Reviews

How do we build our world anew?

Malia Bouattia

Gargi Bhattacharyya, Adam Elliott-Cooper, Sita Balani, Kerem Nisancioglu, Kojo Koram, Dalia Gebriel, Nadine El-Enany, Luke de Noronha, *Empire's Endgame: Racism and the British State*, Pluto 2021

This book reflects on a series of key political moments in Britain over the last few years, from the so-called knife-crime epidemic to the Windrush scandal. It argues that all of these individual moments, taken together, provide a clearer overview of how racism is constructed, reproduced and used to reinforce state control.

The book is organised in five parts. The first part provides an overview of the current moment and how racism is constructed in the contemporary period in Britain. The second part looks at the post-colonial imaginary of colonialism. The third connects this to gender and sexuality - which, the writers argue, is crucial to understanding issues of nationalism and racism today. The fourth discusses militarism and the way in which the rise of racism and nationalism is linked to the growing repression of civil liberties and of the public space. And finally, the fifth part brings all of these issues together and explains how the Covid-19 pandemic both intensified these issues and forced them into the light.

The easy flow, and clear connection between the ideas shared, means that the argument is not overwhelming despite the expansive and impressive list of subjects and political moments that are covered. The chapters are not written by individual authors, but are written collectively, and this aids the transition between each section. This is a collective project, seeking to put forward a unified perspective.

Written by a collective of eight scholars who have engaged with these questions

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not just within their academic work but also on the ground, the book analyses the specifics of events and movements within the left in Britain, and the mistakes that have been made, and discusses how these have helped shape politics in the last few decades. For example, calls from a section of the labour movement for a turn to 'progressive nationalism', in the hope of finding a short cut to rebuild stronger roots within working-class politics, are addressed in detail. The aim is not, however, to find a stick to beat the movement with, but rather to take such issues as critical points of discussion, and to explore what they tell us about the relationships between principles, strategy and the current conjuncture - and the reader is invited to join in these explorations.

This collective attempt to work through practical problems faced by the left is strongly connected to the grassroots experience of many of the writers, and their involvement in many of the struggles they mention shines through the different chapters: the book comes over as an urgent attempt at intervening in ongoing debates, and an encouragement for others to join in. Its accessible style isn't about exercising humility - it is clear that the book is being used to re-open an urgent conversation on how we collectively strategise to fight and build our world anew: 'while none of us believe writing or thinking is any substitute for political action, this project has offered us some sustenance for the messy work of organising. We hope something here sustains you in taking action too'.

The book discusses in detail how the state treats 'terrorists', 'gangsters' and 'illegals' as modern-day 'folk devils', which it pretends to protect us from, in exchange for the rolling back of our freedoms. Without overwhelming readers with heavy historical overviews, the authors still provide enough context for us to understand that all these categories of 'others' mobilised by the state are not random slurs, hurled by ignorant people. Instead, they are institutionalised and racialised social categories, which serve to control and divide our communities, as well as render them obedient. They are used to construct new anxieties in order to divert the population's anger away from structural social crises - portraying consequences as fundamental, while obscuring their systemic causes. These anxieties are continuously reinvented whilst simultaneously playing on (a particular interpretation of) historical realities: in the words of the authors, 'cultures and practices of racism are rooted (and routed) in empire yet they are constantly shifting in form and function'.

The language and references used enable readers who are completely unaware

of the subject to engage with an analysis of the current state of race and racism in Britain. And this feels a lot like the point of the book. The thoughts shared carry the hope that its insights and understanding will provide guidance for the reflections of a new generation of activists, and eventually even help generate new directions for the movements and moments of radical action that will inevitably grow out of those that have defined the last few years. This is especially valuable as young people - as well as older generations who were previously disengaged or disheartened - have been inspired to engage politically following the Black Lives Matter protests that swept across towns and cities up and down the UK last summer.

