

working class into a kind of weakening of their own class—partly for money, partly for the best of inadequately examined reasons. But we were aware only of the poignancy of our own experience, the exalted sense of our individual destiny.

We preferred to listen to the Hoggart who spoke of the resilience of the working class, the resistance against the coming of the new culture. And it is precisely the balanced and tentative quality of the argument in the book that permitted us to interpret it in our own way: the new culture may be debilitating, but some old strengths remain.

We were reassured; and we looked back on that part of the working class that seemed stable and enduring. We could not understand then how our own exodus from the working class was connected with the coming of the new culture, was only part of far deeper convulsions that were going to alter its shape and direction. What we were looking for was something to console us, and something to assuage our guilt at what always seemed, at one level, a defection.

Looked at more closely now, *The Uses of Literacy* is the powerful and moving testimony of a lone child, absorbing the values and response of a culture already in decay. There is a sense of affectionate estrangement from it, a feeling of loving and helpless discontinuity.

Car culture outside Hunslet flats

We paid more attention to what he was saying about those "liberated" from the working class; but what he was essentially describing was what had happened within the mainstream of working class life. And it is here that the deepest unease runs through the whole book.

It isn't surprising that Hoggart came to be accused of being cosy or romantic about the past. In the 1950s, it seemed inconceivable that anyone would be foolish enough to assert that there could be anything wrong with the kind of material comfort that was being brought to working people, the consolations they had never known. Whatever had achieved such changes must be wholly and unambiguously benign. And yet Hoggart was daring to criticise what was to become one of the great taboos of the mid-20th century: the implications for the working class of the improvements granted on the terms of capital.

Even though his criticism was qualified and cautious, he was warning quite clearly about a different sort of impoverishment to the working class which these processes seemed to have set in train. He was careful to anticipate many of the criticisms that were made of him as the proponent of nostalgia and romanticism; but it was the fate of the book, especially in later years, to be seen in this way.

His analysis was always sharper than that.

And it is this second strand of *The Uses of Literacy* that comes on you with the force of a different kind of revelation 25 years later. Those aspects which we chose to disregard or play down when we seized on it as a reflection of our experience then; those aspects which gained Hoggart the undeserved reputation of being sentimental about the past. I mean, the destructive power of those influences, so carefully monitored by him then, which have only grown and become more pervasive and inescapable with time.

Scepticism becomes cynicism

Hoggart's real achievement is the accuracy with which he shows how so many of the strengths and defences in working class life were subtly changed, deformed, to accommodate the new culture, the culture of the marketplace. What he is describing is not so much the imposition of this alien culture upon those old working class communities, as the way in which living attitudes were moulded, re-shaped and modified until they fitted the consumer economy.

He refers to "good instincts pulled out of shape." It was, at base, a violent process. He shows how a traditional scepticism becomes cynicism; how "I dissent" becomes "It's all baloney," a mockery of all principles and a willingness to destroy them. Even "the new tolerance," which he detects, "is weak and unwilling, a fear and resentment of challenge." "The debilitating invitations are successful," he wrote, "because they appeal to established attitudes." It is the exact relationship between the older defensive working class values and the values of the new commercial culture which he so minutely analyses.

The grafting of the new onto that older culture—evoked with such passionate restraint in the first part of the book—involved a deforming, a misshaping of working class hopes and values and relationships, until these became a caricature of themselves. How could it be otherwise, when these had to be made compatible with, made subordinate to, the process of selling things to the previously poor? Hoggart's objection to the cultural manifestations of this process, to the trivialisation of popular entertainments and newspapers, was "not that they prevented working people from becoming highbrow, but that they prevented them from becoming wise in their own way."

