the time around schooling and in the wider society, Coard’s work may be read as a contribution to the radical sociology of education, a field which was expanding at the time, produced by teachers and academics who had been radicalized by the social movements of the 1960s.<sup>33</sup> New Beacon also contributed to the response to the banding proposal by supplying published material to oppositional groups in support of widening the cultural range of what was taught in British schools.

Another response to the racial bias of the British State school system came in the form of setting up local community schools for Black kids, which sought to supplement formal schooling with extra lessons. In 1969 La Rose and a number of other parents started the George Padmore School to provide supplementary education for their children, with the intent of combating the negative stereotyping that these children were likely to face in the classroom. The School's founders introduced cultural products and influences from the Caribbean, south Asia, and Africa, thereby enhancing the "cultural capital" of Black children. Fostering a sense of the cultural and historical value of African societies was a major objective of the Padmore School. La Rose recalled:

[T]he first time I gave a talk on African history and civilisation to the children at the Padmore school, some of them laughed loudly when I mentioned "Africa." I think it was partly a nervous, embarrassed reaction, because they, as black kids in Britain, were used to hearing Africa dismissed as a primitive place, and Africans as primitive people. Africa was something they were a bit ashamed of. So we had to change that. We had to teach them about the civilisations of Africa. (...) I don't mean we neglected the history of Europe, of classical Greece and Rome; that too was part of our history; it was part of my own education at St Mary's College in Trinidad. We did not neglect European culture -- after all, the kids were growing up here in Europe -- but we wanted them to learn about and develop pride in the African parts of their heritage.<sup>34</sup>

Part of the curriculum of the George Padmore School consisted in sessions on world geography, Caribbean cuisine and music, and talks by African and Caribbean-heritage adults about their lives in Africa, in the Caribbean, and in Britain. This extra-curricular exposure prefigured the slow and contested coming of a "multicultural" awareness to British education. Since the early 1970s, there has been a steady growth in supplementary schools organized by ethnic minorities in Britain.<sup>35</sup> From this perspective, the George Padmore School was among the pioneers in multicultural education, which, while it is now accepted by many in the British education establishment, remains an object of a right-wing backlash by those who see multiculturalism as an attack on the integrity of "British" and/or "English" culture.<sup>36</sup>

New Beacon Circle initiated additional projects that brought a radical critique of “race” and class hierarchy in the UK to bear on the specific field of education. Established by New Beacon Circle and others in 1975, the Black Parents Movement (BPM), for example, organized a range of campaigns and activities in and around issues faced by Black youth and their families in Britain, many of which focused on countering the problems they faced in the UK schooling system. BPM’s 1979 pamphlet, Independent Parent Power, Independent Student Power: The Key to Change in Education and Schooling, put forward a set of critical assumptions and strategies that, they argued, would have to guide Black communities in their effort to transform the British schooling system. BPM’s perspective is highly critical of the instrumentalism that, in many respects, differentiates “schooling” from “education.” “The B.P.M. sees schooling as the preparation and selection of workers for the labour market. Some for better paid factory jobs, some for professional or middle class jobs, others for the low paid jobs or unemployment. The exam system is the means by which this selection is made.”<sup>37</sup> For BPM, then, the bureaucratic requirements of school management are seen to conflict sometimes with the needs of students and parents. Though these parents were concerned with their children’s (un)employment they also were concerned to effect change in the content that was taught -- a conviction that led New Beacon Circle to pursue educational projects beyond the existing structural boundaries of schooling, like the George Padmore School.

This does not mean New Beacon Circle activists gave up on the challenge of transforming mass educational institutions. But to do that, argued BPM, Black families and students would have to organize autonomously in mobilizing opposition to various UK schooling policies. As the title of this pamphlet suggests -- Independent Parent Power, Independent Student Power -- autonomous organization was central to counter what BPM identified as a conflict of interest that is often present between the interests of students, parents, and teachers. They wrote:

1. Parents and students, unlike teachers and ancillary workers, are generally either unorganised or badly organised to protect or advance their own independent interests in schools or with education authorities. This is particularly true of black and white working class parents.

2. Teachers and education authorities have been against the idea that parents and students should actively influence what happens in schools or with the education authority.

3. Certainly, teachers will appeal to parents to help fight against the cuts; but naturally the main concern of teachers will be to protect their own jobs and working conditions.

BPM stressed that parents and students cannot assume teachers are a natural ally in the struggle against the racist social environment of schools and of curricula. Such struggles required that Black parents and students organize independently. So whereas the liberal sees a partnership of parent and teacher working together toward fitting the student out for citizenship, New Beacon Circle's activist praxis brings social conflict to the heart of education. They reject the liberal constructions of both the classroom as a neutral space and the assumed commonality of interests of parents and teachers.

