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Introduction – 'Darcus Howe is a West Indian'

C. L. R. James, a man who will appear again and again in these pages, once stated: 'Darcus is a West Indian.' The comment was an attempt to elucidate Howe's character for the benefit of Leila Hassan, deputy editor of *Race Today*, a woman who would later become Howe's wife. So saying, James situated Howe within a specific culture as well as pointing to some fundamental aspects of his personality. James famously argued that West Indians 'have been the most rebellious people in history' (James 1980: 177). This rebelliousness was rooted in a deeply felt love of freedom, a love that sprang from enslavement and the experience of regimented labour on the sugar plantations of the Caribbean.

But when we made the Middle Passage and came to the Caribbean we went straight into a modern industry – the sugar plantation – and there we saw that to be a slave was the result of being black. A white man was not a slave. The West Indian slave was not accustomed to that kind of slavery in Africa; and there in the history of the West Indies there is one dominant fact and that is the desire, sometimes expressed, sometimes unexpressed, but always there, the desire for liberty; the ridding oneself of the particular burden which is the special inherence of black skin. *If you don't know that about West Indian people you know nothing about them.*

(Ibid.)

Significantly, West Indian slaves experienced conditions akin to those of the modern proletariat. On Caribbean plantations, slaves worked within stratified systems of collective toil, using industrial technology at the cutting edge of the age, disciplined by the clock, producing a single product. The result was riches and industrial development for the West, and for the West Indies, a population characterized by the will to rebel. Howe puts it like this: 'we fought from day one and that fight culminated in Toussaint L'Ouverture in Haiti and Paul Bogle in Jamaica'. In this sense, James was right: Darcus Howe is a West Indian.

Howe would later modify James' aphorism. Today, when he tells the story, he adds a coda: 'Darcus Howe is a West Indian *and he lives in Britain.*'

That, for Howe, is a fuller description, and a description of some political importance. For the past 50 years, he has made Britain his home, fighting all the while for immigrants to enjoy the full rights of citizenship without having to renounce their history or identity: to integrate on their own terms. For Howe, it is a struggle in the best traditions of English radicalism and part of the ongoing struggle of the British working class. Writing in 1998, Howe described his mission thus:

... although I spent part of my life in a struggle against England it was, I now know, also a personal and political struggle for England. My life has been largely spent in trying to help force an often reluctant and purblind England to be true to the benign "Motherland" of my parent's vision.

(UC DHP 9/2)

Thirty years earlier, while editing the *Black Eagle*, the newsletter of a small London-based Black Power group, he set out his mission in a similar way. With playful irony he wrote in terms of a civilizing mission; the British had travelled the globe to civilize Africa, India and the Caribbean, now it was time to return the favour (GPI JOU 35/4). Howe and the Black Power Movement would civilize Britain by challenging the state-licensed barbarism of the Metropolitan Police (Met), by teaching Britain to become a harmonious multiracial society, by bringing 'reason to race' (Howe 2011b).

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There is nothing cryptic about our title. *Darcus Howe: A Political Biography* is just that. The outlines of Howe's story are simple enough: born in Trinidad, he immigrated to Britain where he became the country's best-known campaigner for black¹ rights. Initially, he campaigned on the streets, latterly in the mainstream press, on radio and on television.

The biography is political in two senses. First, it is political in that it concerns Howe's work in the public sphere. Our focus then is on Howe the campaigner, the writer and broadcaster, rather than on Howe's private life. Thus, the biography is neither an intimate portrait nor a psychological one. This may seem to be a denial of the celebrated truth that the personal is also the political. It is not. It is merely a recognition that there is a limit to what can be achieved in a single book. It is political in a second sense too. The book is an intervention, at least obliquely, in a series of debates concerning the extent to which the West has entered a post-racial age, the extent to which racism is and has been an issue in British society and the best ways of advancing racial justice.

Turning to methodological issues, our approach is primarily historical. By this we mean that when dealing with historical actors, we aim ‘simply to use the ordinary techniques of historical enquiry to grasp their concepts, to follow their distinctions, to recover their beliefs and, so far as possible, to see things their way’ (Skinner 2002: vii). In short, we attempt to understand Howe in his own terms.