More recently, Hoggart's critics have objected that he didn't deal with work, or to any significant degree with the Labour and trade union movements. Such criticisms misunderstood not only the intensely autobiographical nature of the work, but also the significance of its appearance in the mid-1950s. It was, after all, in the domestic and non-work area that the capitalist marketplace was making its greatest inroads into working class life at that time. Working people had long ago accommodated themselves to the idea that their labour was simply a commodity. What was happening in the fifties was a vast extension of market relationships into domestic and social life—a process that was to turn over so many

areas of human experience to the marketplace, which were previously exempt, because they were "protected" by poverty.

It was the beginning of expropriation of that resilient, stoical, fraternal culture, and its transformation into things and services that could be bought only for money. Capital, at that time, was launching its major assault, not against the world of work, but against the social, moral, spiritual part of the culture. It was absolutely appropriate that he should dwell on this hitherto neglected area of working class life. This is where the pain was being felt most keenly.

This severance of the social/emotional/spiritual aspect of life from work suited the deeper purposes of capital at this time; and it was connived at by the Labour movement. As Hoggart wrote:

"Inhibited now from ensuring the 'degradation' of the masses economically, the logical processes of competitive commerce, favoured from without by the whole climate of the time and from within by the lack of direction, the doubts and uncertainty before their freedom of working class people themselves (and maintained as much by working class writers as by others), are ensuring that working people are culturally robbed."

It looks now as if Hoggart was significantly understating what was occurring. He says that if he were writing the book now he would be angrier. At that time, he could not really have foreseen how the forces he is describing would grow in influence and scope. The fact that what he wrote preceded the major growth of television only makes his argument the more powerful. The processes he cautiously outlines have so far intensified in the last 25 years that some of the examples he cites of things that tend to diminish, rather than broaden, the horizons of ordinary people seem positively benign in the light of much of what passes for popular entertainment now—"the unvaried diet of sensation without commitment," as he put it then.

'The pass will be sold'

"Material improvements can be used so as to incline the body of working people to accept a mean form of materialism as a social philosophy," he wrote. "If the active minority continue to allow themselves too exclusively to think of immediate political and economic objectives, the pass will be sold, culturally, behind their back. This is a harder problem in some ways than even that which confronted their predecessors. It is harder to realise imaginatively the dangers of spiritual deterioration. These dangers are harder to combat, like adversaries in the air, with no corporeal shapes to inspire courage and decision. It is easier for a few to improve the material conditions of many than for a few to waken a great many from the hypnosis of immature emotional satisfactions."

If *The Uses of Literacy* had a personal resonance for many of us in the late fifties, what it offers now, with its prescience and insight, is an even more urgent and reproachful appeal.

The new empire within Britain

Salman Rushdie

Britain is not South Africa. I am reliably informed of this. Nor is it Nazi Germany. I have that on the best authority as well.

You may feel that these two statements are not exactly the most dramatic revelations of the week. But it is remarkable how often they, or similar statements, are used to counter the arguments of anti-racist campaigners. "Things aren't as bad as all that," we are told, "you exaggerate, you're indulging in special pleading, you must be paranoid."

So let me concede at once that, as far as I know, there are no pass laws here. Interracial marriages are permitted. And Auschwitz has not been rebuilt in the Home Counties. I find it odd, however, that those who use such absences as defences rarely perceive that their own statements indicate how serious things have become. If the defence for Britain is that mass extermination of racially impure persons has not yet begun, or that the principle of white supremacy has not yet been enshrined in the constitution, then something must have gone very wrong indeed.

Racism is not a side-issue in contemporary Britain; it is not a peripheral, minority affair. Britain is undergoing the critical phase of its post-colonial period. This crisis is not simply economic or political. It is a crisis of the whole culture, of the society's entire sense of itself. And racism is only the most clearly visible part of the crisis, the tip of the kind of iceberg that sinks ships.

You may not think of the British empire as a subject worth losing much sleep over. After all, surely the one thing one can confidently say about that roseate age of England's precedence, when the map of half the world blushed with pleasure as it squirmed beneath the Pax Britannica, is that it is over, isn't it? Give or take a Falkland Island, the imperial sun has set.

