CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH
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PART 4 RACE

4.6 Mark Duffield—Black radicalism and the Politics of De-industrialisation.

4.6.1 Introduction

Mark Duffield (1988) examines immigrant labour in Britain by focusing on foundry
workers, particularly those from the Indian sub-continent who came to work in the West
Midlands. He asks the question 'how and why did the West Midland ironfoundry industry
become characterized by relatively large concentrations of Indian workers? (Duffield,
1988, p.1). To answer this he undertook an extensive and detailed historical analysis of
the industry and the incorporation and role of Indian workers. His approach is to call in to
question preconceptions about the nature of the immigrant workforce; their attitude to,
and receptivity of, demanding manual labour; their role in the retardation of
mechanisation of the foundry industry; and their 'docility' and involvement in collective
action. The analysis of these myths is undertaken by locating them within a wider
framework of myths about the nature of labour shortages, deskilling and the demand from
capital for low paid immigrant labour.

   Duffield's history outlines the processes of the industrialisation of the ironfoundry
industry in the immediate post war period through the industrial concentration of Indian
workers and their self-representation, to the development of corporate management and
rationalisation of the industry and its decline in the recession years of the 1980s. The rise
and fall of the Indian shop-floor movement is charted and its fortunes linked to wider
political processes.

   Underpinning the Gramscian hegemonic analysis is the central notion of the political
reality of racism. Rather than see racist practices as simply determined by capital's short-
term economic imperatives, Duffield proposes that they represent a paradigmatic instance
of the destruction of worker autonomy. A contradictory alliance between labour and
capital served to undermine the radical potential engendered by the immigrant black
workers and further the fractionalisation of the working class.

4.6.2 Sources

Duffield's historical analysis uncovers the hidden history of the black foundry workers by
focusing on the practices and actions within the foundry industry as well as the wider
context of racist immigration policies and hegemonic destruction of labour autonomy.
This hidden history is revealed by his extensive use of archival material, which provides
the basis for his critical examination of taken-for-granted assumptions about migrant
labour. He lists seven archive sources: those of the Amalgamated Union of Foundry
Workers (AUFW);[20] the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU); the
Engineering Employers Federation (EEF); the West Midlands Engineering and

Employers Association (WMEEA); the Public Records Office (PRO); The Race Relations Board (RRB); and the Banner Theatre Tape Archive.

The AUFW archives, which includes material from its component unions, was consulted at the Machester and West Bromwich offices. The journal *Foundry Worker* and the reports of the Annual Delegates Meeting were extensively used. Duffield notes that this source was very detailed and useful up to 1960 but that since that time there is far less detail on the state of the industry, the composition of the workforce and the internal debates within the union. The same tendency occurred with the material located in the TGWU archives (consulted at the West Bromwich offices). The useful Biennial Delegate Conferences reports and the Regional Secretary's Quarterly Reports (and their forerunners) of the 1950s were extremely informative unlike the virtually useless contemporary records. The EEF archives, housed in its London headquarters, do not permit public inspection of recent files but material from the 1960s and earlier is accessible. Such files contain a lot of information on 'post-war labour policy, foreign and black worker agreements' and the 'effect of immigration and racial legislation'. Information on the local implementation of foreign labour agreements and racial legislation were available from the WMEEA archives housed in Birmingham. Details of disputes, union-employer meetings and correspondence were also found in this source. Case notes on investigations by the RRB in the area and lodged at the Birmingham offices of the Commission for racial Equality (CRE) provided 'an invaluable insight into attitudes and conditions within the industry during the late 1960s and early 1970s'. For reasons of space, Duffield notes, these files are currently being destroyed by the CRE. The Banner Theatre Tape Archive, lodged at the company's premises in Lozells, Birmingham, contained taped interviews with 'local political figures, trade unionists, pickets, striking workers, and so on, dating from the mid-1970s and covering many of the major industrial disputes in the area'. Finally, the thirty-year rule meant that files up to the mid-1950s were available for inspection in the Public Records Office. Duffield located some 'extremely interesting material on post-war labour policy, foreign workers and, especially, government responses to black immigration' (Duffield, 1988, pp. 208–9).

A large number of published books and articles on both the foundry industry and the issue of migrant labour in general, plus various newspaper reports, are used to supplement Duffield's primary data.

The following brief résumé of the history of the period up to 1965 gives an indication of the way Duffield develops a critical historical account, using these various sources to engage myths about the particular history of the industry and, more importantly, the industry as a case study of black migrant labour effected by wider social structural and political processes.

4.6.3 Historical case study

Mechanisation of the industry, that came to a head during the Second World War and took on a new impetus with the development of the automotive industry and its demand for standardised components, caused a crisis amongst skilled ironfoundry craftsmen.[21] Their response, through their union, was to create a new skill hierarchy for machine work. For example, the 'Report of Proceedings of Special Emergency Conference' of the AUFW in August 1946 (page 13) clearly indicated the need for this hierarchy when it claimed that 'the skilled labour force would be adequate if the foundries were properly

staffed with labour to serve the craftsman'. In the event, high-status, high-earning, machine workers on piece-rates were serviced by groups of specialised time-paid labourers. Although both types of worker were initially white, Duffield suggests that this hierarchy defined, in advance, the place that blacks would come to occupy in the industry.

A prevalent myth is that Asian workers took jobs that whites did not want. There is, Duffield asserts, no empirical evidence for this truism. The popularity of the myth arises from its naturalisation of the incorporation process. In particular, it naturalises skill distinctions rather than analyses 'skill' as a social construct. An equally convincing, and empirically sound, analysis of the incorporation of Asian workers in the labour force is that they concentrated in areas where union were weak. Trade unions in expanding industries able to meet labour requirements could keep concentrations of black workers from forming. This was notable in the automotive industry in the West Midlands.

The incorporation of Indian workers into the foundry industry corresponds to a period of decolonisation (1940–60). This was a politically sensitive period and overt immigration policies were resisted. In addition, Britain suffered labour shortages and migrant labour from Europe and the old Empire was required in the short term. A clear government policy was, however, developed to avoid concentrations of black migrant labour. Documents in the Public Records Office show clearly that the government was developing a policy of dispersing black labour, through the agency of the Labour Exchanges, from the ports to the inland areas and to jobs in industries where there was no opposition from workers or employers and where no white women were employed. The TGWU seized the opportunity to increase its membership by recruiting black members but exploited the situation by imposing foreign-worker type restrictions (including exclusion from promotion to supervisory grades and from piece-rate paid jobs) in exchange for its consent to allow black migrants employment opportunities. This kind of collaborative practice between trade unions, employers and government, both formal and informal, continued to affect the distribution of black workers throughout the 1950s.

During the 1950's, the racial practice of the TGWU and other general unions could be summarised as one of acceptance providing it could control and restrict black employment. 'This not only enhanced their own interests, it also enabled employers to fill pressing vacancies and satisfied the government's desire to disperse and incorporate colonial immigrants' (Duffield, 1988, p. 29). The concentration of Indian workers in the West Midlands foundry industry was, then, not simply a result of labour shortages and unpleasant work. The industry was characterised by a low level of trade union organisation. That alone is not, though, the reason for an anomalous concentration of Indian workers. Rather, large concentrations in the industry were a managerial initiative enabled by lack of trade union power. Employers in the industry in the West Midlands had, for some time, been concerned about the attempts by government and trade unions to press for restrictive agreements covering the employment of foreign workers. Indian and West Indian workers, because of their citizenship status, were not subject to employment licensing regulations (unlike European migrants) and so became attractive to employers unhampered by strong trade union opposition. Thus the concentration of Indian workers, aided by self-recruitment which by-passed the Labour Exchange policy of dispersal, was a function of individual employers flouting the social democratic consensus.

This strategy also benefitted employers who paid the Indian workers low rates of pay for their labouring work and afforded the workers no security, knowing they were unable to improve their situation. By the end of the 1950s access to the industry was almost exclusively through intermediaries who usually demanded bribes for their services. The situation was thus one of a hard working, undemanding, and thoroughly exploited labour force in many of the foundries; a situation that fuelled the myth of the 'docile Asian' worker.

The 1960s saw a radical change. At the beginning of the decade the Midland ironfoundries were racially segregated on the basis of the division in the technical organisation of work. By the end of the decade, Indian workers had begun to take over machine work. The struggle of Indian workers against racial oppression gathered momentum during the first half of the 1960s. Central to this was the self-representation of Indian workers through the election of their own shop stewards. The growth of an autonomous Indian shop-floor movement had a significant effect on the unions then competing for members in the ironfoundry industry.

A new racial hegemony, no longer based on 'skill' but on cultural differences, emerged. The Smethwick election result of 1964 clearly signalled that the informality that had characterised the anti-immigration sentiments within the labour movement was about to come to an end. The AUFW had a racist leadership locally who were out of line with the official liberal union line on immigration. The union made an unsuccessful attempt to gain control of the industry in the Midlands including recruiting black workers. However, the leadership hesitancy on migrant workers was reinforced by the Smethwick result and the union made no further serious attempt to recruit Asian workers in the West Midlands after 1964. Officially the AUFW was vehemently opposed to racial discrimination, which it equated with fascism and demanded legislation to outlaw the practice. Nonetheless, the union began to explain its own failure to recruit Indian workers as indicative of cultural, rather than simply social, differences. These cultural differences meant that Indian workers would undermine existing work conditions.

The TGWU had, since 1955, accepted the need for some form of immigration control while simultaneously declaring itself against racial discrimination on humanitarian grounds. The TGWU saw the cultural difference of Indian workers not as inherently likely to undermine existing conditions but as a factor employers could exploit. It did not set out to recruit Indian workers but found that they self-recruited through the emerging shop-floor movement.[22] The TGWU provided a legitimate forum within which Indian workers could organise themselves and escape the domination of the AUFW and other oppressive practices, such as labour touts. The growing militancy of the Indian workers was seen by the TGWU as indicative of self-education and righting the wrongs imposed on them by the employers.

The notion of cultural difference was at the root of a new form of hegemonic discourse, from the-mid 1960s onwards, which depoliticised the race issue. The mid-1960s also saw an all-party consensus on the need to control immigration that was 'an essential ingredient in the overt racial polarisation which developed in the ironfoundry industry towards the end of the 1960s'. The Indian shop-floor movement developed a radical critique of social democracy and was met by a corporate approach to the 'race issue' from both management and unions. The latter provided a 'concrete link between base and superstructure', translating the 'struggle of Indian workers into fragments of

hegemonic knowledge, established links with other institutions and acted as a source and conduit for policies aimed at containing and defusing this struggle'. Unions and management came together in the definition of the race issue as a problem of cultural difference 'giving rise to industrial or technical difficulties'. The two sides fused into a dominant bloc aiming to neutralise the Asian workers' struggle against racial oppression. Plans were laid and attempts made to disperse Asian industrial concentrations, or at least to reduce the spheres of influence by splitting them into smaller units with a proliferation of shop stewards, and cross-cutting the Indian workforce, thus lessening the move to self-representation. Management also acted to undermine the shop-floor movement by taking more active roles in establishing procedure, wage structure and training programmes. The economic restructuring of the industry in the period of decline of the 1970s strengthened the employers' hand. In the event, the unions, 'in their lust after power', helped management engineer the defeat of the Indian shop-floor movement. 'Defeat was an essential precondition of the wholesale closure and contraction of the ironfoundry industry in the West Midlands during the late 1970s and early 1980s.' The first major closure came in February 1979. Within two years all that remained of Birmid's 'once huge ironfoundry complex in Smethwick' was a single crankshaft department employing just 185 men. By the early 1980s most of the ironfoundries in which the Indian shop-floor movement had developed were gone. 'The break up of Indian concentrations and their physical dispersal through unemployment had been accomplished. This was the final act in the rise and fall of the Indian shop floor movement' (Duffield, 1988, pp. 193–4).

4.6.4 Racism and the dominant bloc
Duffield documents these processes in detail. The concentration of Indian workers in the West Midlands ironfoundry industry represented an anomaly. To make sense of it, Duffield examined the case study material by locating it, as the brief résumé suggests, in a wider structural and political context. The research, as has been indicated, is underpinned by a hegemonic analysis. Duffield (1988, p. 202) is unequivocal that capitalism is an oppressive system that daily creates 'poverty and misery'. Capitalism is controlled by a powerful dominant bloc. This bloc includes 'society's leading groups and classes, or more accurately the bureaucracies and organisations these classes have established.' The dominant bloc divides those who enjoy the prerogative of power (the rulers) from those who do not (the ruled). The bourgeoisie retain control but is supported, 'as we know from Gramsci (1971)' by 'all manner of experts, teachers, professionals, social workers, elected representatives, academics' as well as the major bureaucracies of the labour movement (Duffield, 1988, p. 3).

Although representing different camps, or interests, the dominant bloc is united by common ideas that enable it to maintain power. If conflict is to be avoided the dominant bloc must act collectively in 'attempting to manage the crisis'. In so doing it forges a collective 'minimal agreement' on the 'condition of society, human nature, public moralty, and so on'. These positions may have a 'left' and 'right' version but they do not transcend the essential bounds of capitalism and simply provide scope for different 'parties and professionals to vie with each other in trying to solve the problems of the day without, at the same time, risking the established order'. 'Labour governments come and go' but they 'never once challenge the nature of oppression'. Hegemonic control, Duffield (1988, p. 202) asserts, allows the dominant bloc to 'resolve the contradictions

among the subordinate classes' in such a way as to ensure that their own 'incomes, careers and life-styles are maintained. In the last resort these shared assumptions legitimate coercive action whenever it is necessary. Furthermore, within late capitalism, the dominant bloc is synonymous with the extended apparatus of the state.

This is the background to Duffield's case study analysis of migrant labour. It is not a position that prefigures the analysis but one that grows dialectically out of the case study. He was thus able, ever more clearly, to reveal the machinations of the hegemonic bloc. The hidden history of the industry exposes the shared strategies, informal understandings and political collusion that linked labour movement, employers and government agencies into a common, yet contradictory, bloc against black workers. The presence and nature of this bloc was instrumental in the forging and shaping the democratic resistance of the Indian workers to racist oppression.

Crucially, Duffield sees the experiences of Indian workers as fundamentally influenced by the 'collapse and rebuilding' of hegemony which took place in the latter part of the 1960s. This period, he argues, marks a 'crucial transformation in the manner in which power in society was organised and directed. The changes which took place constitute a definite break with the more liberal capitalism of the earlier post-war years.' The political and ideological shifts of this period preface the so-called 'radical' departures from the mid-1970s, which simply reproduce tendencies already present in the earlier transformation (Duffield, 1988, p. 98).

Duffield, in outlining the historical case study, provides a good example of the interlinking of particular details and broader issues, within specific organisational frameworks. Prior to the mid-1960s, when the economy was characterised by welfare capitalism, both left and right viewed the immigration issue as one of scarce resources. 'For the right, the scarcity of houses, hospital beds, school places, and so on, necessitated immigrant control.' The left did not challenge the scarcity assumption and were thus easily able to move from opposition to acceptance of the need for immigration control once its liberal interpretation (which, *inter alia*, involved a demand for more schools and houses) was undermined by the emergence in the late 1960s of the individualistic market economy. The emergence of the latter occurred at a time of a shift of focus from the Empire to the EEC., following the end of decolonisation, from full employment to mass unemployment; from politics of 'broad social estates to that of the special group'. All of this, coincided with 'a leap in the centralisation of state power that these transformations, engendered by the deepening crisis of capitalism, would make necessary' (Duffield, 1988, p. 203).

A new set of shared assumptions emerged in the late 1960s prompted by the Powellist version of the New Right racism. This new view privileged the notion of cultural difference. While the right saw cultural difference as heralding violence and the breakdown of the established order because the indigenous population would not tolerate alternative cultures, the left did not see violence as an inevitable outcome and welcomed diversity. The left conceded that remedial action was necessary but this could be of a legislative and educative nature. This 'left' version has, Duffield claimed, remained the 'the basic framework within which the state's race relations industry has developed'.

The response of the Indian shop-floor movement was to actively engage the basic assumptions of the dominant bloc, which were manifested in relation to notions about skill, experience, suitability, and so on. A major plank in this opposition was the

establishment of all work to be open to anyone who wants to do it. 'Promotion' was then based on seniority not spurious notions about technical skill and ability, which had previously been used by unions and management to limit opportunities for Indian workers and enable management to hire and promote as it desired. In response to the anti-technicist seniority principle established by the shop-floor, employers and unions developed an apparently liberal equal opportunities policy. However, this policy reinforced, rather than denied, the socially constructed skill and eligibility criteria by taking them for granted and offering training to blacks to meet these socially created criteria.

> Thus, not only is the whole oppressive edifice accepted, but through the screening and assessment possible whilst 'training' is taking place, management once again is able to assert its interests in the guise of liberalism. In the interests of stability, equal opportunity, rather than representing a liberating force, would seem to have as its sole object that oppression within society is equally distributed. (Duffield, 1988, p. 205)

The potentially liberating democratic force of the Indian shop-floor movement was eradicated through the closures during the recession and authoritarian centralisation won out. Equal-opportunities policies were central in the marginalisation of the black struggle. The liberal apparatus of equal opportunities, first tried out in the employment sphere, has spread since the 'riots' of 1981. Multiculturalism has become a growth industry, 'ethnic posts', local authority race relations units, racism awareness trainers, and so on are all involved in mystifying the 'nature of power and the essence of the black struggle'. Political power is reduced to issues of colour while the black struggle is reduced to access to resources mediated by 'sensitive' social workers and fair housing policies.

> Compared to the universalism of the black struggle, it is within the nature of the new racism that, in the name of equal opportunity, racial divisions are now taking on an institutional permanence which seems to become stronger by the day. (Duffield, 1988, p. 207)

4.6.5 The new racism
In order to undertake his research Duffield had to become thoroughly acquainted with the operation of the ironfoundry industry. He had to get to know both its organisational structure and to understand the various jobs that workers performed.[23] This was important in providing a basis for deconstructing the technicist assumptions and revealing the socially constructed nature of skill criteria.[24] Duffield's deconstruction of abstract constructs fits neatly with the development of a totalistic analysis. The practices within the industry are constantly related to broader initiatives of the dominant bloc. Contradictions within it are reflected in detailed accounts of contradictions within the industry, such as the conflict between the TGWU and the AUEF, which repeated the 'left' and 'right' approaches to immigration control.

Duffield uses a historical case study to analyse the depoliticisation of the black struggle. While of interest in itself, the rise and fall of the Indian shop-floor movement is a vehicle for examining the nature and ideology of the hegemonic order and the operation of liberal equal opportunities strategies to shore up the 'new racism'. His critique is in

sharp contrast to studies that, in highlighting discriminatory practices against migrant workers, such as *The Chicano Worker* (Briggs *et al.*, 1977), propose policy initiatives to address education and training needs and the unionisation of migrants intended to alleviate the more inhumane effects of discrimination and to assimilate migrants into the same sets of apparatuses as mainstream workers.

Duffield is unambiguous about his own position; he is clearly anti-racist and this informs his analysis. He would regard it as fatuous to adopt a 'neutral' position in order to analyse the struggle and any such attempt would inhibit a broader structural analysis. His political position is clear: capitalism is an oppressive system and the constituents of the organisational bloc that wields political power are all equally culpable. He unreservedly sees the union bureaucracies as being as much to blame as the employers and government in the racist treatment of Indian workers. The contempt in which Duffield holds the unions is summed up by his reaction to a spokesperson of the TGWU who bemoaned the successive closure of six plants. 'Given that the unions helped engineer the political defeat which was a precondition of the closures, the pathetic and whining tone of such statements is all the more obnoxious' (Duffield, 1988, p. 193).

He uses the analysis of prevailing myths as a way to start digging beneath the surface of the supposed relations within the industry and to unravel the hidden history of the racist hegemonic collusion. In so doing he draws some uncomfortable parallels between 'New Right racism' and left 'multi-culturalism'. Duffield's intention is praxiological, not just to reveal the machinations of the hegemonic state apparatus but to indicate the liberating potential of a democratic black movement as opposed to the legitimation of capitalism embodied in equal-opportunities strategies operated by middle-class professionals.

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[20] The AUFW later became the Foundry Section of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering and Foundry Workers (AUEF).

[21] Duffield refers to men throughout probably because the industry had no women workers.

[22] The Indian shop-floor movement was promoted by, among other groups, the Indian Workers Association. The IWA first appeared in Coventry in the 1930s. It was rooted in the Indian nationalist movement. In 1958, prompted by a new generation 'matured during the upheavals of independence' formed the IWA (GB) and successfully agitated to get the Indian government to ease the issue of passports and to provide Indians in Britain with valid documents. The Commonwealth Immigrants Bill of 1962 exacerbated the radical-conservative split in the IWA and provided the impetus for young Indian communists to consolidate their existing hold on the leadership of the IWA (GB). The final major split between the radical industrial-based group centred on Birmingham and the conservatives in Southall occurred in the mid-1960s. The Birmingham branch was highly active in campaigns against racial discrimination.

[23] In this respect he reflected the intensive study of work practices and organisational structures undertaken by Grimshaw and Jefferson (1987) in their study of policework, (Section 2.7)

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[24] This demystification of skill reflects Cockburn's (1983) analysis of print compositors (Section 3.4).