While the book has many strengths, there was also an important gap. The role of Islamophobia as a key tool to facilitate state repression over the last two decades, through the so-called war on terror, is touched on in a few chapters, but always only in passing. It would have been useful for some deeper reflections on this issue, given how central it has been to processes of state repression, racialisation and public debate. In fact young people reading the book are likely to have known no time outside of the War on Terror.

It is true that the category of 'terrorist' is discussed in more detail in a chapter which addresses the 'Pakistani Grooming Gangs' scandal. However, including an overview in the first part of the book - in the same way that the 'gangster' and 'migrant' were so brilliantly contextualised - would have enriched the reader's understanding, and strengthened their ability to connect the dots between diverse experiences of different racialised groups in contemporary Britain - principally black, migrant and Muslim.

It is necessary to bring such connections to the fore because they tell the story of how particular policies have been developed and normalised - with little resistance - in recent years. For example, the treatment of the Windrush generation - so richly touched upon in *Empire's Endgame* - was made possible because of the harsh policies on citizenship and deportation that had been previously trialled on the 'bad citizen', the terror suspects - that is to say on Muslims. As Nisha Kapoor points out, the way the Windrush generation were treated 'reflects the materialisation of a reconfigured politics around citizenship spearheaded by contemporary imperialist politics'.[1]
As she argues, the War against Terror and the UK's intensified deportation regime 'have seen to the cultivation of the most drastic legislative measures for citizenship deprivation in British history alongside the development of a sophisticated

infrastructure for mass deportation.'

The state's reliance on draconian practices - like stripping individuals of their citizenship - in its campaign against what are considered the indefensible in our society has strengthened the foundations of a repressive and securitised state that expels freely and mercilessly. Similar points are made on the extension of counter-terrorism measures in the policing of 'gangs', again connecting the repression of primarily black and primarily Muslim populations in Britain. Expanding on these connections in more detail, and framing them in a shared historical and structural analysis, would only strengthen the book's focus on building clear analytical and political links between issues and struggles that might otherwise appear as separate or unconnected.

The book ends on a note of 'shared grief, hope and resistance'. It identifies this triple formulation as the only one that can allow us to continue rising up, rather than giving in to the despair of loss and defeats that have marked the past few years. The writers draw on the impact of a growing turn towards a politics of abolition, with its centring of 'love' - inspired by BLM - as a sign that we are heading in the right direction. There are new shoots of resistance growing - in the face of old demons - which are mobilising and inspiring people in their thousands. And the people in struggle, as always, show the way.

This note of hope - realistic but optimistic, and featuring, in the words of Daniel Bensaïd, a slow impatience for radical change - fits well with the mood of our current generation of activists. The voices in this book are of activists and academics who have emerged from a generation that is witnessing a fundamental shift in the political and economic landscape in Britain. 'Our moment' - just as it was for our parents and grandparents who lived through the period of liberation struggles across the global south - is defined by a deep crisis of the system as it is, and difficult - if at times hopeful - struggles over what will replace it.

While seeing the growth of the far right across the board, and the strengthening of a repressive state, we are also witnessing the culmination of decades of anti-racist and progressive efforts: mass marches against the War in Iraq; the 2010 student uprisings against the tripling of tuition fees and the birth of decolonising education campaigns which followed; growing opposition to the government's Prevent strategy; and the Palestine solidarity work through occupations and demonstrations which laid the groundwork for the more widespread adoption of boycott, divestment and sanctions

policies against Israel. The cadre which is leading progressive movements and fighting for a different future has been shaped by these campaigns and emerged out of them. The same is true for the authors of *Empire's Endgame*. We are a generation outraged by what the world is, in part because we have tasted, even if fleetingly, what it could be.

Whilst the picture painted of a far right winning seats of power around the world reinforces anxieties and fears, the authors don't dismiss the positive strides made by anti-racist movements and social justice groups. One example is the contrast between the public response to the Tottenham uprisings following the killing of Mark Duggan by police, and those following the murder of George Floyd. In fact, you wouldn't even need to go as far back as that: the first wave of BLM protests which spread to the UK a few years ago was dismissed as a hostile anti-police action that required over-policing and even arrests. This time round, entire cities and neighbourhoods were taken over by protestors, while the images of the statue of Edward Colston being pulled down and thrown in the Bristol harbour circulated around the globe and inspired many to follow suit.