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A number of themes unite this book. The first relates to Howe’s consistent focus on the progressive potential of the black underclass. This intuition was clear from an early age. Living in Belmont, Port-of-Spain, in a house looking out on the home of the Casablanca steel band, Howe was part of a community that included the working class and street hustlers. One of his first battles was against his parent’s desire to move into a more middle-class area. After winning a scholarship to Queen’s Royal College, Howe continued to associate with ‘barflies and hustlers’, shifting his allegiance from Casablanca to Renegades, the street gang which coalesced around it (Howe 2011c). He admits suffering ‘demons of doubt’ about the potential of the black underclass of itinerants and unemployed, particularly after a run-in with hustler-turned-faux-radical Michael X. Howe credits James with keeping ‘his eye on the ball’, by repeatedly demonstrating that the black working class and the black underclass were a progressive historical force (BBC 2002). As a member of the Black Panther Movement, as editor of *Race Today* in the 1970s and 1980s and throughout the summer riots of 2011, Howe continued to believe that radical politics should grow from the ranks of the black working class, black youth and the black unemployed. Howe’s faith in the black underclass is based on his view that radicalism is the natural response of immigrants, particularly second-generation immigrants, who refuse to tolerate brutal policing, poor housing, third-rate jobs and social discrimination reserved for them. In this sense, he argues, the economic and social position of the black underclass meant that they had the potential to play an explosive and insurrectionary role in British politics, and to ignite and play a leading role in a wider rebellion of white youth and urban poor.

Secondly, Howe has continually stressed black ‘self-organisation’ and ‘self-activity’. The insistence that black people must shape their own destinies was Howe’s rallying cry at the beginning of the Mangrove march and the foundation on which the Race Today Collective was built. His emphasis has changed over the years. In the 1960s and 1970s, Howe was critical of well-intentioned whites who wanted to lead the struggle for black rights. He also rejected the position

of anti-racist campaigners who sought to characterize black people as helpless victims, incapable of formulating their own demands. More recently, Howe has questioned attempts to institutionalize the fight for black rights through government agencies. Howe's stance in recent years is evidence of the broader truth that he has eschewed incorporation into the establishment. Rather, Howe continues to identify with the grass roots, striving to articulate the grievances, experiences, goals and concerns of those who have experienced racism most acutely. It is for this reason that Howe often represents a lone voice, and why, at the age of 70, he is still a controversial figure.

Thirdly, Howe has consistently attempted to unite radicalism with reason. Howe describes himself as an instinctive egalitarian. Howe saw the idiocy of racism at school; fielding the best cricket team necessitated Africans and Indians working together on equal terms. Howe rejected colonialism as a young man too, supporting Eric Williams' slogan 'Massa Day Done' (Channel 4 2006). On arrival in Britain, Howe quickly saw that the slogan applied as much to racism in Britain as it did to colonialism in the Caribbean. School, first with his father and later at Queens Royal College (QRC), drew Howe into the 'world of reason'. He recalls the atmosphere of QRC as 'Christian morality, through the lenses of Descartes'; the school's unofficial motto 'I think therefore I am' (Howe 2011a). Howe experienced various kinds of radicalism in Europe. In Britain, in the late 1960s, Howe witnessed the first wave of black militancy. As far as Howe could see, under the leadership of Obi B. Egbuna, Michael X and Roy Sawh, black radicalism was merely a superficial mix of mindless nationalist rhetoric and macho swagger. Howe travelled to Paris in mid-1968 and participated in the revolution. Here, radicalism comprised the esoteric philosophical discussions of students, wholly divorced from the workers' movement. Neither flavour of radicalism appealed. In James, however, Howe found radicalism and reason in their proper proportion. Unlike Britain's black nationalists, James located the black struggle in a universal movement for human emancipation and unlike the French students, James rejected grandiose philosophical abstraction, preferring to face reality (Howe 2011c).