The struggles, people, cultural work, and activism discussed so far come together in the last initiative of the New Beacon Circle that I want to discuss: the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books. A major gathering of radicals, Black writers, third-world intellectuals, and activists, this Book Fair took place twelve times between 1982 and 1995 in London, with satellite Fairs in other British cities and in Trinidad. The Fair was founded by New Beacon, Bogle L'Ouverture Books, and the Race Today Collective. Started in 1967 by Guyanese-born Eric and Jessica Huntley, London-based Bogle L'Ouverture's publishing was concerned mainly with Afro-Caribbean and African literature. Based in Brixton, South London, the Race Today Collective emerged as a splinter from the Institute of Race Relations, and comprised activists who wanted a more direct confrontation with racism in Britain -- as against the Institute's policy of working within the existing state structures.<sup>38</sup> The Race Today Collective put out the journal Race Today, and was involved in a range of Black political activism in Britain. Members of these three founding organizations of the Book Fair were all centrally involved with publishing, bookselling, and education as sites of political action and social transformation.

The first International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books, which took place in April 1982 at the Islington Town Hall in North London, was attended by some 6000 people over its one-week period. That Book Fair gathered momentum from the previous two decades of struggles against racism, classism, and social and cultural exclusion which had been waged by Black and White progressive activists, as well as by many ordinary people whose main concern was fair treatment in the housing market, in schools, and in workplaces. The first Book Fair was being planned in 1981, a time of enormous racial tension in London. As Sarah White recalled,

[1981] was the year of the New Cross massacre and also the Brixton Riots, and [the Book Fair] really arose out of the work that had been done by the three organisations - Race Today, New Beacon and Bogle L'Ouverture -- and we had worked together in the alliance. So it was a kind of cultural manifestation of the politics that had been going on at the time. That is one way of looking at it. Plus the fact that all three organisations were involved in publishing.

The three organisers of the Fair each had concrete links with struggles and activists in the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, North America, and Europe. These connections not only facilitated broad international participation in the Book Fairs, but also were themselves sustained and strengthened by the gatherings in Britain. The Book Fair opened up a space where the respective transnational constituencies of New Beacon, Race Today, and Bogle L'Ouverture could be brought together, deepening the kind of inter-networking upon which the success of their often non-waged activities depended. In this sense, New Beacon was one node in a whole network of radical Black cultural-activist organizations.

For many of those attending the Book Fairs -- and I have in mind especially progressive teachers, small publishers, writers, and artists -- their most important resource consisted in the networks of human relationships through which work and ideas were produced, circulated, and fed back into struggle. On these networks many were dependent economically to remain relatively autonomous from the political and cultural establishments in their respective national contexts. A number of independent publishing ventures drew

inspiration from the politics of the Book Fairs. Jeremy Poynting, for example, of Peepal Tree Press, one of the largest publishers of Caribbean fiction in English, recalled significant encouragement and technical advice from New Beacon in the early period of starting his venture.<sup>39</sup>

The political significance of the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books is as a counter-hegemonic site in relation to a Eurocentric literary, cultural, and political establishment. Such events can be understood as strategic campaigns aimed to gain, extend, and secure relative autonomy for radical Black and third-world writers, artists, and their work. The political thinking behind the Book Fairs was classically Gramscian: the organizers waged battles against “race” and class oppression in cultural spaces, thereby politicizing and so challenging settled bourgeois conceptions of culture as individual accomplishments and refinement. By shifting literary culture into a public space the Book Fairs encouraged a rude democratization of the written word.

### **Conclusion: Cultural Politics, Anti-Racist Education, and Transformation**

The type of political activity that is today captured by the term “activism” is mainly that connected to the new social movements. These movements have had a major impact in Western societies, especially in the areas of gender, ethnicity, “race,” environment, education, and sexuality. These movements engage in struggles over and against power, a crucial dimension of which is meaning.<sup>40</sup> In that aspect, new social movements share much in common with the forms of “cultural politics” that came into public awareness when the student, women’s, and black power movements came to the fore in the 1960s. Cultural politics may be imagined as a kind of politics that attacks the exclusionary distinction of “high” and “low” culture, that foregrounds the way in which elites value the cultural capital which they possess while devaluing that of those subordinate to them in a given social formation, and that

seeks to politicize the way in which cultural forms are consumed and how culture is produced.<sup>41</sup> The modes of struggles associated with cultural politics, as I hope to have shown in this chapter, extend further back in time and wider in space than is often acknowledged, as elements of this kind of politics can be seen in action, throughout the history of capitalist modernity, in both the colonial and the post-colonial parts of the world system.

That education has played a pivotal and paradoxical role in the emergence, shape, and trajectory of cultural politics is clear in the case of New Beacon Circle. For the New Beacon Circle, education is perhaps the single most important process in bringing about the kinds of social transformation they desire. These transformations are best understood in terms of a transcendent vision, combining the internationalism of the classical Left with the anti-colonialism of the radicalized British ex-colonial. Imagine Rosa Luxemburg in a political chat room with C.L.R. James. You get my point.

Much of what passes lately for informed discussion of multiculturalism in Britain is actually a crude essentialism dressed up in the designer garb of ‘culture.’ Where once there was talk of ‘race’ there is now talk of ‘culture.’ Since September 11, 2001, talk of multiculturalism in official circles has begun to slide into talk of averting a “clash of civilizations.” From the top-down perspective of the British state, protestations of multicultural Britain constitute the latest in a long line of strategies it developed for controlling the overseas colonial population. These strategies always involved constructing the colonized as fundamentally different/other than the English, a strategy first employed in subjugating Ireland, one of England’s first colonies. The otherness was both the means and the justification for the surveillance of the colonials. Especially suited for surveillance were and still remain those elements perceived to be prone to trouble or potentially threatening to “British values” of honesty, civility, and democracy. For many of the ruled, especially among the Black and Brown, retreat into cultural identity is often a defence against an increasingly rightwing political culture in which White + Might = Right.

An uncompromising anti-racist pedagogy drawing on Black, radical, and third world currents, as developed by New Beacon, posed a potent challenge to post-imperial xenophobia and racism in

Britain. That pedagogy can help to dismantle the racialized patriotism that remains central to dominant representations of Britishness.

All of the New Beacon projects I have discussed make direct interventions into actually existing social and cultural spaces with the aim of effecting change and creating alternatives. The projects are distinguished by an orientation toward planning and putting in place structures that would endure into the future; they are projects imagined and implemented with a transcendent orientation. The setting up of an educational trust and archive, bearing the name of the Pan African Marxist George Padmore, supported by an expanding web presence ([www.georgepadmoreinstitute.org](http://www.georgepadmoreinstitute.org)), is an indication that the key figures in the New Beacon circle have an eye to the future.

Of course, transcendence is never guaranteed. Still, New Beacon Circle chose to act, not in a naïve voluntarist manner, but with acute awareness that some of their aims are bound to fail. Their collective lifework is a timely reminder to a younger generation now being politicized in the anti-capitalist, anti-globalization, and other oppositional movements that social change must not only be struggled for, but it must be organized toward; and organized struggle grows out of struggles to organize. The New Beacon Circle's radical pedagogical ventures into publishing, bookselling, and activist organizing have helped to constitute the multicultural society that Britain is not yet, but might yet become.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> In memory of Jim Murray (1949-2003): activist, friend, and comrade. [La Lotta Continua](#).

<sup>2</sup> I use colour-“race” terms in capitalised form and always with implicit quotation marks. I reject both “race” as ontology and also racial ways of seeing/knowing. Race and its attendant colour lexicons are undeniably part of an apparatus of organizing social life, but to accord them near-ontological status is to lose sight of their instrumentality and contingency. I treat

---

race as a sociological object, rather than an epistemological standpoint. That I feel the need to make these almost banal points here is an indication of renewed fascination, both popular and scholarly, with “race.”

<sup>3</sup> R. Williams, Culture (London: Fontana, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> O. Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> P. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, (London: Pelican, 1968).

<sup>7</sup> P. Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985); P. Freire and I. Shor, A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> A. Callinicos, The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx (London: Bookmarks, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> A. Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

<sup>10</sup> R. Dennis, “Introduction: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Tradition of Radical Intellectual Thought,” in Research in Race and Ethnic Relations: The Black Intellectuals, ed. R. Dennis. (London: JAI Press, 1997); W. Du Bois, The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century, (New York: International Publishers, 1968).

<sup>11</sup> C. Calhoun, The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism During the Industrial Revolution, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982); E. Meiksin-Wood, The Retreat from Class: The New True Socialism, (London: Verso, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> D. Lowenthal, West Indian Societies, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

---

<sup>13</sup> O. Bolland, “Creolization and Creole Societies: A Cultural Nationalist View of Caribbean Social History,” in Intellectuals in the Twentieth-Century Caribbean, ed. A. Hennessey, (London: Heinemann, 1992); C.L.R. James, A New View of West Indian History, (1965); E. Williams, Education in the British West Indies, (New York: University Place Book Shop, 1968).

<sup>14</sup> E. Williams, Capitalism and Slavery, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964); E. Williams Williams Speaks: Essays on Colonialism and Independence, (Callaloux, 1964).

<sup>15</sup> C. Campbell, Colony and Nation: A Short History of Education in Trinidad & Tobago, (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1986).

<sup>16</sup> Campbell 1996

<sup>17</sup> I. Oxaal, Black Intellectuals Come to Power: The Rise of Creole Nationalism in Trinidad Tobago, (Cambridge: Schenkman, 1968), 62.

<sup>18</sup> For an extended discussion of the New Beacon Circle see Brian W. Alleyne, Radicals Against Race: Black Activism and Cultural Politics, (London: Berg, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> See <http://www.clrjamesinstitute.org>. Jim Murray died on 21 July 2003, after a short illness.

<sup>20</sup> C.L.R. James, American Civilization, ed. K. Hart and A. Grimshaw (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> A. Walmsley, The Caribbean Artists Movement 1966-1972: A Literary and Cultural History, (London: New Beacon Books, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> S. Cudjoe and P. Henry, “The Audacity of It All: C.L.R. James’s Trinidadian Background,” in C.L.R. James’s Caribbean, ed. P. Buhle (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 39-55.

<sup>23</sup> R. Sander, The Trinidad Awakening: West Indian Literature of the Nineteen Thirties, (New York: Greenwood, 1988).

- 
- <sup>24</sup> P. Buhle, CLR James: The Artist as Revolutionary, (London: Verso), 26.
- <sup>25</sup> B.W. Alleyne, "Classical Marxism, Caribbean Radicalism and the Black Atlantic Intellectual Tradition," Small Axe 3 (1998): 157-69; A. Bogue, Caliban's Freedom: The Early Political Thought of C.L.R. James, (London: Pluto Press, 1997).
- <sup>26</sup> B. Beese, "Race Today interviews New Beacon," Race Today 9 (1977).
- <sup>27</sup> J. Thomas, Fraudacity: West Indian Fables by James Anthony Froude, (London: New Beacon, 1969 [1889]).
- <sup>28</sup> J.A. Froude, The English in The West Indies; or, The Bow of Ulysses, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1888).
- <sup>29</sup> State school here includes both comprehensive (all-ability and all subject areas) and selective ("Grammar" schools, oriented toward the traditional scholastic curriculum). The New Beacon activists and their associates were engaged with mainly with schooling in England.
- <sup>30</sup> A. Cambridge, "Education and the West Indian Child -- A Criticism of the ESN School System." Black Liberator 1 (1971): 9-19; P. Willis, Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs, (New York: Columbia, 1977); F. Dhondy, "Teaching Young Blacks," Race Today 10 (1978): 81-6.
- <sup>31</sup> T. Carter, Shattering Illusions: West Indians in British Politics, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1986).
- <sup>32</sup> B. Coard, How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Sub-Normal in the British School System, (London: New Beacon, 1971).
- <sup>33</sup> M.F.D. Young, Knowledge and Control New Directions for the Sociology of Education, Open University Set Book, (London: Collier Macmillan, 1971).
- <sup>34</sup> Personal Interview.

- 
- <sup>35</sup> T. Carter, Shattering Illusions: West Indians in British Politics. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1986); G. John, The Black Working-Class Movement in Education and Schooling and the 1985-86 Teachers Dispute, (London: Black Parents Movement, 1986); H.S. Mirza and D. Reay, “Spaces and Places of Black Educational Desire: Rethinking Black Supplementary Schools as a New Social Movement,” Sociology 34, no. 3 (2000): 521-44.
- <sup>36</sup> S. May, “Critical Multiculturalism and Cultural Difference: Avoiding Essentialism,” in Critical Multiculturalism: Rethinking Multicultural and Antiracist Education, ed. S. May (London: Falmer Press, 1999).
- <sup>37</sup> Black Parents Movement, Independent Parent Power, Independent Student Power: The Key to Change in Education and Schooling, (London: Black Parents Movement, 1980). Emphasis in original.
- <sup>38</sup> J. Bourne and A. Sivanandan, “Cheerleaders and Ombudsmen: The Sociology of Race Relations in Britain,” Race & Class XXI (1980): 331-52.
- <sup>39</sup> Personal Interview.
- <sup>40</sup> A. Melucci, Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society, (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989).
- <sup>41</sup> J. Guillory, Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).