This assertion of the progress of our movements is not based on the empty lip service of the corporate and political establishments who also claimed that 'Black Lives Matter' last summer. Instead, we measure our progress through the mass, collective, and widespread outcry that was expressed by thousands filling the streets in solidarity. This energy did not feel like a one-time event, it was here to stay: it showed up on the streets *again* to demand justice after the horrendous rape and killing of Sarah Everard by a police officer, and once more as the government tried to pass the repressive Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill; and it returned again during the latest attacks on Gaza by Israel. There is no doubt it will not end there.

We are faced by dangerous, powerful and repressive enemies - at the helm of states, street-fighting organisations and powerful corporations. The tasks ahead, especially as we face the ever-growing climate emergency, are huge. This book is a useful intervention in the debates and arguments that are taking place, which are so necessary to get us from where we are, to liberation.

Note

1. https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3774-on-windrush-citizenship-and-its-others. See also Nisha Kapoor, *Deport, Derive, Extradite*, Verso 2017.

Resisting literary love as resistance in *The Prophets*

Kavita Bhanot

Robert Jones Jr, *The Prophets*, Hachette 2021

'Did Black queer people exist in the distant past?', asks Robert Jones Jr - and his answer is: 'of *course* they did'. But it is inevitable, as he says, that there is no evidence of this: 'it's often the way of a traumatised people to erase the past, shun excavation of it, deny it ever existed, or pretend that it looked some other erroneous but glorious way … Who would want to explain the horrors of yesteryear with no way of stopping the pain from returning?'

Yet it is this difficult task that Jones undertakes in his novel *The Prophets* - a story of forbidden, secret love between two enslaved boys, Samuel and Isiah, on the Halifax plantation in the antebellum South. Through this story, Jones inserts the queer black experience into a history of slavery and oppression, as well as into a pre-colonial African context. For this reason alone, it is an undeniably important novel.

The novel emerges from the current political moment in the west; in which a diaspora, originating from formerly colonised countries, is asserting itself in a decolonial wave of resistance in the midst of white supremacy. There are subtle references to this contemporary context woven through the novel - for example, amongst the list of white people's oppressions is that: 'they stepped on people's throats with all their might and asked why people couldn't breathe' (p301). Like other recent literature that embodies this politics (Rupi Kaur perhaps being the most well-known example), the novel is located somewhere along the path in the author's journey of self-discovery of his own humanity (in this instance as a queer

black man), against the dehumanising messages that living in a white supremacist context has given him. This includes the idea that his ancestors were primitive, while the country he lives in, the USA, is 'civilised'; and the idea of Africa as cruel, as homophobic, while the West is concerned with human rights and equality.

In contrast, Jones's novel shows pre-colonial Africa to be sophisticated, 'civilised' and humane. Allowing the colonising intruders to join her tribe's celebrations, King Akusa (who is a woman) thinks: 'it would show how charitable her people were and please the ancestors. Fierceness should always be tempered with kindness; that was wisdom' (p181). The novel shows pre-colonial African society to hold complex attitudes towards sexuality and gender - a fluidity that was so normalised it did not need to be named. It is whiteness, in the form of Christianity, that brings homophobia into Africa, into black communities in the United States. This is depicted, in the novel, through the figures of Portuguese missionary characters who, upon witnessing a celebration of the love between two men, Kosii and Elewa, in the fictional Kosongo tribe, exclaim: 'But they are two men … These are the seeds of Sodom'. A missionary tells King Akusa: 'I think your people would benefit from our religion' (p184). Later in the story, Amos, a fellow slave on the plantation, converts to Christianity and consequently betrays Isiah and Samuel. Remembering that pre-colonial societies often had complex, certainly less binary approaches and practices in regards to desire, sexuality, gender expression and patriarchy is an important act of resistance to white supremacy.

