Resisting racial police warfare through radical history

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> Matters of history, remembrance and memory are crucial to the survival of a radical democracy. When people cease to remember, politics loses its emancipatory possibilities, and individual and collective actions that can resurrect the unkept promises of the past disappear.
>
> Henry A. Giroux[1]

Teacher and anti-racist activist Blair Peach was killed in Southall, West London, in April 1979, as he was participating in protests in solidarity with the local community and against the National Front's unwanted and provocative presence in the town. The date of the killing - 23 April - is commonly seen as England's national St George's Day, but it also stands out as a pivotal date in modern British anti-racist history: a day when nationalist sentiment was supplemented with state racism and police brutality of the deadliest kind. Peach's death, and the serious injuries inflicted on others, were the result of a traumatising display of police violence in defence of racists and against Southall's predominantly South Asian community.

In honouring this milestone date in the history of British racism and anti-racism, this article foregrounds the critical role of historical knowledge for current resistance to the coterminous processes of institutional racism and militarised policing. It also reflects on the importance of Southall Resists 40 (SR40), a local community project set up in 2018 to mark the fortieth anniversary of Peach's death, and to remember

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Southall's broader history of racial violence and anti-racist community resistance.[2]

SR40 was itself an exercise in radical history: it organised public remembering as a way of contesting popular and prevailing myths about the police as an impartial service. The project reflected the power of radical history to excavate the *deep roots* of contemporary racial categorisation, and showed how it operates through the production of 'enemies', and through targeted and belligerent policing. It also showed how critical recollection can reveal the *mutating persistence* of past expressions of racial police warfare into present (and future) socio-political epochs. Such exercises in the 'history of the present' teach us that modern British policing has *always* regulated race militaristically; that the forms this takes are articulated with prevailing socio-political conditions; and that it is a necessity to contest the racial order this supports through a radical politics of police abolition.[3]

Radical history plays a particularly significant role in resisting racialised policing given establishment efforts to institute and maintain a post-racial context that seeks to undermine political *and* historical consciousness. Post-race logic rejects the structural and systematic significance of racism: it portrays incidences of racism as individual and anomalous problems divorced from socio-political arrangements.[4] Within the terms of these neoliberal ways of thinking, institutional racism in policing is deemed a non-issue. This line of thought was apparent during the Black Lives Matter protests in summer 2020, when ex-commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Cressida Dick opined: 'I don't think [racism] is a massive systemic problem. I don't think it's institutionalised'.[5] Dick's successor, Sir Mark Rowley, also rejected the label of institutional racism after the 2023 Casey Review into the Metropolitan Police's culture and standards found deep-rooted racism, misogyny and homophobia within the organisation.[6] All of this reflects the post-racial politics of the Johnson government's widely discredited 2021 Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (the 'Sewell Report'), which denied institutional racism and proclaimed Britain as 'a successful multi-cultural community - a beacon to the rest of Europe and the world'.[7]

The point I want to make is that this depoliticisation of racism is intimately connected to a wider politics of forgetting. The war on remembering is evident, for example, in the Department for Education's efforts to enforce constraining commitments to 'political impartiality' when teaching history. In February 2022, it issued statutory guidance stating that during annual history months and historical

anniversaries, schools should 'continue to be mindful of legal duties on political impartiality during these events'.[8] Post-racial logic, coupled with regulated remembering, has significant implications for thinking critically about the modus operandi of police power. To deny the existence of institutionalised police racism is to render unnecessary open, honest and critical discussion about the long history of systematic police violence suffered by racially coded populations in Britain and its necropolitical colonies. To trivialise that historical context is to conceal the extensive, routinised and normalised status of racial police warfare, thereby enabling its contemporary forms to be downplayed as exceptional, marginal and aberrational.

The post-racial politics of amnesia are linked to processes of manufactured ignorance and 'dis-imagination' - what Henry A. Giroux calls 'the violence of organized forgetting'.[9] Giroux notes the undermining of collective memory, and the value of tracing the history of present social inequality, injustice and resistance. The attack on a 'critical sense of remembering' (p26) marks a strategic move to suppress critical thought altogether. One way in which forgetting is 'organised' is by substituting pedagogical practices that foster historically informed and politically conscious communities with those that omit histories of police violence, in order to produce ignorance about the principal purpose of modern police power. Such manufactured ignorance erodes the collective capacity to think critically about the continued role of policing as a militarised instrument for regulating race;[10] and it also undermines our capacity to imagine much-needed radical solutions that offer a way to undo the current racial and martial order. A politics of 'dis-imagination' flourishes, with the aim of making current forms of policing seem inevitable and alternative futures inconceivable - while also creating the conditions for a succession of unimaginative, uninspired and ineffective police reforms, whose effect is to maintain the status quo.

Against this post-racial and ahistorical backdrop, resistance by community activists to 'organised forgetting' should be seen as part of wider efforts to refuse present forms of institutionally racist and militaristic policing; and Southall Resists 40 is to be understood as a part of this resistance.

Southall Resists 40

Southall Resists 40 was a coordinating group of residents, organisations, activists and artists aiming to mark the fortieth anniversary of Blair Peach's

death. When he was killed, Peach was peacefully protesting alongside Southall's predominantly South Asian community against the fascist National Front who, with approval from the council, had planned to hold an election meeting at Southall Town Hall that evening. The police were operating as an 'occupying force'; they 'sealed off the centre of [the] town, into which the propagators of racial hatred were to be escorted'.[11] While offering the fascists safe passage into Southall, 2,756 officers, with horses, dogs, vans, riot shields and a helicopter, trapped protesters in three double cordons, before going 'berserk' - driving vans into crowds, charging at them on horses and hitting demonstrators with truncheons.[12] Peach died from a police blow to the head, inflicted near the corner of Beachcroft Avenue, while other protesters suffered serious injuries from a brutal display of force - a 'police riot'.[13]

Among those seriously injured was Clarence Baker, who was part of local community group, Peoples Unite, and reggae band Misty in Roots. Baker was hospitalised with a fractured skull after being struck by police. The police also destroyed the headquarters of Peoples Unite, which was at No 6 Park View Road - a self-run space which brought together black, Asian and white youth through artistic expression grounded in political consciousness. Those sheltering inside the house were 'forced out through a gauntlet of police wielding truncheons, and then everything in the building was smashed, including PA equipment worth thousands of pounds'.[14] According to the report of the Unofficial Committee of Enquiry, chaired by Michael Dummett, 345 people, mainly Asian residents, were later charged with various offences relating to the protest.[15] The report described the decision to hold the court hearings in Barnet, twenty-odd miles from Southall, as 'at best inept and insensitive' (p111). The trials lasted for weeks and, as the report noted, this compounded 'the psychological wounds inflicted on 23 April', putting the community through a 'further, and prolonged, ordeal' (p10).

SR40 sought to situate this state racism within Southall's broader history of racist violence, including lethal street violence. That history includes the racist killing of Gurdip Singh Chaggar, an 18-year-old Sikh who was stabbed on 4 June 1976 outside Southall's Dominion Cinema, which was 'a symbol of Asian self-reliance and security'.[16] It also includes responses to racial violence, including the July 1981 uprising, when Asian youths razed the Hambrough Tavern pub after skinheads, attending a concert there, began terrorising the community.

Figure 1: School-based artwork remembering Blair Peach (personal photo).

SR40 also took the collective view that Peach's death remains 'unfinished business' - since no police officer was ever held to account for it. The project grappled with issues such as the war-like policing of anti-racism, and the question of which people can be killed by police with impunity. It also reflected on the weaponisation of time, given the ensuing decades-long fight for justice and accountability. Ultimately, SR40 remembered not for the sake of remembering, but rather as a way to critically comprehend and draw inspiration from past struggles for present-day anti-racist mobilisation against racialised policing.

As a hub for various projects, SR40 used creativity as a political tool to engage with Southall's history, in order to inform immediate anti-racist consciousness and action. The Southall Rising Arts Project made the significant events of 1976, 1979 and 1981 a point of sustained classroom discussion. Putting 'decolonising the curriculum' into action, the project involved residents and artists working with local schools; students were encouraged to rethink their relationship with Southall by producing artwork that illustrated the area's rich history of anti-racist struggle (see Figure 1). A history walks initiative traced the gradual development of Southall into

Figure 2. Plaques outside Southall Town Hall (Southall Resists 40).

a proud symbol of multicultural conviviality, by foregrounding the stories behind key sites where racial violence had taken place, but also the sites of community response, highlighting the resilience that had underpinned that development. On 23 April 2019, SR40 unveiled three plaques honouring Chaggar, Peach, Misty in Roots and Peoples Unite - appropriately, the plaques were fitted onto Southall Town Hall, where the National Front had held its fateful election meeting (see Figure 2). Four days later, Southall's community marched in a show of collective remembrance and commemoration, but also of strength and unity against contemporary state racism in Britain and beyond.

At its core, SR40 was a powerful expression of community resistance against racialised and militarised policing, combining radical and public history. The project made public history radical, by 'creating spaces for forgotten stories to be told' - stories that unsettled hegemonic myths about the police and the policed.[17] In other words, SR40 publicly questioned long-established and broadly accepted ideas about the police as benevolent protectors, and racially coded communities as violent aggressors. It achieved this by recalling an episode in black British history when the police had enabled a far-right group - one that was hostile and often violent to migrants - to pursue their goal, while punishing a multicultural working-class community peacefully exercising its democratic right to defend itself from fascists. It also reminded us that the views of Enoch Powell and Margaret Thatcher were not so very different from those of the National Front. This work of remembrance was also

radical in its broader position of encouraging a critique not necessarily of individual police officers, but of the socio-political conditions in Britain that problematise the racialised poor, fuel fascism and sanction targeted forms of belligerent policing.

SR40 also made radical history public, by inspiring critical thinking on a collective scale. The project strategically mobilised common spaces - such as the classrooms and the streets, and public buildings, including Southall Town Hall, as well as Southall itself - to make the area's radical history of anti-racist struggle widely accessible. The broad appeal of the school-based arts project, history walks initiative, plaque ceremony and community march was enhanced by the creativity of those involved. By connecting past racial injustices to present-day lived experiences, they provided far-reaching, collective and democratic avenues towards defamiliarising the police and critically questioning the essence of police power, as well as cultivating the radical imagination. Through their public action, SR40 aimed to disrupt the short-sighted but dominant discourses that ignore the history of racial police warfare in Britain, marginalise shared memories of targeted and extreme police power, and conceal the long trajectory of racism as a formal strategy of militarised policing.

In remembering past acts of police aggression towards anti-racist protestors, SR40 demonstrated that similar trends today are not aberrational and have deep historical roots. It drew attention to the historical continuities in recent state actions such as the baton-charging, horse-charging, pepper-spraying and kettling of Black Lives Matter demonstrators in 2020; and government attempts to criminalise political ideologies and activism by categorising them through a 'Terminology and Thresholds Matrix', as well as through moves to expand the definition of extremism: such actions are part of a contemporary war on anti-racist fightback and movement-building.[18] These are similar manoeuvres to those of the 1970s and 1980s, which themselves drew inspiration from the militarised efforts of colonial police to control colonised populations and crush anti-colonial uprisings.[19] It is important to keep in the public mind the police's longstanding role of contesting social change, criminalising grassroots activism, suppressing progressive mobilisation and preserving the status quo. As the political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal warns from the confines of his cell: 'If you begin a social movement and fail to understand this historical reality, you will march into a buzz saw that will leave you in pieces'.[20]

By connecting the past to the present, SR40 also illuminated the historical consistency of racialised policing, linked as it is to an uninterrupted chain of

enduring and evolving images of racialised populations as enemy others. SR40 emphasised that post-war portrayals of black and Asian communities as antagonistic to Britain's national fabric have not been consigned to history.[21] Rather, these demonising ideas, and the destructive policing practices they permit - which are themselves an enduring legacy of colonial power - endure in contemporary neoliberal Britain. They persist and proliferate under biopolitical regimes that employ multi-agency policing to intrusively monitor Muslims considered risky to national security; impose Serious Violence Reduction Orders as an intensification of stop-and-search powers that disproportionately degrade black youth; and deploy potentially lethal weapons such as tasers to incapacitate racial targets deemed to be aggressive or out of control. Thinking about the durability of racial policing prompts contemplation of what Ash Amin has called 'the nature of possibility under conditions of racial persistence and changing biopolitics'.[22] Radical history teaches us that rehashed liberal reforms that advocate diverse police forces, 'independent' review boards or body-worn cameras do nothing to disrupt the enduring power of militarised police racism.

Learning from histories of resistance

What radical history reveals, then, is that racial police warfare changes over time while remaining the same. Its mutating persistence suggests that racism is a formal strategy of militarised policing that has not only a past and a present but also a future. 'The play between endurance and change' - in Amin's words - means that the shape of racial police warfare to come cannot be predicted with absolute certainty. The future police regulation of racialised populations will materialise in forms that are not completely foreseeable as yet. However, tracing the historical trajectory of our present condition provides valuable clues for the struggles that lie ahead. Not least, it tells us that, in the absence of meaningful socio-political transformation, policing will continue in its current racist practices that disregard and degrade racially defined populations.

But the future can be different. History is an 'open horizon' in which another world is waiting to be won.[23] As Achille Mbembe writes: 'we will need to work with and against the past to open up a future that can be shared in full and equal dignity'.[24] Furthermore, histories of violence always relate to histories of defiance, which means remembering and mobilising 'the *depth* of the humanistic,

revolutionary impulse' (italics in original).[25] SR40 showed Southall to be a community that has produced its own rich and radical history of anti-racist resistance to state aggression. That special history includes the self-defence, self-empowering and campaigning work of local groups and organisations like the Southall Youth Movement, Peoples Unite, Southall Monitoring Group and Southall Black Sisters. SR40 also showed that Southall continues to fight in a creative, collective and committed fashion for a future free of institutional racism, its militaristic instincts and neoliberal impulses.[26] Radical histories of hope, agency and possibility - like that of Southall - can inspire, guide and galvanise present and future movements to refuse and resist racialised policing.

Such refusal and resistance rests on knowing what policing is and is not. As Micol Siegel argues, '"police" is one of the least theorized, most neglected concepts in the lexicon of reformers and activists today'.[27] Radical history teaches us that the police have never offered an impartial and non-martial service, as the modern liberal myth of 'policing by consent' would have us believe. It teaches us that the police is a state institution of force, within which the politics of racism and militarisation have historically reinforced one another, and within which police power has long been rationalised through the shifting production of racial subjects as enemy figures; and that its racialised codifications have materialised through targeted and developing strategies of securitisation, pre-emption and disposability. Learning that lesson necessitates conceptualising the police as a biopolitical instrument, whose modus operandi is to regulate race militaristically in defence of dominant socio-economic interests.[28] Today, the biopolitics of policing operates in a world of diminishing demand for labour, escalating privatisation of public resources, sustained underfunding of welfare services, and a post-racial emphasis on self-enterprise. In this context, replenished images of racially coded enemies help to rationalise an expanding police and punishment apparatus that is tasked with managing the surplus populations of neoliberalism.

In uncovering the nature of the police, radical history suggests that reform is not enough. Projects such as SR40 do vital work in adding historical weight to contemporary demands to defund, downscale and diminish the police, with the end goal not only of abolishing racialised and militarised punitive infrastructures, but also of establishing a counter-conception of humanity on which to build a new socio-political world with new relationships committed to providing universal

welfare, safety and security. This history shows that the violence and violation suffered by racialised communities through policing is not aberrational, but rather a routine situation that requires radical solutions.

Equally, radical acts of resistance and refusal require radical history. This is because historical knowledge counters the coming into being of what Giroux calls 'dead time' - a future devoid of possibility and progress. Thus radical history contests the racialised and martial order: it recalls not for the sake of recalling, but in service of sustaining present hope and facilitating future transformation.

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Notes

1. Henry A. Giroux, 'Media Obsess Over Biden's Memory But Our Forgetting History Is the Real Crisis', *Truthout,* 4 March 2024. Accessed 24 March 2024: https://truthout.org/articles/media-obsess-over-bidens-memory-but-our-forgetting-history-is-the-real-crisis/.

2. See Jasbinder S. Nijjar, 'Southall Resists 40: history speaking to the now': https://irr.org.uk/article/southall-resists-40-history-speaking-to-the-now/.

3. For 'history of the present' see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, New York, Random House 1977.

4. David Theo Goldberg, *Are we all postracial yet?* Cambridge, Polity Press 2015.

5. Adam Forrest, 'Metropolitan Police chief denies force is "institutionally racist" and pledges to listen to Black Lives Matter protesters', *Independent*, 8 July 2020: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/met-police-cressida-dick-racism-bianca-williams-stop-search-a9607671.html. Dick has a history of denying institutional racism and making broad claims about major shifts in policing. In January 2012, Dick stated that 'no murder in modern times, or in the whole history of the Met, has ever had the impact of the killing of Stephen Lawrence'. After outlining how police 'wholeheartedly accepted and implemented' the resulting Macpherson Report's recommendations to address institutional racism, Dick declared that 'the Met can be proud of how it has been transformed in attitudes, practice, training and professionalism'.

6. See Vikram Dodd, 'Louise Casey's report on the Met police: the fall of a British institution', 21 March 2023: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/mar/21/louise-caseys-report-on-the-met-police-the-fall-of-a-british-institution.

7. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-report-of-the-commission-on-race-and-ethnic-disparities, p8.

8. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/political-impartiality-in-schools/political-impartiality-in-schools.

9. Henry A. Giroux, *The Violence of Organized Forgetting*, San Francisco, City Lights 2014.

10. See Jasbinder S. Nijjar, 'Racial warfare and the biopolitics of policing', *Social Identities*, Vol 28 No 4, 2022, pp441-457.

11. