

CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

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PART 4 RACE

4.5 Gideon Ben-Tovim, John Gabriel, Ian Law and Kathleen Stredder—*The Local Politics of Race*

4.5.1 Introduction

The Local Politics of Race is an action research study that examines the political processes that give rise to and maintain racial inequalities. Gideon Ben-Tovim, John Gabriel, Ian Law and Kathleen Stredder focus, as the title suggests, on local politics and the analysis is developed through their five-year involvement in local organisations in Wolverhampton and Liverpool. Local organisations rather than individual cases provide the opportunity to address institutionalised racism as they allow for ‘discussion and action on important and specific race-related issues’ (Ben-Tovim *et al.*, 1986, p. 65).

The researchers developed their research against a background of mounting evidence of racial inequality. Despite legal constraints on racial discrimination and the increasing awareness and take-up of race issues, black people are discriminated against and disadvantaged in various spheres including education, employment and immigration (Townsend 1972; Home Office, 1981; Tomlinson, 1983; Commission for Racial Equality, 1983, 1984; Brown, 1984; Swann, 1985; *Race and Immigration*). ‘It was clear that the “politics” of racial equality weren’t working.’ Thus, ‘underlying the whole project was a commitment to producing knowledge which would be “of use” in the struggle for racial equality’ (Ben-Tovim *et al.*, 1986, pp. 1–2).

The researchers, however, deny prioritising any one form of intervention and are opposed to sectarian notions about the authenticity of any one form of anti-racist activity (for example, activity on the streets by black people alone). They define three types of organisation committed to the elimination of racial inequalities: first, explicitly anti-racist organisations that grew up in response to the National Front in the 1970s; second, community and project groups for Afro-Caribbean, Asian and multi-racial groups; third, policy-related campaigning groups. The researchers concentrated on campaigning and pressure groups, especially the Labour Party and Community Relations Councils, which, they argue, have ‘provided important political contexts for those committed to work actively for racial equality’ (Ben-Tovim *et al.*, 1986, p. 95).¹⁶ In addition they contacted two local anti-racist groups: the Merseyside Anti-Racist Alliance (MARA) and the Wolverhampton Anti-Racist Committee (WARC).

The book focuses on the politics of racial inequality and the role played by political forces in both reinforcing and reducing those inequalities. They do not address race relations by focusing on culture or biological differences. Nor do they use class inequalities or capital accumulation to explain race relations. What they are concerned with is the ‘secondary’ role of politics. Rather than treat the political as a residue of

autonomous activity as the cultural-, biological- and class-determinant approaches tend to, Ben-Tovim *et al.* are primarily interested in the machinations of politics and the wielding of power as it effects local struggles for racial equality. This focus is not, however, blind to the structural limitations. They are not interested in, for example, minority culture *per se* but locate it within the discussion of minority rights and demand for institutional provision.

Their conception of politics is not restricted to formal governmental institutions 'but refers to a mode of analysing institutional structures and relations in general'. Within these institutional contexts, they focus 'on sites of struggle and conflict' where the outcome is not known in advance. In short they address power. They see power as something other than 'fixed quantities ascribed to individuals on the basis of some preconceived hierarchy of the state'. On the contrary, they needed to establish what the conditions are that make the exercise of power possible. Such conditions relate to the law, control over the administration of policy, access to material resources, the nature of prevalent ideologies, and the political struggles. They, therefore, 'conceive race policy initiatives not as necessarily tokenistic or correct solutions but rather as resources whose outcomes depend on the mobilisation of forces for and against racial equality' (Ben-Tovim *et al.*, 1986, p. 99).

4.5.2 Action research

The project, started in 1978, became a piece of action research not least because of the reluctance of both local and central government to provide information through the standardised structured interview research instruments. The original intention was to examine the impact of central government policies on race on local communities. Part of this was to examine the scope for local differences in policy and organisational practices. The plan was to interview Whitehall officials and to examine policy documents and Hansard in order to determine central government policy. Interviews with Home Office and Department of Environment officials proved to be 'uninformative and inadequate for examining central government's relationship with local authorities or for building up a detailed knowledge of how race as an issue was "handled" in Whitehall' (Ben-Tovim *et al.*, 1986, p. 3).

A survey of local officials and politicians in Wolverhampton and Liverpool was intended to find out the influence of central policy on local policy-making processes. However, the principal officers in Liverpool and Wolverhampton refused access to the administrators/local officers in the town halls and thus the researchers were deprived of a main source of information.

The third stage was to assess the impact of local political and community organisations through interviews and direct active participation. The involvement in these areas provided the researchers with 'a wealth of detail' about the operation of local government. Such involvement also allowed the researchers to study the relationship between central and local government on race issues and to look at 'the role of central legislation in promoting racial equality'. In the circumstances a revised plan was developed that involved assessing the problems and possibilities created for local organisations and local struggles for racial equality by local and central policies.

For example this meant that we did not rely on data from the Home Office or Liverpool's chief executive for an understanding of the 1976 Race relations Act.

Rather we came to understand the Act through our active involvement in local anti-racist struggles. In this way our knowledge of central and local policies was linked to the research process through action. (Ben-Tovim *et al.*, 1986, p. 4)

The researchers regarded their direct involvement in local organisations as not just a fortuitous means of gaining information. On the contrary, they regarded the ‘action’ aspect of their research as of key importance. ‘We were able to use our energy and efforts (for the purpose of research) to support local struggles for racial equality’ (Ben-Tovim *et al.*, 1986, p. 3). The kind of action the researchers were involved in included:

attending meetings to engage in debates about strategies and objectives; writing policy papers and using them for discussion and lobbying; doing local research for the use of organisations and attending and organising conferences. (Ben-Tovim *et al.*, 1986, p.3)

Ben-Tovim *et al.* argue that the relationship between local government and local organisations concerned with racial equality, such as the Community Relations Councils and the Labour Party, was ‘consistently tested over a wide spectrum of issues’ and with them ‘acting in a variety of capacities’. They thus argue that their findings are ‘valid and reliable’ and ‘furthermore that they are detailed and specific, as well as explanatory in their content’ (Ben-Tovim *et al.*, 1986, p. 4). The researchers argued that they were thus able to ‘take research out of its ivory tower’ and to develop academic research in the context of a committed fight for racial equality. Operating in a different social and academic context they are unequivocal in the face of the dilemmas that fifteen years earlier had plagued Ladner (1971).

4.5.3 Conventional and integrative action research

The researchers point out that there is a substantial ‘if unfashionable’ tradition of action research in the social sciences, which includes the War on Poverty Programmes in the United States and the Education Priority Areas Project and the Community Development Project in the United Kingdom, during the 1960s and 1970s. More recently, action research has been associated with initiatives ‘designed to combat the effects of urban deprivation and disadvantage’. These initiatives, however, were all characterised by a distinction between action and research with a corresponding distinction between ‘those who researched and those who acted’ (Lees and Smith, 1975). The result is that action research has frequently failed to take account of its political context with corresponding implications for the programme of action.

Ben-Tovim *et al.* (1986, p. 6) argue that social science has always been surrounded by controversy about the relationship between the various social scientific disciplines on the one hand and political action on the other. At one level this is seen as an issue of value freedom. In the area of race relations there has been, contrary to notions of value-freedom, a clear commitment by most authors to particular standpoints, such as the elimination of racial discrimination or the promotion of racial harmony. However, despite the intrusion of such values there has been little systematic attempt to develop the political implications of these positions.¹⁷ Such depoliticisation of the issue within social science, the authors claim, is fatuous and unrealisable. Any research, let alone that related to racism, is political from beginning to end. Subjects are not selected and studied

neutrally. More to the point, social scientists cannot expect their research to be taken up by politicians or organisations. 'The tendency to divorce research from its would-be political context and to abstain from research based interventions in politics has only served to sanction the political status quo and in some instances no doubt to actually exacerbate inequalities themselves' (Ben-Tovim *et al.*, 1986, p. 5). The depoliticisation of the research process, they argue, undermines any direct challenge to institutionalised racism.

They suggest that in the 1980s both 'mainstream social science' and Marxism have effected a consensus that divorces research from political practice. Mainstream social science they argue tends to disregard the political significance of its research activity through its commitment to objectivity. Much Marxism, they suggest disengages social science from politics 'by focusing debate on the ideological purity of Marxism's contemporary forms and their fidelity (or lack of it) to the classical Marxist tradition'. This is reinforced by an insistence on economic and class structures as the primary focus of analysis. The authors thus project a 'purist economic' view of much Marxist analysis of race, which is hostile to 'reformist' intervention in existing social structures.¹⁸

Rather than pursue 'objective' research the authors are concerned that the sociology of race should be overtly politicised and reflect the ethical commitment condemning racism. Ben-Tovim *et al.* explore 'political action in terms of viable strategic options' with the intention of providing 'a more complex explanation of the limits of reform without pre-empting it altogether'.

What Ben-Tovim *et al.* propose is a dissolution of the distinction between researchers and activists. They note three consequences of this approach. First, policy implications are an integral part of the research, not an appended afterthought. That is, the implications of the research on policy becomes an object of investigation in their own right. The implementation and use of the research is built into the analysis from the outset. Second, the analysis of the organisations (both statutory and campaigning) that are concerned with political change is not neutral but represents an evaluation of their effectiveness in realising their objectives. Third, the knowledge gained from the research is not the 'relatively superficial, external and ephemeral' knowledge of the social surveyor or in-depth interviewer but is knowledge that is 'constructed out of political practice, for which there is no substitute'. Such knowledge 'demands a continuous interplay of calculation and testing through struggle within a political context'. What this means is that:

Questions asked can be tested against past performance and if necessary asked again. Policy statements can be measured in terms of their impact over time, as well as influenced directly through collaborative political intervention. Organisations can be understood not just in terms of their constitutions or the basis of selective and guarded statements of their leaders but through direct and sustained involvement over relatively long periods of time. (Ben-Tovim *et al.*, 1986, p. 9)

This they have attempted to do in their work in Liverpool and Wolverhampton.

4.5.4 Politics and policy

Ben- Tovim *et al.* use the term 'racism' to refer to 'a process the outcome of which is racial inequality'. Racism operates overtly by design, or indirectly by the effects, of laws, policies and administrative practice. Thus racism operates positively through policies, rules and their interpretation or negatively through a failure to do anything about racism or even recognise it. Universalism, for example, which suggests everyone should be treated equally denies positive discrimination to correct imbalances as a result of prior racist practices.

They argue that institutionalised racism is deeply embedded and that an analysis of it should go beyond the analysis of the immigration policies of post-war governments. It is to 'racism's low profile' that they wish to draw attention, both to reveal further layers of institutional racism but because of the contribution it can make to the understanding of the politics of race and racism.

In broadening the notion of the state in relation to racism Ben- Tovim *et al.* propose three interrelated sets of political forms and processes. First, a set of public institutions (ultimately accountable to an electorate), including central, regional and local government and their administrations. Second, the relationship between these public institutions and those outside the formal apparatus as mediated by laws, policies and administrative practices (including marriage, taxation, social security, race relations, etc.) Third, the state is seen as 'a site of struggle where the object is to change the role of public institutions in terms of their status and/or their relationship to bodies outside their formal institutional boundaries' (Ben-Tovim *et al.*, 1986, p. 23). They argue that understanding struggles requires this broader conception of the state. It is then possible, they suggest, 'to indicate how struggles themselves can serve to redefine the boundaries of the state and its internal/external relations'.¹⁹

Reviewing forms of discrimination in local policy they note four categories of policies and practices: those that fail to redress racial injustice; those that create and maintain racial inequalities; those that abuse the cultural differences of racial minorities; and those that assume negative racial stereotypes.

They draw on case study material from their own political experience to illustrate these various occurrences. For example, the abuse of cultural difference is illustrated in the absence of adequate provision of leisure and recreational facilities for Asian girls. They make virtually no use of statutory youth-service provision for various reasons including the absence of girls-only provision. Despite clear implications for policy, and the scope under the 1944 Education Act granted to local authorities, the youth service has continually failed to develop a positive policy to meet the needs of this group of young people.

Part of the action initiative was to refer to models of good practice in order to convince local authorities of the respectability and efficacy of policy initiatives. For example, two of the researchers undertook research of the Inner London Education Authority Youth Service (Gabriel & Stredder, 1982), which showed that, among other things, the London authority had: an explicit commitment to combat racism; had introduced self-help project work outside its traditional youth club provision; involved young people in planning provision; and had substantial black representation within the youth service. These results were used in branch committee meetings to show officers and politicians that what they regarded as impractical had worked elsewhere and that

what they regarded as extreme demands had been written into the philosophy of the London youth service. While the point was made, it is indicative of the nature of the local politics of race that this did not result in any immediate fundamental shift in practice in Wolverhampton.

The authors conclude that their case material shows that there is a complex set of processes at work linking policy, administrative practice and various interested organisations. Racial equality is a political struggle marked by slow and unpredictable shifts. There is strong resistance to racial equality in local government bolstered by racial stereotypes and the refusal to acknowledge the existence of racism. This is mainly manifested in the persistence of colour-blind ideologies that draw for support on the ambiguity of central policy initiatives. Anti-racist organisations, through planned political initiatives, have engaged the forces of resistance through a re-definition of the problem. To avoid charges of extremism, the organisations with which the researchers were involved have built broad alliances and have attempted to break down resistance through the 'democratic' processes of negotiation and representation.

4.5.5 Conclusion

The research has focused on concrete struggles over racial inequalities. They have developed a research process that takes into account local conditions. Their action approach contributes to change in a direct way.

Although this has not ruled out the possibility of producing objective research evidence, for example surveys and case studies of institutionalised racism, what we have done is to allow local conditions to dictate research priorities and to use findings to press for institutional change. Our intervention has served to facilitate and develop our political analysis. (Ben-Tovim *et al.*, 1986, p. 97)

Their approach is clearly informed by Marxism (although sceptical of much Marxist commentary) but rather than rely on Marxist economic theory at the expense of a political analysis they have drawn on Marx's political framework. In their analysis of local struggles aimed to secure greater equality, justice and power for racial minority communities they integrate theory and practice 'through an analysis of a highly specific and complex set of historical conditions within the context of a broadly based set of socialist objectives' (Ben-Tovim *et al.*, 1986, p. 97).

They conclude their analysis of the political context in which policies related to racial equality have been implemented by providing a straightforward framework for intervention. The action researcher should identify or construct a problem, analyse the political means by which the problem is reinforced or created, and then undertake a political challenge to the problem. This is not a detached analysis but an ongoing lived experience through action research that provides the basis for 'a constant reformulation, elaboration and development of research problems and analysis' with the political objective of the elimination of racial inequality. Research and political action become fully integrated. The efficacy of research material is linked directly to an understanding of policy constraints, administrative machinations and political processes.

¹⁶ Reviewing the role of the Labour Party the researchers note that despite the broad ideological commitment the role of the party in both Liverpool and Wolverhampton has been limited. Liverpool, dominated by Militant has tended to confine anti-racism to slogans while in Wolverhampton positive, although superficial, initiatives have uncovered more profound problems. Nonetheless, despite these initiatives there is a resistance to extending action which is not just a reflection of a commitment to anti-racism, nor the absence of mandatory participatory mechanisms within the party but is also 'in part a reflection of the absence of any clear conception of socialist policy and its implications for the local state' (Ben-Tovim *et al.*, 1986, p. 82).

¹⁷ Ben-Tovim *et al.* argue that the analysis of race has been compartmentalised into studies of policy or class analyses of racism and that this has meant that policy issues have been divorced from their political context while political analysis has lacked a policy dimension. To overcome this, they argue, policy analysis must 'accommodate the notions of anti-racist and black struggles', that is, address the mechanism for achieving identified reforms and ensuring that overall objectives will be monitored and maintained. Further, policy must be evaluated on the basis of its contribution towards reducing racial inequalities. Finally, the relationship between policy and the 'realities of the political system' must also be explored.

¹⁸ The accounts of research practice in this book have been presented without specific critiques, because all of them represent useful case studies. However, these comments by Ben-Tovim *et al.* are rather too generalised and misleading to pass without comment. 'Mainstream sociology', which presumably refers to the dominant modes of non-critical research highlighted in part one of this book, is not as naïve or confused about its political significance as the researchers suggest. Indeed, there are explicit accounts that explore political considerations (for example, Denzin, 1970). What mainstream sociology tends to do, however, is, as the researchers suggest, disengage their analysis from any praxiological concerns. Equally, some Marxist research tends to be less explicit about praxiological concerns than one might expect given the revolutionary tradition. Not all Marxist analysis is, of course, economic, as this book consistently reiterates. Nor is all Marxist analysis disdainful of direct action within prevailing social structures. Such action is not uniformly regarded as reformist by Marxists, as Ben-Tovim *et al.* suggest. Indeed, most Marxist analysis informed by Gramscian hegemonic notions tends to be concerned to get involved directly in social action, here and now, rather than await the revolution, as the examples in this book make clear. In the final analysis, whatever straw models Ben-Tovim *et al.* construct, there is, as this book shows, a critical tradition that is directly concerned with praxiological issues.

¹⁹ Ben-Tovim *et al.* argue that focusing on legislative amelioration (that is, on the various Race Relations Acts, local government grant aid, inner city policies) is too restrictive because it fails to differentiate positive and negative effects. Further, looking only at high-profile political opposition to racial inequality (for example, the Anti-Nazi League; The Organisation of Women of Afro-Caribbean and Asian Descent and other black groups) centres concern on overt discrimination rather than insidious aspects of racism. By addressing and identifying the modes of operation of policies on such things as housing, taxation, education, families, and so on, political action could be initiated to challenge them. This would also allow the critique of mainstream policies on, for

example, housing (rather than marginalised inner-city policies) to ensure that racial minorities are not excluded either by positive or negative discrimination (for example, failure of councils to provide large houses for extended family groups).