So, too, is the book's frequent reversal of normalised racist associations of blackness and whiteness, so it is whiteness that carries negative associations: 'Samuel didn't want to be anywhere where the white fell out of the sky cold and frozen, laying its claim over everything', we are told at one point (p306) - connecting whiteness and colonialism. In contrast, 'darkness' is associated with 'inky night or ancestral shadows or the ebony of playmates and lovers'. There is a similar reversal in the normalised representation of white and black people; white people, who are normally humanised, are othered, represented as sinister, deranged, inhumane. They are the strange, uncivilised 'skinless' people in pre-colonial Africa ('all three demons were missing skin' (p86)). They are the 'people who didn't even wash their hands before they ate and who didn't clean themselves after leaving the outhouse' (p28). They are shown as insecure and paranoid, with bizarre sexual fantasies of domination and abuse. In contrast, it is amongst the slaves that we see true desire

and love. Be Aunty loves Amos, Amos loves his wife Essie, Essie loves Isiah, Puah loves Samuel. And of course, in the only instance in which love and desire come together in mutual reciprocation, Samuel and Isiah love each other. At its heart, *The Prophets* is a love story - about love at all costs, love as salvation, love as resistance. It is a form of resistance because, in a world that seeks to control, to strangulate, every aspect of their lives, love is an act of agency for the characters.

Western literature is and intrinsically has been about characters with agency. This poses obvious challenges when writing about slavery - about characters who have been enslaved and dehumanised, their agency and choice taken away. But, as Jones and other black writers before him have shown in their literature, there is always humanity, there is always agency, there is always resistance; in the cracks, in small, surprising, uncomfortable ways, in refusal and non-compliance. And writing about this is a form of resistance. In contrast to the loyal slaves represented through a white imagination in films like *Gone with the Wind*, Jones's characters constantly resist the domination of their hearts and minds and bodies, in their thoughts, words and deeds. They have contempt for their captors: 'show me when a toubab ever keep they word', says Samuel (p68). Articulating, through absurdity, what tends to be normalised, we are told that: 'they hung animal heads on the wall like art'. 'Right next to their own faces and you can't tell the difference [Essie] said with a sweet chuckle.' Maggie, who works in the house and is made to breastfeed white babies thinks: 'it had dull eyes and eyelashes so close to the colour of its own skin that it might as well not have had any at all'. Maggie detests 'the feel of its probing lips on her breast. She forced herself to smile just to keep from smashing its frail body to the ground' (p31). She puts nightshade on her nipples before she feeds, killing one of the babies. She adds little ingredients to the food she prepares for the adults: 'a few drops of snake venom in the sweet tea. A tiny bit of heel ground glass dust in the hominy grits … As with any good magic, she topped it off with a gentle humming … At the very least, if she couldn't kill them, she could make them uncomfortable. Cantankerous bellies and the rare bloody stool were pleasant, reassuring results' (p32). 'Miniscule power was still power', is Maggie's attitude. Amos, meanwhile, in order to 'manage [his owners'] expectations', picks a hundred pounds of cotton a day, although he could pick double the amount. And in the scenes depicting the capture and transport of slaves from Africa, we see Kosii, having lost his partner Elewa, grab a white boy who is about the same age, and jump overboard with him, taking along the woman and man he is chained to.

