

THE WHITES OF THEIR EYES Racist Ideologies and the Media

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In this essay I want to address two, related, issues. The first concerns the way the media – sometimes deliberately, sometimes unconsciously – define and construct the question of race in such a way as to reproduce the ideologies of racism. The second is concerned with the very difficult problems of strategy and tactics which arise when the left attempts to intervene in the media construction of race, so as to undermine, deconstruct and question the unquestioned racist assumptions on which so much of media practice is grounded.

We need to think about both these questions together: the often complex and subtle ways in which the ideologies of racism are sustained in our culture; and the equally difficult question as to how to challenge them in the practice of ideological struggle. Both form the basis of a wider anti-racist strategy which – I argue here – neglects the ideological dimensions at our peril.

For very complex reasons, a sort of racist ‘common sense’ has become pervasive in our society. And the media frequently work from this common sense, taking it as their base-line without questioning it. We need, urgently, to consider ways in which, *in addition* to the urgent and necessary political task of blocking the path to power of the openly organized racist and right-extremist organizations, we can also begin to construct an anti-racist common sense. This task of making anti-racist ideas popular is and must be part of a wider democratic struggle which engages, not so much the hard-line extremists of the right, or even the small numbers of the committed and converted, but the great body of common sense, in the population as a whole, and amongst working people especially, on which the struggle to build up an anti-racist popular bloc will ultimately depend.

Questions of strategy and tactics are not easy, especially when what is at issue is the winning of popular positions in the struggle against racism. There are few short cuts or ready-made recipes. It does not

follow that, because our hearts are in the right place, we will win the struggle for ‘hearts and minds’. And even the best analysis of the current situation provides few absolute guide-lines as to what we should do, in a particular situation. Neither passionate left-wing convictions nor the immutable laws of history can ever replace the difficult questions of political calculation on which the outcome of particular struggles ultimately turns. This essay is written in the firm conviction that we need to be better prepared, both in our analysis of how racist ideologies become ‘popular’, and in what are the appropriate strategies for combatting them. Both, in their turn, depend on a more open, less closed and ‘finalist’ debate of positions among people on the left committed to the anti-racist struggle. In discussing the second aspect, I will draw on some recent experiences of attempts to intervene politically in the area of racism and the mass media.

In 1979, the Campaign Against Racism In The Media (CARM) won the opportunity to make a programme putting its case in the BBC’s ‘access television’ slot, *Open Door*. The programme, *It Ain’t Half Racist, Mum*, was transmitted twice, in February and March of that year, in the usual corners of the schedule reserved for clearly labelled ‘minority programmes’. The programme produced a significant response. It was widely reviewed; CARM received over 600 letters, the great majority of them favourable; the programme also triggered off an internal storm within the BBC and an appeal by one distinguished programme presenter, Robin Day, to the BBC Appeals Tribunal on the grounds that his performance in a debate on Immigration (which he chaired) had been misrepresented in the programme. Since then, the programme has been widely used by a variety of anti-racist groups and in schools and colleges, as a way of triggering off a discussion of racism and the media, though the BBC has kept an extremely tight grip on the programme’s distribution and has been something less than helpful in promoting it.

The CARM group, composed largely of anti-racist media workers, worked for some time preparing and discussing the approach to the programme, viewing extracts and bargaining with the reluctant broadcasters to allow the extracts we wanted to criticize being used in the programme (many, including ITN and BBC News, refused). I was invited, at a fairly late stage in the process, to help prepare a script and to present the programme jointly with Maggie Steed. *It Ain’t Half Racist, Mum* has

been well received on the whole, by the left and anti-racist groups. It has also been severely criticized, on several occasions, by Carl Gardner and Margaret Henry, original members of the CARM team, who thought the programme seriously misdirected and leaky with missed opportunities.¹ This experience provides us with a useful opportunity to reconsider both the general issue of racism and the media, and the even more serious and knotty problem of strategies of left interventions in mainstream television programming.

In 1980 I was invited by Alan Horrox and his small team in the Thames Television Schools department to help prepare and script a series of four programmes on the media and social problems, to be transmitted for schools as the second 'Viewpoint' series in Thames's *English Programme*. The first 'Viewpoint' series had also been concerned with representations of social issues on television, and contained the excellent and much-shown double programme on sexual stereotypes, *Superman And The Bride*. It had also proved highly controversial and ran into trouble with the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) who would not agree to repeat the series, despite its highly favourable reception, until a number of changes had been made. The IBA especially required changes to those parts which made the links between programming policy and television company ownership; and to the style of presentation which, in its view, did not sufficiently clearly acknowledge that this was only *one* of many possible 'viewpoints' on the subjects treated. (The vast majority of unsigned and unauthored programmes transmitted nightly are, presumably, viewed only through the universal all-seeing, neutral, balanced and impartial 'eye' of God.)

The making of the second 'Viewpoint' series was, therefore, something of a tricky exercise. One of the programmes we made also covered the handling and presentation of race in the media, though from a different point of view from that adopted in the CARM programme. This programme, *The Whites Of Their Eyes*, has also been transmitted twice in the usual ITV School programme schedule, moving up to attract 30% of the school viewing audience. This was for a different audience from that which we aimed for in the CARM programme. It was intended for an audience, in a controlled viewing situation, in schools, viewed with a teacher, and allowing for considerable follow-up work in the classroom (a special 'project' booklet for the series was produced for classroom use by Andrew Bethel).

The CARM programme, on the other hand, aimed at the general

viewing public, or that part of it still able to keep its eyes open late at night or on a sleepy Sunday. Together, these programmes form the background to this article.

Before discussing these programmes in more detail, however, we might usefully begin by defining some of the terms of the argument. 'Racism and the media' touches directly the problem of *ideology*, since the media's main sphere of operations is the production and transformation of ideologies. An intervention in the media's construction of race is an intervention in the *ideological* terrain of struggle. Much murky water has flowed under the bridge provided by this concept of ideology in recent years; and this is not the place to develop the theoretical argument. I am using the term to refer to those images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and 'make sense' of some aspect of social existence. Language and ideology are not the same – since the same linguistic term ('democracy' for example, or 'freedom') can be deployed within different ideological discourses. But language, broadly conceived, is by definition the principal medium in which we find different ideological discourses elaborated.