And how fine was the manner of its setting; in what good order the British withdrew. Union Jacks fluttered down their poles all round the world, to be replaced by other flags, in all manner of outlandish colours. The pink conquerors crept home, the box-wallahs and memsahibs and bwanas, leaving behind them parliaments, schools, Grand Trunk Roads and the rules of cricket.

How gracefully the British shrank back into their cold island, abandoning their lives as the dashing peoples of their dreams, diminishing from the endless steaming landscapes of India and Africa into the narrow horizons of their pallid, drizzled streets. No point, you may say, in exhuming this particular dead horse in order to flog the poor, decomposed creature all over again.

But the connection I want to make is this: those old colonial attitudes are still in

operation here in Britain—in what E. P. Thompson, on Channel 4 and in these pages last month, described as the last colony of the British empire. The British authorities, being no longer capable of exporting governments, have chosen instead to import a new empire, a new community of subject peoples of whom they can think, and with whom they can deal, in very much the same way as their predecessors thought of and dealt with "the fluttered folk and wild," the "new-caught, sullen peoples, half-devil and half-child," who made up, for Rudyard Kipling, the white man's burden.

If you want to understand British racism—and, without understanding, no improvement is possible—it is impossible even to begin to grasp the nature of the beast unless you accept its historical roots; unless you see that 400 years of conquest and looting, centuries of being told that you are superior to the fuzzy-wuzzies and the wogs, leave their stain on you aff; that such a stain seeps into every part of your culture, your language and your daily life; and that nothing much has been done to wash it out.

The vocabulary of abuse

If you want proof of the existence of this stain, you can look at the huge, undiminished appetite of white Britons for television series, films, plays and books full of nostalgia for the Great Pink Age. The TV adaptation of Elspeth Huxley's white Kenya saga, *Flame Trees of Thika*, may have been a hit here, but in African countries it caused such insult and uproar that it had to be taken off the air.

Think, too, about the ease with which the English language allows the terms of racial abuse to be coined: wog, frog, kraut, dago, spic, yid, coon, nigger, Argie. Can there be another language with so wide-ranging a vocabulary of racist denigration?

Let me quote from Margaret Thatcher's speech at Cheltenham on 3 July, her famous victory address:

"We have learned something about ourselves," she said then, "a lesson which we desperately need to learn. When we started out, there were the waverers and the faint-hearts. The people who thought we could no longer do the great things which we once did . . . that we could never again be what we were. There were those who would not admit it . . . but—in their heart of hearts—they too had their secret fears that it was true: that Britain was no longer the nation that had built an Empire and ruled a quarter of the world. Well, they were wrong."

There are several interesting aspects to this speech. Remember that it was made by a triumphant Prime Minister at the peak of her popularity; a Prime Minister who could



claim, with complete credibility, to be speaking for an overwhelming majority of the electorate, and who, as even her detractors must admit, has a considerable gift for assessing the national mood. If such a leader at such a time felt able to invoke the spirit of imperialism, it was because she knew how central that spirit is to the self-image of white Britons of all classes.

I say white Britons because it is clear that Mrs Thatcher was not addressing the two million or so blacks, who don't feel quite like that about the empire. So even her use of the word "we" was an act of racial exclusion, like her other well-known speech about the fear of being "swamped" by immigrants. With such leaders, it is not surprising that the British are slow to learn the real lessons of their past.

Britain is not Nazi Germany. The British empire was not the Third Reich. But at least, after the fall of Hitler, heroic attempts were made in Germany to purify German thought and the German language of the pollution of Nazism. The distinguished group of writers and intellectuals called Group 47 came together with that specific purpose: to re-make German thought from the ground up, rescuing it from the rubble of the war. Such acts of cleansing are occasionally necessary in every society.

But British thought and British society have never been cleansed of the Augean filth of imperialism. It is still there, breeding lice and vermin, waiting for unscrupulous people to exploit it for their own ends. The British may be the only people on earth who feel nostalgia for pillage and conquest and war.