Love is the central form of resistance in the novel; above all, the love between Isiah and Samuel. In the little crack that is created, mostly because they are overlooked ('no one cared much about Isiah and Samuel' (p300)) - they are able to love each other. The relationship is described as their 'bliss' (p18). Beautiful moments of sensuality, desire and pleasure are created between Isiah and Samuel throughout the novel. The emphasis, in the depiction of their love story, is on agency, on their choosing love, choosing each other, choosing to love each other. 'Willingness', one of the characters observes, 'radiated off of them in heat'. 'It caressed their words … it adorned their hands, especially when they touched. They looked into each other's eyes and … something opened. How blessed Adam felt to be a witness to pure intention.' These are active words, words of agency: willingness, intention. Samuel and Isiah make each other feel alive. Samuel looks at Isiah and thinks: 'the dead he felt inside didn't move in Isiah's direction. No, there he felt something tremble and kick. There he felt something tremble and yawn' (p299). They feel free when they are together, creating pockets of freedom and hope: 'Isiah had widened him, given him another body to rely upon, made him dream that a dance wasn't merely possible, but something they could do together, the minute they were free. A dreadful thing to get a man's hopes up that way …' (p301). Because, of course, this sense of freedom and hope is an illusion; their relationship carries real risks, not only because love is forbidden, not only because the coloniser's religion sees their love as sin, but also because they are belying one of their 'functions' - to 'breed'. In this context, love is literally a crime. Therefore, their relationship represents not just inadvertent, but overt, resistance. 'Why aren't they afraid?', one character, Maggie, asks herself. 'The two bucks had natures that caused them to resist', says Paul, their white owner (p262).

Love against all odds, as a form of resistance, has been at the core of narratives throughout time and across the world - not just in the west. For example, in my own knowledge, tragic love stories at the heart of Punjabi culture, such as Heer Ranjha, represent defiance against patriarchy, class and other hierarchies. But if the gendered power dynamic between the lovers is not overtly addressed, the woman's devotion to love and her lover can still seem to solidify a form of patriarchy. When stories paper-over the power dynamics - whether of gender, race, age or status (class/caste) - it can lead us to question the very possibility of idealised love, especially heterosexual love. The trope of romantic 'love' as resistance, salvation, transcendence needs to be questioned - including in western literature by the 'other', for example,

the 'love stories' in two recent novels, Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Given that both relationships are inter-racial - and the relationship in Shamsie's novel is also heterosexual - I couldn't believe in the idealised love and transcendence at the heart of these novels, where inequalities within them are not directly grappled with. Love, which needs some semblance of equality, might be an aspiration, but it is not often realised.

Isiah and Samuel's relationship can of course be seen to sidestep this; they are both black men, of the same age, both enslaved since birth; a sense of equality is embedded into their relationship: 'Isiah's breath smelled like milk and his body curled snugly into Samuel's. Moonlight did all the talking. It just happened. Neither of them chased the other and yet each was surrounded by the other. Samuel liked Isaiah's company, which had its own space and form' (p309).

However, it is still questionable if love, if any relationship, looks like this in reality, even in such circumstances. In its beauty and perfection, in the lack of power dynamics, in the lack of separation between them, the relationship between Isiah and Samuel seems metaphorical and abstract, a political or narrative device; the specificities are missing.

For there is little separation between Isiah and Samuel; they are joined together, two halves of a whole. They blur into each other. In the chapters written from their perspective, the narration jumps back and forth from Samuel's to Isiah's perspective seamlessly, in a way that is even, at times, confusing. Although they do have distinct personalities ('one black, the other purple; one smiling, the other brooding', while Samuel is depicted as harder, more like a 'man' and Isiah is softer, more cheerful and kind), they're often written about as if they are one unit, as 'they'; 'they put the horses away'(p8); '… they looked like two ravens who had the nerve to become one' (p152). At times they are referred to as 'The Two of Them'. When Timothy, the plantation owner's son, is looking at them, he observes: 'Their heat seemed to blur everything in close proximity. Hay stuck to Samuel's back, or maybe it was Isiah's. He couldn't tell who was holding whom' (p203). 'Samuel and Isiah had blended into one blue-black mass' (p117). Each feels what the other feels: 'the second crack [of the whip] struck Samuel and Isiah trembled for him' (p145).