Three important things need to be said about ideology in order to make what follows intelligible. First, ideologies do not consist of isolated and separate concepts, but in the articulation of different elements into a distinctive set or chain of meanings. In liberal ideology, 'freedom' is connected (articulated) with individualism and the free market; in socialist ideology, 'freedom' is a collective condition, dependent on, not counterposed to, 'equality of condition', as it is in liberal ideology. The same concept is differently positioned within the logic of different ideological discourses. One of the ways in which ideological struggle takes place and ideologies are transformed is by articulating the elements differently, thereby producing a different meaning: breaking the chain in which they are currently fixed (e.g. 'democratic' = the 'Free West') and establishing a new articulation (e.g. 'democratic' = deepening the democratic content of political life). This 'breaking of the chain' is not, of course, confined to the head: it takes place through social practice and political struggle.

Second, ideological statements are made by individuals: but ideologies are not the product of individual consciousness or intention. Rather we formulate our intentions *within ideology*. They pre-date individuals, and form part of the determinate social formations and con-

ditions into which individuals are born. We have to 'speak through' the ideologies which are active in our society and which provide us with the means of 'making sense' of social relations and our place in them. The transformation of ideologies is thus a collective process and practice, not an individual one. Largely, the processes work *unconsciously*, rather than by conscious intention. Ideologies produce different forms of social consciousness, rather than being produced by them. They work most effectively when we are not aware that how we formulate and construct a statement about the world is underpinned by ideological premisses; when our formations seem to be simply descriptive statements about how things are (i.e. must be), or of what we can 'take-for-granted'. 'Little boys like playing rough games; little girls, however, are full of sugar and spice' is predicated on a whole set of ideological premisses, though it seems to be an aphorism which is grounded, not in how masculinity and femininity have been historically and culturally constructed in society, but in Nature itself. Ideologies tend to disappear from view into the taken-for-granted 'naturalized' world of common sense. Since (like gender) race appears to be 'given' by Nature, racism is one of the most profoundly 'naturalized' of existing ideologies.

Third, ideologies 'work' by constructing for their subjects (individual and collective) positions of identification and knowledge which allow them to 'utter' ideological truths as if they were their authentic authors. This is not because they emanate from our innermost, authentic and unified experience, but because we find ourselves mirrored in the positions at the centre of the discourses from which the statements we formulate 'make sense'. Thus the same 'subjects' (e.g. economic classes or ethnic groups) can be differently constructed in different ideologies. When Mrs Thatcher says, 'We can't afford to pay ourselves higher wages without earning them through higher productivity', she is attempting to construct at the centre of her discourse an identification for workers who will cease to see themselves as opposed or *antagonistic* to the needs of capital, and begin to see themselves in terms of the *identity of interests* between themselves and capital. Again, this is not only in the head. Redundancies are a powerful material way of influencing 'hearts and minds'.

Ideologies therefore work by the transformation of discourses (the disarticulation and re-articulation of ideological elements) and the transformation (the fracturing and recomposition) of subjects-for-action. How we 'see' ourselves and our social relations *matters*, because

it enters into and informs our actions and practices. Ideologies are therefore a site of a distinct type of social struggle. This site does not exist on its own, separate from other relations, since ideas are not free-floating in people's heads. The ideological construction of black people as a 'problem population' and the police practice of containment in the black communities mutually reinforce and support one another. Nevertheless, ideology is a practice. It has its own specific way of working. And it is generated, produced and reproduced in specific settings (sites) – especially, in the apparatuses of ideological production which 'produce' social meanings and distribute them throughout society, like the media. It is therefore the site of a particular kind of struggle, which cannot be simply reduced to or incorporated into some other level of struggle – for example, the economic class struggle, which is sometimes held to govern or determine it. It is the struggle over what Lenin once called 'ideological social relations', which have their own tempo and specificity. It is located in specific practices. Ideological struggle, like any other form of struggle, therefore represents an intervention in an existing field of practices and institutions; those which sustain the dominant discourses of meaning of society.

The classic definition of ideology tends to regard it as a dependent sphere, which simply reflects 'in ideas' what is happening elsewhere, for example, in the mode of production, without any determinacy or effectivity of its own. This is a reductive and economistic conception. Of course, the formation and distribution of ideologies have determinate conditions, some of which are established outside of ideology itself. Messers Murdoch and Trafalgar House command (through *The Times*, *Sunday Times* and the *Express* group) the resources of institutionalized ideological power in ways which no section of the left could currently aspire to. Nevertheless, ideologies are not fixed forever in the place assigned to them by 'the economic': their elements, as Laclau has argued,² have 'no necessary class belongingness'. For instance, 'democracy' belongs *both* to ruling-class ideology, where it means the Western system of parliamentary regimes, *and* to the ideologies of the left, where it means or refers to 'popular power', against the ruling power bloc. Of course, though the heads of small shopkeepers are not necessarily filled exclusively with 'petty-bourgeois thoughts', certain ideological discourses *do* have or have acquired, historically, well-defined connections with certain class places. (It is easier for a small shopkeeper, than for an assembly line-worker in British Leyland, to

think of his or her interests as equivalent to those of an independent self-employed small capitalist). These 'traces', as Gramsci called them, and historical connexions – the terrain of past articulations – are peculiarly resistant to change and transformation: just as it is exceedingly hard, given the history of imperialism, to disinter the idea of 'the British people' from its nationalistic connotation.

New forms of ideological struggle can bring old 'traces' to life, thus Thatcherism has revived liberal political economy. Even in such well-secured cases, transformations *are* possible ('the people' coming to represent, not the 'nation, unified under the ruling class', but the *common* people *versus* the ruling class – an antagonistic relation rather than an equivalent and unifying one). The corollary of this is that there is no fixed, given and necessary form of ideological consciousness, dictated exclusively by class position. A third of the British working class has regularly seen itself, in terms of how it votes, as 'rightfully subordinate to those who are naturally born to rule over others'. The famous working-class deference Tory vote shows they do not necessarily see themselves as their class position would lead us to suppose: e.g. as the 'majority exploited class which ought to supplant the class which rules over us'.

At the last (1979) election, Mrs Thatcher clearly had some success in getting skilled and organized workers to *equate* (articulate together) their own opposition to incomes policies, wage control and the demand for a 'return to collective bargaining', with her own, very different, conception of 'letting market forces decide wage levels'. Just as the working class is not impervious to reactionary or social-democratic ideas, so it is not *a priori* impervious to racist ideas. The whole history of Labour socialism and reformism is a refutation of the idealistic hope (rooted in economism) that the economic position of the working class will make it inevitable that it thinks only progressive, anti-racist or revolutionary ideas. Instead, what we have seen over the past two decades is the undoubted penetration of racist ideas and practices, not only into sections of the working class, but into the very organizations and institutions of the labour movement itself.