One of the key concepts of imperialism was that military superiority implied cultural superiority. This enabled the British to condescend to and repress cultures far older than their own; and it still does. For the citizens of the new, imported empire, for the colonised Asians and blacks of Britain, the police force represents that colonising army, those regiments of occupation and control.

The myth of 'swamping'

The peoples whom I have characterised as members of a new colony would probably be described by most of the British as "immigrants." This word, "immigrant," demonstrates the extent to which racist concepts have been allowed to seize the central ground and to shape the nature of the debate.

The facts are that, for many years now, there has been a sizeable amount of white immigration as well as black. The annual number of emigrants leaving these shores is now larger than the number of immigrants coming in. Of the black communities, over 40 per cent are not immigrants, but black Britons, born and bred, speaking in the many voices and accents of Britain, with no homeland but this one.

And yet the word "immigrant" still means "black immigrant." The myth of "swamping" lingers on. Even British-born blacks and Asians are thought of as people whose real "home" is elsewhere. Immigration is only a problem if you are worried about blacks;

that is, if your approach to the question is one of racial prejudice.

But the worst thing about the so-called "numbers game" is its assumption that less black immigration is self-evidently desirable. The effect of this assumption is that governments of both parties have eagerly passed off gross injustice as success.

The immigration laws establish a quota system for the migration of UK passport holders from different countries. But ever since Kenya drove out her Asians and, Britain did her best to prevent those British citizens from entering this country, the African quota has remained, every year, unfilled. The reason is that the fleeing Asians, spurned by Britain, were given refuge by India. But the Indian quota has never been increased; and, as a result, the total numbers of black immigrants to Britain have fallen.

Against natural justice

You might think that natural justice would demand that the already lamentably low quotas for British citizens from Africa would be made available to those same citizens, now living as refugees in a desperately poor country which can ill-afford to care for them. But natural justice has never been much in evidence in this field. In fact, the British tax system intends to withhold tax relief from wage-earners here whose dependants are trapped abroad. First you keep people's families away from them, then you alter your laws to make it twice as hard for those people to keep their families fed. They're only "immigrants."

A couple of years ago, the British press made a huge stink about a family of African Asians who arrived at Heathrow airport and were housed by the very reluctant local authority. It became a classic media witch-hunt: "They come over here, sponge off the state and jump the housing queue." But that same week, another family also landed at Heathrow, also needing, and getting, housing from the local authority. This second family barely made the papers (though NEW SOCIETY did pick up the point in an editorial). It was a family of white Rhodesians running away from the prospect of a free Zimbabwe.

One of the more curious aspects of British immigration law is that many Rhodesians and other white non-Britons who are Commonwealth citizens have automatic right of entry and residence here, by virtue of having one British-born grandparent; whereas many British citizens are denied these rights, because they are black.

The "immigrants" came because they were invited. The Macmillan government embarked on a large-scale advertising campaign to attract them. They were extraordinary advertisements, full of hope and optimism, which made Britain out to be a land of plenty, a golden opportunity not to be missed. They worked. People travelled here in good faith, believing themselves wanted. This is how the new empire was imported.

What is it like, this country to which the immigrants came, in which their children are growing up? This is not the England of fair play, tolerance, decency and equality—

maybe that place never existed anyway, except in fairy tales. In the streets of the new empire, black women are abused and black children are beaten up on their way home from school. In the rundown housing estates of the new empire, black families have their windows broken, they are afraid to go out after dark, and human and animal excrement arrives through their letter boxes. The police offer threats instead of protection, and the courts offer small hope of redress.

Britain is now two entirely different worlds, and the one you inherit is determined by the colour of your skin. In my experience, very few white people, except those active in fighting racism, are willing to believe the descriptions of contemporary reality offered by blacks. And black people, faced with what Professor Michael Dummett has called the "will not to know—a chosen ignorance, not the ignorance of innocence," grow increasingly suspicious and angry.

What has been created is a gulf in reality. White and black perceptions of everyday life have moved so far apart as to be incompatible. And the rift is not narrowing; it is getting wider. We stand on opposite sides of an abyss, yelling at each other and sometimes hurling stones, while the ground crumbles beneath our feet.

I make no apology for taking an uncompromising view of the reasons for the existence of this chasm. The will to ignorance arises out of a desire not to face the consequences of what is going on; because if the white British allowed themselves to know, they would have to alter their picture of the world too radically for their liking. People don't want to do that; it is uncomfortable and difficult; and so they close their ears. Those who adopt the position of the ostrich invite a swift kick in the pants.

Every major institution is permeated by racial prejudice to some degree. The unwillingness of the white majority to recognise this is the main reason why it can remain the case. Take the law. We have, in Britain, judges like McKinnon who can say in court that the word "nigger" cannot be considered an epithet of racial abuse because he was nicknamed "Nigger" at his public school; or like the great Lord Denning, who can publish a book claiming that black people are not as fit as whites to serve on juries, because they come from cultures with less stringent moral codes. We have a police force that harasses blacks every day of their lives.

On Railton Road

There was a policeman who sat in an unmarked car on Railton Road in Brixton last year, shouting abuse at passing black kids and arresting the first youngsters who made the mistake of answering back. There were policemen at a Southall demonstration who sat in their vans, writing the letters, NF, in the steam of their breath on the windows.

The British police have refused even to make racial discrimination an offence in their code of conduct, in spite of Lord Scarman's recommendations. It is precisely because the law courts and the police are not

doing their jobs that the activities of racist hooligans are on the increase. It's simply not good enough, you see, to deplore the existence of neo-fascists in your society. They exist because they are permitted to exist.

In the health service, British citizens are regularly asked to produce passports before receiving treatment. None of these citizens are white. In our schools, the National Front and the British Movement gain access to many playgrounds, disseminating their lies and signing up recruits.

As for the government: when the Race Relations Act was passed in 1976, it specifically exempted itself and its actions from the jurisdiction of the act.

Institutional racism

The evidence of institutional racism is so voluminous that I cannot hope to do more than provide a few examples.

A friend of mine, an Indian, was deported recently for the technical offence of "over-staying." This means that, after a dozen years of living here, he was a couple of days late sending in the forms applying for an extension to his stay. Neither he nor his family had ever claimed a penny in welfare, or, I suppose I should say, been in trouble with the police. He and his wife financed themselves by running a clothes stall, and gave all their spare time and effort to voluntary work helping their community.

My friend was chairman of his local traders' association. When the deportation order was made, this association, all three of his borough MPs and about 50 other MPs of all parties pleaded with the Home Office for clemency. None was forthcoming.

My friend's son had a rare disease, and a doctor's report was produced stating that the child's health would be endangered if he was sent to India. The Home Office stated that it considered there were no compassionate grounds for reversing its decision.

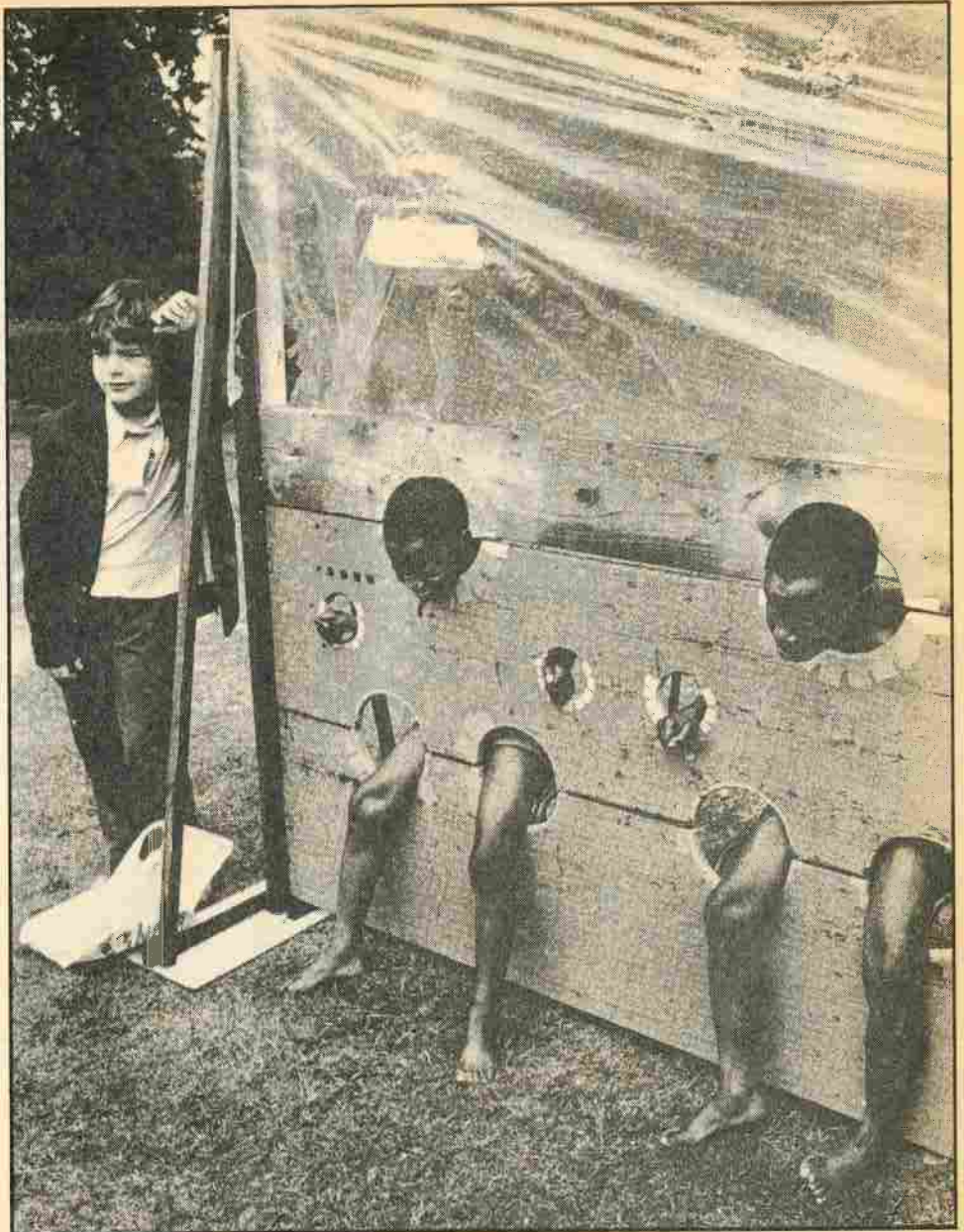
In the end, my friend offered to leave voluntarily—he had been offered sanctuary in West Germany—and asked to be allowed to go freely, to avoid the stigma of having a deportation order stamped into his passport. The Home Office refused him this last scrap of self-respect, and threw him out. As the fascist, John Kingsley Read, once said: one down, a million to go.

The combination of institutional racism and the willed ignorance of the public was clearly in evidence during the passage through parliament of the British Nationality Act, 1981.

This notorious piece of legislation, expressly designed to deprive the children of black and Asian Britons of their citizenship rights, went through in spite of some (mainly non-white) protests. And because it did not really affect the position of the whites, many of them probably did not even realise that one of their most ancient rights, a right they had possessed for 900 years, was being stolen from them.

This was the right to citizenship by virtue of birth, the *ius soli*, or right of the soil.

Black youth in Britain. Above: Boy scouts at a fete. Below: The Notting Hill carnival in 1978



Photographs by Chris Steele-Perkins