While this gaze that sees them as one is often that of the white characters in the novel, it is expressed by other characters too, and it seems to be the perspective of the novel. When love is idealised in this way, it can seem metaphorical rather than

real; other-worldly: 'You in this place, but you ain't of it …', Maggie says to Samuel. 'Neither you nor Isiah … ain't neither one of you belong here in this place … there be a whole better place for you, maybe not somewhere, but some*time*' (p302). This is how I also felt about them; in their beauty and perfection, they seemed not of this world, or this time. We see this again, when Maggie says: 'It wasn't simply that they were helpful, that she never had to lift a bucket of water from the well or a log for the fire or a boulder to beat the wash when they were around … It might have been that the feeling had nothing to do with them at all, but rather with something they helped her to remember' (p35). In this way, in representing something beyond themselves, they are almost symbolic - there is something parable-like in the story about them.

My perspective has its own limitations, being a heterosexual brown woman, but in its idealisation, the relationship seemed to me to be presented as perceived from the outside, constructed through the gaze (white and/or heterosexual) upon it. It doesn't help that, although Isiah and Samuel's love and desire is centred in the novel, the story is mostly told from the point of view of a number of other characters who live on the plantation. And everyone seems to be obsessed with them, singly, or, more often, together; their kindness, their beauty, their bodies, their sex life. 'The barn was a source of vexation and an interest to almost everyone on the plantation', thinks the overseer James (p330). 'I've seen you and Isiah … At night, I've seen you', says Timothy (p305). They're described as 'young, fit, black and blue' (p263). 'One, a deep cavern without lamplight to guide, the other a midnight sky, but without any stars.' In other ways, too, they seem, through this obsessive gaze, to be fetishised; and in this way they continue, even in a novel that celebrates their love, to be othered.

This idealisation, even fetishisation, as a response or resistance to denigration, dehumanisation, othering and silencing is understandable. But it can continue to embody, in a different way, the dominant gaze: remaining locked in the gaze of the oppressor; white, heterosexual. Alongside the other-worldly beauty of the queer men in the novel (Isiah and Samuel), as well as their alter egos in precolonial Africa (Kosii and Elewa), there is the depiction of its black women as magical and wise (seven of them come together to unite their powers to try to save Isiah and Samuel, as well as the matriarchal ruler King Akusa).

Like the relationship between Isiah and Samuel, the representation of pre-

colonial Africa can seem similarly idealised and symbolic. Jones is aware of the perils of pride and hierarchical power - this is, after all, behind the oppression of colonialism; he writes that 'the weaver is no less vital than the king. We do not mean to give you the impression of an untroubled period in which cruelty was unthinkable' (pp174-5). At the same time, his version of pre-colonial Africa is undeniably romanticised and top-down, focusing on the King as a wise and just ruler, with subjects who are loyal to her until the end - relishing rather than questioning such hierarchies (as also happens in *Black Panther*). Such representation is an effort, Jones has said in interviews, to render unity between the continent and the black diaspora, as well as articulating the importance and connection of 'long memory'. This is of course important politically, but in reality the relationship between the African continent and black diaspora is complex in its power dynamics: a working-class black diaspora (which carries the weight of its violent history) can be counterposed to African elites; meanwhile the western privilege of the black diaspora can be contrasted to the marginalisation of the African continent. This power dynamic might be wished away, but a true political gaze, or a desire for political unity, must grapple with these layers head-on.

The importance of workers' self organisation

Gabriel Kuhn

AngryWorkers, *Class Power on Zero-Hours*, AngryWorkers 2020

It has become common to juxtapose a neoliberal 'cosmopolitan' left to a traditional 'working-class' left. This captures troublesome developments within the left, but the choice of words doesn't seem ideal. After all, is there anything more cosmopolitan than today's working class?

Demonstrating this is only one of the virtues of a curious book titled *Class Power on Zero-Hours*, authored by a London-based collective calling itself the 'AngryWorkers'. Who are they? They describe themselves as part of the 'communist left', although this 'might not mean much to many, and it isn't really important, other than to say that our approach to revolutionary politics lies firmly in workers' self-organisation'.

The group formed when two of them left 'the leftist bubble' and moved to West London, more specifically to Greenford, where they rented a room for 450 quid a month and went to work in the area's warehouses and factories. Over the years, their collective was joined by other workers, who analysed the goods they pick and the parcels they deliver in the context of global supply chains and just-in-time production. Ultimately, however, the goal is to foster the 'self-organization of the working class'.