Howe's desire to embrace reason was part of his rejection of black nationalism. Inspired by discussions with James, and E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, Howe adopted a very English way of conducting politics. Howe's strategy from the Mangrove trial onwards was to appeal to the values of the English dissenting tradition to ground arguments for black rights within a tradition of radicalism that Howe had imbibed at QRC, and which represented the most progressive face of English culture. In this sense, Howe describes himself

as 'a natural black heir to the English radical dissenting tradition of Milton, Mill and Tom Paine' (UC DHP 9/2), not so much a black Jacobin as a black Leveller. To some extent, the Englishness of Howe's approach explains his success in the mainstream British media. Indeed, Howe's appeal to an English tradition, in part, explains why programmes like *Devil's Advocate* and the *Bandung Files* entered the mainstream, quickly shaking off the label of 'ethnic programming' and why Howe found success as a columnist for the *Evening Standard*. Crucially, the freshness of Howe's political idiom, which eschewed the moribund rhetoric of the white left while synthesizing English and Caribbean radicalism, is part of the reason that his programmes and his print journalism attracted a loyal white following.

Howe's willingness to collaborate with the mainstream media predates his first appearances on Channel 4. Part of the strategy of *Race Today*, under his editorship, was to produce material that could be easily picked up by the mainstream. In this sense, Howe has played a significant role in recent years by bringing radical ideas into the mainstream. Trevor Phillips, former television executive and current chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, argues that Howe has used the media to popularize James' ideas, playing the role of John the Baptist to James' Christ (Phillips 2012). Television producer and Howe's long-term collaborator Narinder Minhas makes a similar point, claiming that Howe was the man who 'brought intelligent discussions about race to primetime' (Minhas 2012).

Howe is also significant as he has continually advocated black and white collaboration, with the proviso that when dealing with racism black people play the leading role. This political principle is rooted in personal experience. He spent his childhood rubbing shoulders with the grandchildren of Indian indentured labourers in rural Trinidad. His school days were enriched by white teachers at QRC, who Howe describes as 'the most enlightened bourgeois' of their generation, whose experiences of war prompted them to leave Europe for the classrooms of the Caribbean (Howe 2011c). In London too, Howe was at home in the late-1960s' scene in clubs like the Flamingo and the Roaring Twenties, where Reggae, Ska and American R&B attracted whitebeats, Mods and the first skinheads as well as black clubbers from Brixton and Notting Hill. Throughout his life, Howe has counted people of all races and classes as his friends, comrades and collaborators. Howe's approach was crucial to securing white involvement in the Black People's Day of Action, against the demands of nationalists who wished to keep the event exclusively black. It is paradoxical, then, that Howe, who has never been a nationalist, has been dubbed 'race chief'

and 'race agitator' or 'Britain's first professional black man' as Howe has never embraced separatism or narrow identity politics.

In common with James, Howe saw an important connection between the struggles of the white working class and the fight for racial justice. In his first *Race Today* editorials, Howe set out his view that the treatment of black people in Britain brought the horrors of colonialism and the worst excesses of capitalism to the metropolis. Struggles against racism exposed these injustices and, consequently, had the potential to reawaken the spirit of discontent in the white working class. In this sense, while accepting that the black minority was too small to carry a revolution in Britain to its conclusion, Howe believed that it could play a crucial role in radicalizing the white working class. Howe's faith in the British working class was obvious as early as the Mangrove trial. Accused of inciting riot, faced with the combined forces of Special Branch, the Met, the Home Office and the British justice system, Howe advocated selecting white working-class jurors and making a direct appeal to their experience of police harassment. Significantly, whereas white liberals have tended to see the white working class as a reservoir of unenlightened racism, Howe sees the white working class in a more positive light: as a fluid group who have tended to absorb immigrants from around the world. The inclusive nature of Howe's politics runs through his reports in *The Vanguard*, the newspaper of the Oilfield Workers Trade Union of Trinidad and Tobago, which vividly describe the unity between African and Asian workers engendered by Trinidad's 1970 Black Power Revolution; his editorship of *Race Today*, which focused considerable attention on the position of women; to *Who you calling a nigger?* – Howe's 2004 documentary concerning inter-minority violence.

Howe's campaigning style has synthesized insights from the Caribbean, the United States and the United Kingdom. James' influence has already been noted. *Black Jacobins*, *Beyond a Boundary*, *Modern Politics*, *Facing Reality* and *American Civilisation* are among the works that Howe cites most frequently. This is only part of Howe's radical erudition. With James, he read Franz Fanon, W. E. B. Du Bois, Stokely Carmichael, Walter Rodney, Karl Marx and E. P. Thompson. This list has some notable omissions. Dickens was Howe's first literary love; indeed, at an early age he identified with Philip Pirrip, the protagonist of *Great Expectations*. In *Modern Politics* and *Facing Reality*, Howe saw what he had already intuited from the lives of Caribbean people: that political leaders should play an extremely limited role in organizing and formulating the demands of working people. Specifically, Howe rejected the notion of the vanguard party, the political elite who thought, acted and made the revolution on behalf of the masses.

Rather, Howe embraced James' notion of the 'small organisation' that grounded itself in the lives of ordinary people, educating and learning from the working class, recording their struggle and encouraging them to formulate their own demands (James et al. 1974: 118–19). In the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Howe saw a group that approximated the Jamesian organization. Howe's involvement with SNCC came by a circuitous route. Inspired by James, Howe travelled to Montreal to take part in the 1968 Congress of Black Writers. Black Power had emerged as an ideology and a movement in America in 1966; 2 years later, the Montreal conference served as a Black Power International. The Congress allowed Howe to renew acquaintance with Carmichael, his childhood friend, as well as introducing Howe to Rodney, the movement's rising star. Inspired by the Congress, Howe travelled to New York, where he worked with SNCC during the Ocean Hill-Brownsville education campaign. He played a small role, staying below the radar in order to evade the immigration authorities. Even so, he learnt from the best. The SNCC organizers distinguished themselves by facilitating self-organization, working at a grass-roots level and encouraging black high school students to take centre stage. During his stay in New York, Howe spent time with H. Rap Brown and participated in one of Black Power's defining campaigns which took the struggle for racial justice to the northern states, pitting black radicals against white liberals. Howe first attempted to build a small organization in the run-up to Trinidad's Black Power Revolution. Later in the same year, he applied the lessons that he had learnt in New York and Port-of-Spain to the battle against police racism in Notting Hill. The Mangrove March of August 1970, which took mass protest to the symbolic centres of racism, was in essence a rerun of the strategy used by radicals at the beginning of the February Revolution in Trinidad. Equally, a decade later, Howe used campaigning techniques learnt from SNCC to organize the Black People's Day of Action.

Howe's career has also been distinctive due to his consistent focus on pop culture as a progressive force. The *Black Eagle*, one of the first British Black Power news-sheets, contains images of Malcolm X and Otis Reading united in articulating the same message. The image captured Howe's intuition that political struggle and new forms of popular expression went hand in hand. This was an argument that Howe articulated in Horace Ové's *Reggae* (1971) and later in the 1986 BBC *Arena* series *Caribbean Nights*. Again, Howe found support for his intuitions in James' work, specifically *American Civilisation*, which argued that pop culture often expressed the most progressive aspects of public opinion. Indeed, popular culture and the arts played an important role in *Race Today* and in Howe's later television work.

Finally, Howe has continually shown political courage. This was evident in his decision to defend himself for 55 days at the Old Bailey during the trial of the Mangrove Nine; in his decision to break with the Institute of Race Relations and take *Race Today* on a new course; in his willingness to confront Chief Buthelezi on *Devil's Advocate* and to tackle taboo topics in documentaries about black parenthood and inter-community violence. He has had the courage to remain outside the political establishment. Indeed, against a consensus that labelled the summer riots as 'criminality pure and simple' (Cameron 2011). Howe was prepared to point the finger at the long-standing issue of stop and search.

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Howe has been part of Britain's political landscape since the early 1970s. While he has proved hard to ignore, he has often been hastily dismissed. Strategies for dismissing Howe and his arguments have changed. In the late 1960s and early 1970s while Howe was railing against racism in the Met, the authorities adopted a strategy of denial and political slur. Simply put, they argued that there was no racism in the Met and that black radicalism was a front for criminality or even terrorism. By the early 1980s, things had moved on. In discussion with Howe, Michael Mates acknowledged that there was racism in the police and he acknowledged that it was deplorable, but argued it was a reflection of society at large, a relatively small problem that would sort itself out in time. More recently, the narrative has changed again; yes, racism *was* a problem in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s – in fact, it was a significant problem that blighted the lives of a generation – but racism is now a thing of the past. This was Edwina Curry's response to Howe's radical explanation of the riots of 2011. On this view, while Howe did good work back in the 1970s, his current concerns are a throwback to a bygone age, a sign that Howe is no longer relevant. Around the same time, there has been a resurgence of outright denial, linked to a romantic dumbed-down 'whiggish' view of history that suggests that racism was *always* someone else's problem. On this view it is true that there was terrible racism in Germany under the Nazis, in the American South, in the Belgium Congo, but the British were better than that. As a nation, so the story goes, we had too much common sense to be taken in by fascism, too much decency to introduce segregation, and our Empire, while imperfect, was more humane than those of other European powers. To some extent, this was the message of the 'official' 2007 commemorations of the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade. Many of the statements made by senior politicians during and since the bicentennial year

reflected the ‘abolitionist myth’, in which ‘[t]he history of enslavement has been viewed backwards, through the history of its abolition, and that history in turn has been read not as a complex story involving slave resistance and economic causation . . . but as a story of heroic moral efforts of a mainly white, mainly male and mainly British abolitionist movement . . .’ (Smith et al. 2011: 3). David Cameron’s recent pronouncements on abolition represent the apotheosis of this view, placing Britain squarely on the side of the angels at every decisive historical moment:

. . . we have the values – national values that swept slavery from the seas, that stood up to both fascism and communism and that helped to spread democracy and human rights around the planet – that will drive us to do good around the world.
(Cameron 2010)

For Cameron, these national values are ancient:

Human rights is a cause that runs deep in the British heart and long in British history. In the thirteenth century, Magna Carta set down specific rights for citizens, including the right to freedom from unlawful detention. In the seventeenth century, the Petition of Right gave new authority to Parliament; and the Bill of Rights set limits on the power of the monarchy. By the eighteenth century it was said that: “this spirit of liberty is so deeply implanted in our constitution, and rooted in our very soil, that a slave the moment he lands in England, falls under the protection of the laws, and with regard to all natural rights becomes instantly a free man.” It was that same spirit that led to the abolition of slavery . . . that drove the battle against tyranny in two World Wars . . . and that inspired Winston Churchill to promise that the end of the “world struggle” would see the “enthronement of human rights”.

(Cameron 2012)

From this perspective, a British black rights movement is wholly redundant, and Howe’s criticisms of the British police or of institutional racism are nonsensical; for the nature of the ‘British heart’, to borrow Cameron’s phrase, excludes the possibility of systematic racial prejudice in Britain. Consequently, Howe can be dismissed because his claims run counter to the ‘official view’ that Britain is a place in which the values of freedom and justice are upheld by all, for all.

Sadly, Britain has not always been the utopia of civilized fair play that the ‘abolitionist myth’ suggests. Cameron’s narrative hides more than it reveals, and it is over-optimistic to think that racism has been pushed now and forever to the fringes of British politics. British culture is Janus-faced, civilized and barbaric,

progressive and reactionary. Dismissing Howe ignores crucial aspects of both sides of modern Britain. Therefore, this book contends that we ignore Howe at our peril.

Note

- 1 Any term with a history escapes definition (Geuss 1999: 13–14). The term ‘black’ is no exception. ‘Black’ has been used differently at different moments in the events we discuss. Therefore, rather than attempting to offer an ahistorical definition, we have consciously used the term variously. Our intention is to use the term historically, reflecting the different usages the term has had across the era that we are concerned with.