Let us look, then, a little more closely at the apparatuses which generate and circulate ideologies. In modern societies, the different media are especially important sites for the production, reproduction and transformation of ideologies. Ideologies are, of course, worked on in many places in society, and not only in the head. The fact of un-

employment, as the Thatcher government knows only too well, is, among other things, an extremely effective ideological instrument for converting or constraining workers to moderate their wage claims. But institutions like the media are peculiarly central to the matter since they are, by definition, part of the dominant means of *ideological* production. What they 'produce' is, precisely, representations of the social world, images, descriptions, explanations and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work. And, amongst other kinds of ideological labour, the media construct for us a definition of what *race* is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the 'problem of race' is understood to be. They help to classify out the world in terms of the categories of race.

The media are not only a powerful source of ideas about race. They are also one place where these ideas are articulated, worked on, transformed and elaborated. We have said 'ideas' and 'ideologies' in the plural. For it would be wrong and misleading to see the media as uniformly and conspiratorially harnessed to a single, racist conception of the world. Liberal and humane ideas about 'good relations' between the races, based on open-mindedness and tolerance, operate inside the world of the media – among, for example, many television journalists and newspapers like the *Guardian* – alongside the more explicit racism of other journalists and newspapers like the *Express* or the *Mail*. In some respects, the line which separates the latter from the extreme right on policies such as, for example, guided repatriation for blacks, is very thin indeed.

It would be simple and convenient if all the media were simply the ventriloquists of a unified and racist 'ruling class' conception of the world. But neither a unifiedly conspiratorial media nor indeed a unified racist 'ruling class' exist in anything like that simple way. I don't insist on complexity for its own sake. But if critics of the media subscribe to too simple or reductive a view of their operations, this inevitably lacks credibility and weakens the case they are making because the theories and critiques don't square with reality. They only begin to account for the real operation of racism in society by a process of gross abstraction and simplification.

More important, the task of a critical theory is to produce as accurate a knowledge of complex social processes as the complexity of their functioning requires. It is not its task to console the left by producing simple but satisfying myths, distinguished only by their super-left wing

credentials. (If the laws and tendencies of the capitalist mode of production can be stated in a simplified form because they are essentially simple and reducible, why on earth did Marx go on about them for so long – three uncompleted volumes, no less?) Most important of all, these differences and complexities have real *effects*, which ought to enter into any serious political calculation about how their tendencies might be resisted or turned. We know, for example, that the broadcasting institutions are not ‘independent and autonomous’ of the state in the way suggested in the official wisdom. But if we neglect to ask why the question of ‘independence’ and the media’s ‘relative autonomy’ are so important to their functioning, and simply reduce them to what we think of as their essential nature – pure instruments of ruling-class or racist ideology – we will not be able to deconstruct the credibility and legitimacy which they, in fact, carry (which depends, precisely, on the fact that ‘autonomy’ is not a pure piece of deception). Moreover, we will have an over-incorporated conception of the world, where the state is conceived, not as a necessarily contradictory formation, but as a simple, transparent instrumentality. This view might flatter the super-radical conscience, but it has no place in it for the concept of class struggle, and defines no practical terrain on which such struggles could be conducted. (Why it has passed so long for ‘Marxism’ is a mystery.) So we must attend to the complexities of the ways in which race and racism are constructed in the media in order to be able to bring about change.

Another important distinction is between what we might call ‘overt’ racism and ‘inferential’ racism. By *overt* racism, I mean those many occasions when open and favourable coverage is given to arguments, positions and spokespersons who are in the business of elaborating an openly racist argument or advancing a racist policy or view. Many such occasions exist; they have become more frequent in recent years – more often in the press, which has become openly partisan to extremist right-wing arguments, than in television, where the regulations of ‘balance’, ‘impartiality and neutrality’ operate.

By *inferential* racism I mean those apparently naturalized representations of events and situations relating to race, whether ‘factual’ or ‘fictional’, which have racist premisses and propositions inscribed in them as a set of *unquestioned assumptions*. These enable racist statements to be formulated without ever bringing into awareness the racist predicates on which the statements are grounded.

Both types of racism are to be found, in different combinations, in the

British media. Open or overt racism is, of course, politically dangerous as well as socially offensive. The open partisanship of sections of the popular press on this front is an extremely serious development. It is not only that they circulate and popularise openly racist policies and ideas, and translate them into the vivid populist vernacular (e.g. in the tabloids, with their large working-class readership) it is the very fact that such things can now be openly said and advocated which *legitimizes* their public expression and increases the threshold of the public acceptability of racism. Racism becomes ‘acceptable’ – and thus, not too long after, ‘true’ – just common sense: what everyone knows and is openly saying. But *inferential racism* is more widespread – and in many ways, more insidious, because it is largely *invisible* even to those who formulate the world in its terms.

An example of *this* type of racist ideology is the sort of television programme which deals with some ‘problem’ in race relations. It is probably made by a good and honest liberal broadcaster, who hopes to do some good in the world for ‘race relations’ and who maintains a scrupulous balance and neutrality when questioning people interviewed for the programme. The programme will end with a homily on how, if only the ‘extremists’ on *either side* would go away, ‘normal blacks and whites’ would be better able to get on with learning to live in harmony together. Yet every word and image of such programmes are impregnated with unconscious racism because they are all predicated on the unstated and unrecognized assumption that the *blacks* are the *source of the problem*. Yet virtually the whole of ‘social problem’ television about race and immigration – often made, no doubt, by well-intentioned and liberal-minded broadcasters – is precisely predicated on racist premisses of this kind. This was the criticism we made in the CARM programme, *It Ain’t Half Racist, Mum* and it was the one which most cut the broadcasters to their professional quick. It undermined their professional credentials by suggesting that they had been partisan where they are supposed to be balanced and impartial. It was an affront to the liberal consensus and self-image which prevails within broadcasting. Both responses were, in fact, founded on the profound misunderstanding that racism is, by definition, mutually exclusive of the liberal consensus – whereas, in inferential racism, the two can quite easily cohabit – and on the assumption that if the television discourse could be shown to be racist, it must be because the individual broadcasters were intentionally and deliberately racist. In fact, an ideological

discourse does *not* depend on the conscious intentions of those who formulate statements within it.

How, then, is race and its 'problems' constructed on British television? This is a complex topic in its own right, and I can only illustrate its dimensions briefly here by referring to some of the themes developed in the two programmes I was involved in. One of the things we tried to show in *The Whites Of Their Eyes* was the rich vocabulary and syntax of race on which the media have to draw. Racism has a long and distinguished history in British culture. It is grounded in the relations of slavery, colonial conquest, economic exploitation and imperialism in which the European races have stood in relation to the 'native peoples' of the colonized and exploited periphery.

Three characteristics provided the discursive and power-coordinates of the discourses in which these relations were historically constructed. (1) Their imagery and themes were polarized around fixed relations of subordination and domination. (2) Their stereotypes were grouped around the poles of 'superior' and 'inferior' natural species. (3) Both were displaced from the 'language' of history into the language of Nature. Natural physical signs and racial characteristics became the unalterable signifiers of inferiority. Subordinate ethnic groups and classes appeared, not as the objects of particular historical relations (the slave trade, European colonization, the active underdevelopment of the 'underdeveloped' societies), but as the given qualities of an inferior *breed*. Relations, secured by economic, social, political and military domination were transformed and 'naturalized' into an order of *rank*, ascribed by Nature. Thus, Edward Long, an acute English observer of Jamaica in the period of slavery wrote (in his *History of Jamaica*, 1774) – much in the way the Elizabethans might have spoken of 'the Great Chain Of Being' – of 'Three ranks of men [sic], (white, mulatto and black), dependent on each other, and rising in a proper climax of subordination, in which the whites hold the highest place.'

One thing we wanted to illustrate in the programme was the 'forgotten' degree to which, in the period of slavery and imperialism, popular literature is saturated with these fixed, negative attributes of the colonized races. We find them in the diaries, observations and accounts, the notebooks, ethnographic records and commentaries, of visitors, explorers, missionaries and administrators in Africa, India, the Far East and the Americas. And also something else: the 'absent' but imperializing 'white eye'; the unmarked position from which all these

'observations' are made and from which, alone, they make sense. This is the history of slavery and conquest, written, seen, drawn and photographed by The Winners. They cannot be *read* and made sense of from any other position. The 'white eye' is always outside the frame – but seeing and positioning everything within it.

Some of the most telling sequences we used was from early film of the British Raj in India – the source of endless radio 'reminiscences' and television historical show-pieces today. The assumption of effortless superiority structures every image – even the portioning in the frame: the foregrounding of colonial life (tea-time on the plantation), the background of native bearers. . . . In the later stages of High Imperialism, this discourse proliferates through the new media of popular culture and information – newspapers and journals, cartoons, drawings and advertisements and the popular novel. Recent critics of the literature of imperialism have argued that, if we simply extend our definition of nineteenth century fiction from one branch of 'serious fiction' to embrace popular literature, we will find a second, powerful strand of the English literary imagination to set beside the *domestic* novel: the male-dominated world of imperial adventure, which takes *empire*, rather than *Middlemarch*, as its microcosm. I remember a graduate student, working on the construction of race in popular literature and culture at the end of the Nineteenth Century, coming to me in despair – racism was so *ubiquitous*, and at the same time, so *unconscious* – simply assumed to be the case – that it was impossible to get any critical purchase on it. In this period, the very idea of *adventure* became synonymous with the demonstration of the moral, social and physical mastery of the colonizers over the colonized.

Later, this concept of 'adventure' – one of the principal categories of modern *entertainment* – moved straight off the printed page into the literature of crime and espionage, children's books, the great Hollywood extravaganzas and comics. There, with recurring persistence, they still remain. Many of these older versions have had their edge somewhat blunted by time. They have been distanced from us, apparently, by our superior wisdom and liberalism. But they still reappear on the television screen, especially in the form of 'old movies' (some 'old movies', of course, continue to be made). But we can grasp their recurring resonance better if we identify some of the base-images of the 'grammar of race'.

There is, for example, the familiar *slave-figure*: dependable, loving in

a simple, childlike way – the devoted ‘Mammy’ with the rolling eyes, or the faithful field-hand or retainer, attached and devoted to ‘his’ Master. The best-known extravaganza of all – *Gone With The Wind* – contains rich variants of both. The ‘slave-figure’ is by no means limited to films and programmes about slavery. Some ‘Injuns’ and many Asians have come on to the screen in this disguise. A deep and unconscious ambivalence pervades this stereotype. Devoted and childlike, the ‘slave’ is also unreliable, unpredictable and undependable – capable of ‘turning nasty’, or of plotting in a treacherous way, secretive, cunning, cut-throat once his or her Master’s or Mistress’s back is turned: and inexplicably given to running way into the bush at the slightest opportunity. The whites can never be sure that this childish simpleton – ‘Sambo’ – is not mocking his master’s white manners behind his hand, even when giving an exaggerated caricature of white refinement.

Another base-image is that of the ‘native’. The good side of this figure is portrayed in a certain primitive nobility and simple dignity. The bad side is portrayed in terms of cheating and cunning, and, further out, savagery and barbarism. Popular culture is still full today of countless savage and restless ‘natives’, and sound-tracks constantly repeat the threatening sound of drumming in the night, the hint of primitive rites and cults. Cannibals, whirling dervishes, Indian tribesmen, garishly got up, are constantly threatening to over-run the screen. They are likely to appear at any moment out of the darkness to decapitate the beautiful heroine, kidnap the children, burn the encampment or threatening to boil, cook and eat the innocent explorer or colonial administrator and his lady-wife. These ‘natives’ always move as an anonymous collective mass – in tribes or hordes. And against them is always counterposed the isolated white figure, alone ‘out there’, confronting his Destiny or shouldering his Burden in the ‘heart of darkness’, displaying coolness under fire and an unshakeable authority – exerting mastery over the rebellious natives or quelling the threatened uprising with a single glance of his steel-blue eyes.

A third variant is that of the ‘clown’ or ‘entertainer’. This captures the ‘innate’ humour, as well as the physical grace of the licensed entertainer – putting on a show for The Others. It is never quite clear whether we are laughing with or at this figure: admiring the physical and rhythmic grace, the open expressivity and emotionality of the ‘entertainer’, or put off by the ‘clown’s’ stupidity.

One noticeable fact about all these images is their deep *ambivalence*

– the double vision of the white eye through which they are seen. The primitive nobility of the ageing tribesman or chief, and the native’s rhythmic grace always contain both a nostalgia for an innocence lost forever to the civilized, and the threat of civilization being over-run or undermined by the recurrence of savagery, which is always lurking just below the surface; or by an untutored sexuality, threatening to ‘break out’. Both are aspects – the good and the bad sides – of *primitivism*. In these images, ‘primitivism’ is defined by the fixed proximity of such people to Nature.

Is all this so far away as we sometimes suppose from the representation of race which fill the screens today? These *particular* versions may have faded. But their *traces* are still to be observed, reworked in many of the modern and up-dated images. And though they may appear to carry a different meaning, they are often still constructed on a very ancient grammar. Today’s restless native hordes are still alive and well and living, as guerilla armies and freedom fighters in the Angola, Zimbabwe or Namibian ‘bush’. Blacks are still the most frightening, cunning and glamorous crooks (and policemen) in New York cop series. They are the fleet-footed, crazy-talking under-men who connect Starsky and Hutch to the drug-saturated ghetto. The scheming villains and their giant-sized bully boys in the world of James Bond and his progeny are still, unusually, recruited from ‘out there’ in Jamaica, where savagery lingers on. The sexually-available ‘slave-girl’ is alive and kicking, smouldering away on some exotic TV set or on the covers of paperbacks, though she is now the centre of a special admiration, covered in a sequinned gown and supported by a white chorus line. Primitivism, savagery, guile and unreliability – all ‘just below the surface’ – can still be identified in the faces of black political leaders around the world, cunningly plotting the overthrow of ‘civilization’: Mr Mugabe, for example, up to the point where he happened to win both a war and an election and became, temporarily at any rate, the best (because the most politically credible) friend Britain had left in that last outpost of the Edwardian dream.

The ‘Old Country’ – white version – is still often the subject of nostalgic documentaries: ‘Old Rhodesia’, whose reliable servants, as was only to be expected, plotted treason in the outhouse and silently stole away to join ZAPU in the bush . . . Tribal Man in green khaki. Black stand-up comics still ape their ambiguous incorporation into British entertainment by being the first to tell a racist joke. No Royal Tour is

complete without its troupe of swaying bodies, or its mounted tribesmen, paying homage. Blacks are such 'good movers', so *rhythmic*, so *natural*. And the dependent peoples, who couldn't manage for a day without the protection and know-how of their white masters, reappear as the starving victims of the Third World, passive and waiting for the technology or the Aid to arrive, objects of our pity or of a *Blue Peter* appeal. They are not represented as the subjects of a continuing exploitation or dependency, or the global division of wealth and labour. They are the Victims of Fate.

These modern, glossed and up-dated images seem to have put the old world of Sambo behind them. Many of them, indeed, are the focus of a secret, illicit, pleasurable-but-taboo admiration. Many have a more active and energetic quality – some black athletes, for example, and of course the entertainers. But the connotations and echoes which they carry reverberate back a very long way. They continue to shape the ways whites see blacks today – even when the white adventurer sailing up the jungle stream is not *Sanders Of The River*, but historical drama-reconstructions of Stanley and Livingstone; and the intention is to show, not the savagery, but the serenity of African village life – ways of an ancient people 'unchanged even down to modern times' (in other words, still preserved in economic backwardness and frozen in history for our anthropological eye by forces unknown to them and, apparently, unshowable on the screen).

'Adventure' is one way in which we *encounter* race without having to *confront* the racism of the perspectives in use. Another, even more complex one is 'entertainment'. In television, there is a strong counter-position between 'serious', informational television, which we watch because it is good for us, and 'entertainment', which we watch because it is pleasurable. And the purest form of pleasure in entertainment television is *comedy*. By definition, comedy is a licensed zone, disconnected from the serious. It's all 'good, clean fun'. In the area of fun and pleasure it is forbidden to pose a serious question, partly because it seems so puritanical and destroys the pleasure by switching registers. Yet race is one of the most significant themes in situation comedies – from the early Alf Garnett to *Mind Your Language*, *On The Buses*, *Love Thy Neighbour* and *It Ain't Half Hot, Mum*. These are defended on good 'anti-racist' grounds: the appearance of blacks, alongside whites, in situation comedies, it is argued, will help to naturalize and normalize their presence in British society. And no doubt, in some examples, it

does function in this way. But, if you examine these fun occasions more closely, you will often find, as we did in our two programmes, that the comedies do not simply include blacks: they are *about race*. That is, the same old categories of racially-defined characteristics and qualities, and the same relations of superior and inferior, provide the pivots on which the jokes actually turn, the tension-points which move and motivate the situations in situation comedies. The comic register in which they are set, however, protects and defends viewers from acknowledging their incipient racism. It creates disavowal.

This is even more so with the television stand-up comics, whose repertoire in recent years has come to be dominated, in about equal parts, by sexist and racist jokes. It's sometimes said, again in their defence, that this must be a sign of black acceptability. But it *may* just be that racism has become more normal: it's hard to tell. It's also said that the best tellers of anti-Jewish jokes are Jews themselves, just as blacks tell the best 'white' jokes against themselves. But this is to argue as if jokes exist in a vacuum separate from the contexts and situations of their telling. Jewish jokes told by Jews among themselves are part of the self-awareness of the community. They are unlikely to function by 'putting down' the race, because both teller and audience belong on equal terms to the same group. Telling racist jokes across the racial line, in conditions where relations of racial inferiority and superiority prevail, reinforces *the difference* and reproduces the unequal relations because, in those situations, the point of the joke depends on the existence of racism. Thus they reproduce the categories and relations of racism, even while normalizing them through laughter. The stated good intentions of the joke-makers do not resolve the problem here, because they are not in control of the circumstances – conditions of continuing racism – in which their joke discourse will be read and heard. The time *may* come when blacks and whites can tell jokes about each other in ways which do not reproduce the racial categories of the world in which they are told. The time, in Britain, is certainly *not yet arrived*.

Two others arenas which we tried to illustrate in both programmes related to the 'harder' end of television production – news and current affairs. This is where race is constructed as *problem* and the site of *conflict* and debate. There have been good examples of programmes where blacks have not exclusively appeared as the source of the 'problem' (ATV's *Breaking Point* is one example) and where they have not been exclusively saddled with being the aggressive agent in conflict

(the London Weekend Television *London Programme* and the Southall Defence Committee's *Open Door* programme on the Southall events are examples). But the general tendency of the run of programmes in this area is to see blacks – especially the mere fact of their existence (their 'numbers') – as constituting a problem for English white society. They appear as law-breakers, prone to crime; as 'trouble'; as the collective agent of civil disorder.

In the numerous incidents where black communities have reacted to racist provocation (as at Southall) or to police harassment and provocation (as in Bristol), the media have tended to assume that 'right' lay on the side of the law, and have fallen into the language of 'riot' and 'race warfare' which simply feeds existing stereotypes and prejudices. The precipitating conditions of conflict are usually *absent* – the scandalous provocation of a National Front march through one of the biggest black areas, Southall, and the saturation police raiding of the last refuge for black youth which triggered off Bristol – to take only two recent examples. They are either missing, or introduced so late in the process of signification, that they fail to dislodge the dominant definition of these events. So they testify, once again, to the disruptive nature of black and Asian people *as such*.

The analysis of the media coverage of Southall contained in the NCCL Unofficial Committee of Inquiry *Report*,³ for example, shows how rapidly, in both the television and press, the official definitions of the police – Sir David McNee's statement on the evening of 23 April, and the ubiquitous James Jardine, speaking for the Police Federation on the succeeding day – provided the media with the authoritative definition of the event. These, in turn, shaped and focused what the media reported and how it explained what transpired. In taking their cue from these authoritative sources, the media reproduced an account of the event which, with certain significant exceptions, translated the conflict between racism and anti-racism into (a) a contest between Asians and the police, and (b) a contest between two kinds of extremism – the so-called *fascism* of left and right alike.

This had the effect of downgrading the two problems at the centre of the Southall affair – the growth of and growing legitimacy of the extreme right and its blatantly provocative anti-black politics of the street; and the racism and brutality of the police. Both issues had to be *forced* on to the agenda of the media by a militant and organized protest. Most press reports of Southall were so obsessed by em-

broidering the lurid details of 'roaming hoardes of coloured youths' chasing young whites 'with a carving knife' – a touch straight out of *Sanders Of The River*, though so far uncorroborated – that they failed even to mention the death of Blair Peach. This is selective or tunnel-vision with a vengeance.

A good example of how the real causes of racial conflict can be absorbed and transformed by the framework which the media employ can be found in the *Nationwide* coverage of Southall on the day following the events. Two interlocking frameworks of explanation governed this programme. In the first, conflict is seen in the conspiratorial terms of far-left against extreme-right – the Anti-Nazi League against the National Front. This is the classic logic of television, where the medium identifies itself with the moderate, consensual, middle-road, Average viewer, and sets off, in contrast, extremism on both sides, which it then equates with each other. In this particular exercise in 'balance', fascism and anti-fascism are represented as *the same* – both equally *bad*, because the Middle Way enshrines the Common Good under all circumstances. This balancing exercise provided an opportunity for Martin Webster of the National Front to gain access to the screen, to help set the terms of the debate, and to spread his smears across the screen under the freedom of the airwaves: 'Well,' he said, 'let's talk about Trotskyists, extreme Communists of various sorts, raving Marxists and other assorted left wing cranks.' Good knockabout stuff. Then, after a linking passage – 'Southall, the day after' – to the second framework: rioting Asians *vs* the police. 'I watched television as well last night,' Mr Jardine argued, 'and I certainly didn't see any police throwing bricks . . . So don't start making those arguments.' The growth of organized political racism and the circumstances which have precipitated it were simply not visible to *Nationwide* as an alternative way of setting up the problem.

In the CARM programme *It Ain't Half Racist, Mum*, we tried to illustrate the inferential logic at work in another area of programming: the BBC's 'Great Debate' on Immigration. It was not necessary here to start with any preconceived notions, least of all speculation as to the personal views on race by the broadcasters involved – though one can't expect either the BBC hierarchy or Robin Day to believe that. You have simply to look at the programme with one set of questions in mind: Here is a problem, defined as 'the problem of immigration'. What is it? How is it defined and constructed through the programme? What logic governs

its definition? And where does that logic derive from? I believe the answers are clear. The problem of immigration is that 'there are too many blacks over here', to put it crudely. It is *defined* in terms of *numbers of blacks* and what to do about them. The *logic* of the argument is 'immigrants=blacks=too many of them=send them home'. That is a racist logic. And it comes from a chain of reasoning whose representative, in respectable public debate and in person, on this occasion, was Enoch Powell. Powellism set the agenda for the media. Every time (and on many more occasions than the five or six we show in the programme) the presenter wanted to define the base-line of the programme which others should address, Mr Powell's views were indicated as representing it. And every time anyone strayed from the 'logic' to question the underlying premiss, it was back to 'as Mr Powell would say . . .' that they were drawn.

It certainly does not follow (and I know of no evidence to suggest) that Robin Day subscribes to this line or agrees with Mr Powell on anything to do with race. I know absolutely nothing about his views on race and immigration. And we made no judgement on his views, which are irrelevant to the argument. If the media function in a systematically racist manner, it is not because they are run and organized exclusively by active racists; this is a category mistake. This would be equivalent to saying that you could change the character of the capitalist state by replacing its personnel. Whereas the media, like the state, have a *structure*, a set of *practices* which are *not* reducible to the individuals who staff them. What defines how the media function is the result of a set of complex, often contradictory, social relations; not the personal inclinations of its members. What is significant is not that they produce a racist ideology, from some single-minded and unified conception of the world, but that they are so powerfully constrained – 'spoken by' – a particular set of ideological discourses. The power of this discourse is its capacity to constrain a very great variety of individuals: racist, anti-racist, liberals, radicals, conservatives, anarchists, know-nothings and silent majoritarians.

What we said, however, about the *discourse* of problem television was true, despite the hurt feelings of particular individuals: and demonstrably so. The premiss on which the Great Immigration Debate was built and the chain of reasoning it predicated was a racist one. The evidence for this is in what was said and how it was formulated – how the argument unfolded. If you establish the topic as 'the numbers of

blacks are too high' or '*they* are breeding too fast', the opposition is obliged or constrained to argue that 'the numbers are not as high as they are represented to be'. This view is opposed to the first two: but it is also imprisoned by the same logic – the logic of the 'numbers game'. Liberals, anti-racists, indeed raging revolutionaries can contribute 'freely' to this debate, and indeed are often obliged to do so, so as not to let the case go by default: without breaking for a moment the chain of assumptions which holds the racist proposition in place. However, changing the terms of the argument, questioning the assumptions and starting points, breaking the logic – this is a quite different, longer, more difficult task.

One element of the struggle, then, is to try to start the debate about race somewhere else. But this depends on making visible what is usually invisible: the assumptions on which current practices depend. You have to expose, in order to deconstruct. This is certainly not the *only* kind of intervention – and one of the problems with the discussion of strategy on the left is exactly the left's inflexibility: the assumption that there is only one key to the door. That, at any rate, was the main (though not the only) reason why the group involved in making the final version of the CARM programme decided not to go for the all-out, over-arching résumé of the anti-racist case, in twenty-five minutes, but instead to adapt to the given terrain (we don't choose our own battle-grounds), and take a very specific target. In short, to do a programme *about* the media and racism, *on* the media, *against* the media.

This, however, is one of the main criticisms levelled at the CARM programme by its critics: that it was too confined to and preoccupied with exposing the media, and didn't make the general anti-racist case. About this opinions can and do genuinely differ, though the critics – I'm afraid – preferred to attribute these differences, not to the genuine problems of political calculation, but to 'bad faith' on our part (see for example, Gardner and Henry, *op. cit.*). I did think that the limited opportunity provided by *Open Door*, with all its problems (out-of-prime-viewing scheduling, low budgets, little time in the studio, restricted access to equipment, etc.) should best be used to hammer a particular target: to make the media, for once, speak 'against' the media's dominant practice, and thus reveal something about how they normally function. This means limiting the topics covered, going for a narrow-gauge approach rather than a scatter-fire programme covering the history and causes of racism *in general*. It may have been the wrong

choice. It wasn't necessarily because we lost our 'left-wing' nerve – as I think is the main, and familiar, imputation.

A second line of criticism is about the audience aimed for. Gardner and Henry, for example, criticize CARM for going for the 'general audience', which, they argue, is to adopt the traditional media view of the audience as an undifferentiated, passive mass. They would have preferred the programme to 'equip the black, left-wing and anti-racist movements with the tools and knowledge about the workings of television racism' (op. cit., p. 75). Again, a genuine matter of disagreement. Another view (the one I took) is that black, left-wing and anti-racist groups, already active in the anti-racist struggle, are the last people who need to be instructed about how media racism works – least of all in a twenty-five minute programme on a public TV channel. Such organized activists have far more effective, internal channels for such purposes. What such groups face is the stark fact of a growing racist common sense and the lack of 'access' to the means to engage with this type of popular consciousness. But I'm afraid that, to enter the struggle on this *popular* level is a quite different order of political task from that of confirming the already-confirmed views of the converted. It means struggling over the muddy and confused middle-ground: the ground where Powellism, Thatcherism and the National Front have, in recent years, made such remarkable headway.

I suspect that, behind this criticism lies a much deeper debate about political strategy which these critics did not openly engage: the left confronts very sharp alternatives now between the broadening and deepening of democratic struggle, pressing on with 'class-against-class' confrontations as if nothing had happened to left-vanguardism since the heroic days of May 1968 – although the whole terrain of popular struggle has shifted decisively against the left offensive. Ultimately, then, the debates about strategies turn on the analysis of political conjunctures. And it is *this* which should be openly debated – rather than caricatured into an eternal conflict between the 'true' and the 'false' left.

Not only the 'middle ground' but liberal consciousness itself must be an object of struggle – if what we intend is the winning of positions in a protracted war of position. Indeed, if the CARM programme had a 'target audience', I would unhesitatingly define it, not as the casual or confirmed racist (who are unlikely to be converted by twenty-five minutes on BBC 2) but precisely the *liberal consensus*. For the 'liberal consensus' is the linch-pin of what I called 'inferential racism'. It is

what keeps active and organized racism in place. So this was one, at least, of the targets we aimed for. And, recognizing, from our analysis, that one kind of common sense is not displaced in an evening, we deliberately tried to think realistically about what the programme could and *could not* do. 'Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will': there is nothing worse, for the left, than mistaking a tiny skirmish for the final show-down. For, if optimistic voluntarism raises hearts and hopes for a little while, it is followed, as day follows night, by a corresponding gloom and pessimism. (Gramsci is excellent on the oscillations of high optimism and deep pessimism on the left in periods of rapidly shifting fortunes.) CARM's intervention could not be anything but a tiny movement in a long war of position, on the stony ground which television, regularly, delivers to the wrong side. Political calculation begins with defining the target of action, the limits of the terrain, an accurate assessment of the balance of forces and a correct estimation of the enemy's strength. Horses for courses.

The third major criticism was that the programme's style and form reproduced that of the standard formats of dominant television practice – trying to beat the professionals at their own game, rather than consciously breaking those frames. In fact, this is predicated on a much more complex, though largely unstated, argument that it is the forms rather than the content and premisses of ideological discourses which constitute their effectivity. Therefore, the main task is to 'deconstruct the forms of the television discourse'. 'We wanted the programme to be *offensive* . . .', Gardner and Henry argued. This is a complicated issue, and a contentious one: by no means the simple either/or alternative in which it is presented. I myself thought we should go further in the direction of 'deconstruction' than the material constraints on programme production eventually allowed. So that is to concede one major weakness in the programme's conception. But after that, argument, not assertion, needs to take over.

Is it true that ideologies work exclusively by their forms? This position depends on an anti-realist aesthetic – a fashionable position in debates about ideology in the early 1970s. In its absolute form, it needed to be, and has been, quite effectively challenged and qualified. It represented at the time a certain justified 'formalist' reaction to the over-preoccupation with 'content' and 'realism' on the traditional left. But it was and is open to very serious criticism. For one thing it was founded on a rather loony and quite a-historical view of the narrative and presen-

tational forms in television. They were said *all* to belong to the same type of 'realism' – *the* realism of *the* realist text, was the phrase – which, apparently, was introduced in the fourteenth century and had persisted, more or less, right up to *Man Alive*. This highly specious account was sealed – quite incorrectly – with the signature of Brecht. In this absolutist form, the thesis has proved quite impossible to defend, and many of those who first proposed it have since either backed away from its excesses or fallen into an eloquent silence.

The view that lumps together the latest, banal, TV documentary and the TV drama documentary on the General Strike of 1926, *Days Of Hope*, is so historically naïve and simplistic, and so crude politically, as to give it the status of a blunderbuss in a war conducted by missile computer. This is not to deny the importance of form in the discussion of ideology. Nor is it to deny that programmes which simply reproduce the existing dominant forms of television do not sufficiently break the frames through which audiences locate and position themselves in relation to the knowledge which such programmes claim to provide. But the argument that *only* 'deconstructivist' texts are truly revolutionary is as one-sided a view as that which suggests that forms have no effect. Besides, it is to adopt a very formalistic conception of form, which, in fact, accepts the false dichotomy between 'form' and 'content'; only, where the left has traditionally been concerned exclusively with the latter, this view was concerned only with the former. There were other calculations to be made. For example, that using the existing format of the typical programme which viewers are accustomed to identify with one kind of truth, one could undermine, precisely, the credibility of the media by showing that even this form could be used to state a different kind of truth.

A second consideration is this: if all the dominant television forms are 'realist' and realist narratives are bad, does it follow that all avant-garde or 'deconstructivist' narratives are good? This is also a rather loony position to take. The history of culture is littered with non-revolutionary 'avant-gardes': with 'avant-gardes' which are revolutionary in form only; even more, with 'avant-gardes' which are rapidly absorbed and incorporated into the dominant discourse, becoming the standard orthodoxies of the next generation. So, 'breaking and interrupting' the forms is no guarantee, in itself, that the dominant ideology cannot continue to be reproduced. This is the false trail along which some of the French theorists, like Julia Kristeva and the *Tel Quel* group, tried to

drive us, by a species of polite intellectual terrorism, in the 1970s. In hindsight, the left was quite right to resist being hustled and blackmailed by these arguments.

This is no abstract debate, restricted to intellectuals of the left bank exclusively. It relates to political choices – harsh ones, to which there are no simple solutions, but which confront us every day. In any left bookshop today, one will find the imaginatively-designed, style-conscious, frame-breaking, interrogative avant-garde 'little journals' of the left: interrupting the 'dominant ideologies' in their form at every turn – and remorselessly restricted to a small, middle-class, progressive audience. One will also find the traditionally-designed, ancient looking, crude aesthetics of the 'labour movement' journals (*Tribune*, the *Morning Star*, *Socialist Challenge*, for example) – remorselessly restricted to an equally small and committed audience. Neither appears to have resolved the extremely difficult problem of a truly revolutionary form *and* content: or the problem of political effectiveness – by which I mean the breakthrough to a mass audience. This is not simply a problem of the politics of popular communication on the left: a burning issue which no simple appeal to stylistic aggressiveness has yet been able to solve. If only the social division of labour could be overcome by a few new typographical or stylistic devices!

Actually, however, it would be wrong to end this piece with a simple defence of what was done, which simply mirrors by reversal the criticisms levelled. We knew we had an exceedingly rare opportunity – not something the left can afford to squander. We knew the programme could have been better, more effective – including using more effectively ideas we did or had to jettison. These are genuinely matters of debate and properly the subject of criticism. I want, instead, to draw a different lesson from this episode. It is the degree to which the left is unable to confront and argue through constructively the genuine problems of tactics and strategy of a popular anti-racist struggle. To be honest, what we know collectively about this would not fill the back of a postage stamp. Yet, we continue to conduct tactical debates and political calculation as if the answers were already fully inscribed in some new version of Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* Our mode of political calculation is that of the taking of absolutist positions, the attribution of bad faith to those genuinely convinced otherwise – and thereby, the steady advance of the death-watch beetle of sectarian self-righteousness and fragmentation.

It somehow enhances our left-wing credentials to argue and debate as if there is some *theory* of political struggle, enshrined in the tablets of stone somewhere, which can be instantly translated into the one true 'correct' strategy. The fact that we continue to lose the key strategic engagements and, in the present period, have lost very decisive terrain indeed, does not dent, even for a moment, our total certainty that we are on the 'correct line'. My own view is that we hardly begin to know how to conduct a popular anti-racist struggle or how to bend the twig of racist common sense which currently dominates popular thinking. It is a lesson we had better learn pretty rapidly. The early interventions of the Anti-Nazi League in this area, at a very strategic, touch-and-go moment in the anti-racist struggle was one of the most effective and imaginative political interventions made in this period by groups other than the already-engaged groups of black activists. It is an experience we can and must build on – not by imitating and repeating it, but by matching it in imaginativeness. But even that leaves no room for complacency – as we watch the racist slogans raised on the soccer stands and listen to racist slogans inflect and infect the chanting of young working class people on the terraces. Face to face with this struggle for popular advantage, to fight on only one front, with only one weapon, to deploy only one strategy and to put all one's eggs into a single tactic is to set about winning the odd dramatic skirmish at the risk of losing the war.

NOTES

1. Carl Gardner, 'Limited Access', *Time Out* (23 February 1979); 'It Ain't Half A Hot Potato Mum', *Time Out* (23 February 1979); and Carl Gardner (with Margaret Henry), 'Racism, Anti-Racism and Access Television', *Screen Education*, 31, Summer 1979.
2. Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, New Left Books, 1977.
3. *Southall: Report of the Unofficial Committee of Inquiry*, National Council of Civil Liberties, 1980.

GETTING OVER THE RAINBOW Identity and Pleasure in Gay Cultural Politics

RICHARD DYER

The seventies saw the growth of many forms of cultural politics. Not since the years immediately following the Russian Revolution have socialists been so heavily and actively aware of the importance of cultural politics. The gay movement has had a special role to play here, above all in showing how a politics of culture can be rooted in, and grow out of, the already existing culture of an oppressed group. The gay movement activated the political potential of what lesbians and gay men had already achieved in developing against the grain of oppression, a particular way of life, a culture. I want to argue that this relation between a movement and the lived culture of the group that it represents can serve as an object lesson for the left. In addition, I suggest that the particular concerns of identity and pleasure, brought to political flower from the ground of the gay sub-culture, indicate specific ways of connecting political aims with the way people actually think and feel about their lives.

The development of gay culture is a classic instance of Marx's dictum that 'people make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past'.¹ This is a dictum that all branches of the left need to integrate into their thinking and their political agenda.

The case of lesbians and gay men is exemplary but it is also extreme, in the sense that culture *is* the situation of gay people. Gays are defined and structurally placed in the sphere of culture – there are the circumstances that are not of our own choosing. Having been so placed, gays have sought to gain control over those conditions and in the process have produced a wealth of new cultural forms, new definitions of identity, new awarenesses of human happiness.

To understand this further, we need to consider first the question of the very concept 'homosexual',² before going on to the issue of why culture is so privileged an arena of gay movement activity and the

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SILVER LININGS

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