Let's return to the cosmopolitanism that, supposedly, stands in opposition to the 'dull life' of the suburbs and small country towns. The West London workmates of the AngryWorkers hail from all corners of the world: there is the Polish Rasta, the

assembly line workers from Gujarat, the Tamils that form the hygiene teams, the feisty young woman from Hungary driving trucks, and the Afro-Caribbeans with the anti-imperialist vernacular.

My own experience of West London is perhaps relevant here. I have stayed in Hounslow a few times, with the family of a friend I met in South Africa, whose parents moved to the UK from Pakistan some forty years ago. He has since worked in Dubai and now lives in Philadelphia. West London is neither an arrival nor a departure point. Or, rather, it is both. People come and go, as they do in many places. 'Globetrotting' might be associated with privileged rich kids and their Instagram accounts, but think again. I have a good friend who drives buses for the Stockholm transit system. He grew up in a Punjabi family in Delhi. Before settling in Sweden, and starting a family with his Swedish-Colombian partner, he spent time in Russia, the Ukraine and the Czech Republic, off the beaten path of the average travel guide. Will the real globetrotter please stand up? And what class do they belong to?

This kind of mobility is often attributed to 'globalisation', a vague term if there ever was one. But, yes, it is the result of new technologies in transport and communication, young populations, forced replacement through war, oppression and poverty, and a radical reorganisation of capitalist production and distribution. The studies of the AngryWorkers capture a microcosm that encapsulates all of this, and more.

While most of the AngryWorkers' attention focuses on the workplace, they situate the working experience in a broad social, economic and cultural framework. In their book, we learn as much about the living conditions of workers in West London as about their working conditions. In the process, the AngryWorkers don't shy away from touchy subjects. They present an intriguing critique of 'community' structures (they use quotes for the term frequently), stressing the class structure and the exploitation of workers within them. They explain:

> 'Communities' in the sense of cross-class social structures of people with 'the same background' are not natural entities. They thrive in specific conditions. For example, in situations where there is a lack of welfare provisions due to austerity or under conditions of recent migration, which makes you depend materially and emotionally on ties with already settled members of your language, ethnic etc.

> background. We have to emphasise the double character of these community structures: they are not mainly an expression of lacking 'class consciousness', as they do help working class people survive materially; but, at the same time, they are the basis for super-exploitation of its working class members and for their political integration into the trajectory and career of the so-called 'community leaders'.

The AngryWorkers call their studies 'workers' inquiries'. They clarify that: 'this isn't a book about "journalistic impressions", where we fly in and out of crap jobs, merely describing and complaining about the "terrible" conditions. We intervene in the class struggle.' Their two main workers' inquiries follow three-year stints working in a Bakkavor food processing plant and as a delivery driver for Tesco, respectively.

If the term 'workers' inquiry' ever made sense, it does here. We get to know about the daily routines, the contact (or, due to the organisation of the workplace, lack thereof) with their colleagues, the problematic role of the unions (both become union reps for bigger unions at some point, GMB and USDAW, but also work with the rank-and-file IWW), and the possibilities and impossibilities of building 'class power'. We also learn plenty of other stuff. In a shorter workers' inquiry about working in a 3D printer manufacturing plant in the Park Royal industrial estate (which the AngryWorkers call the 'crown jewel of a workers' vanguard'), you'll learn more about the ins and outs of 3D printing than you ever cared to know.

Recently, the AngryWorkers reviewed an academic volume that claims to entail 'workers' inquiries'. They concluded the following.

> Firstly, their largely academic approach means that we don't really get to read 'workers' inquiries', but academic texts based on fairly conventional methods of research. They get around this by using linguistic acrobatics ('workers inquiries from above' etc). Whilst there is a lot of useful information in the book, by shrouding the perspective in a bit of a fraud, it is far less useful than it could be. The writers' external position means that they depend primarily on trade union organisations and officials as representatives of 'the workers'. This, in turn, results in a partial view (the focus of most texts is the question of unionisation), and also a skewed perspective, as certain events are

either misunderstood or misrepresented.

Cocky? No. If you set the standard for workers' inquiries, you have the right to call out those who think they can take the academic shortcut and end up in a cul-de-sac. The lack of academic pretence in *Class Power on Zero-Hours*, while dishing up state-of-the-art investigations, is a real delight. It puts the book in a proud tradition of militant working-class studies such as James Boggs's *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook* (1963) and J. Sakai's *Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat* (1983).

No qualms at all? Some, if few. There is something about the collective's portrayal of the global working class that seems to downplay the ongoing divides caused by imperialism. The AngryWorkers stress the structural similarities that workers across the globe are facing, and how they are tied together by supply chains. They also seem to suggest that migration makes strict national divisions between working classes obsolete. Granted, there is truth in this, and it is of importance for the resistance against capital. There lies much power in the potential to bring the supply chains to a halt, and it is crucial to point to the political (rather than just ethical) dimension of migrant justice activism. Yet, the enormous global gaps in wages, the imbalance between producer and consumer societies, and significant divisions between productive and reproductive labour are huge obstacles to working-class unity. Labour migration patterns (who moves where to do what kind of jobs) are an expression of this, as is the fact that millions of people risk their lives to get the kinds of jobs that the AngryWorkers describe as underpaid, precarious and unhealthy.

There is a strong operaist overtone to the book, which, in many ways, is great (the focus on the working class, its power, and its autonomy). However, while the critique of supposedly 'deindustrialised' societies in the global North is important, the overall focus on the industrial proletariat as the revolutionary subject can strike one as a little too - old-school? One could certainly say that you can't expect people in a 400-page book dedicated to workers' inquiries to spend too much time on the climate crisis, peasant uprisings or indigenous resistance. Yet, the AngryWorkers make it clear that their inquiries are tied to the revolutionary cause, and they close the book with four chapters on 'Revolutionary strategy'. A few important ingredients might be missing there.

The AngryWorkers explicitly want 'to build an organisation'. True to the operaist credo, they write:

> The primary role of organisations is not to 'organise people' or to 'teach them about the right line'. The primary task of an organisation is to understand the material context of a situation or struggle.

The organisation should rest on collectives like their own. To get started, they suggest six steps:

> Make a commitment to a 'six-month or year-long plan'.
>
> Find the biggest workplaces in your area.
>
> Be active in and around at least one strategical workplace - strategical in the sense that 'they represent a wider condition for working class people in the area, or have links to other local, national or international workplaces').
>
> Get to know the workers and write leaflets.
>
> Set up a solidarity network.
>
> Publish a local worker's newspaper or newsletter.

Admittedly, I find this proposal somewhat fascinating. It is, essentially, what the AngryWorkers did in West London for six years. They themselves say that they didn't have 'major "organising successes"'. And despite stressing that they managed to 'root' themselves, it can look from the outside that they have little to show for all their efforts.

I know European anti-imperialists who, in the 1970s, got engaged in robberies to help support national liberation movements in the global South. To them, the revolution could only come from these movements. How did they know? They had taken on jobs in European factories for six months, after which they concluded that there was no revolutionary potential within the European working class. The AngryWorkers seem unperturbed by their lack of major organising successes. They stick to their programme. Does this make them naive, stubborn, perhaps even dogmatic, or, for once, a group within the contemporary radical left that has a long-term plan? I am unsure, but will not deny that I find there is something

admirable in their steadfastness. The same is true for their bold discussion of taking over 'the grain baskets, manufacturing centres, ports, power plants'. Yes, let's cut the sideshows, and move on to the big things!

Here is what the AngryWorkers have to say:

> Yes, it's ambitious. But with a clear set of proposals and aims, at least in the short to medium-term, we've got a good basis to get cracking … It can sometimes be frustrating and depressing when you're on the front line of the class war, but on the whole, it's exhilarating and purposeful and it gives us the means to live how we want.

You should really read this book.

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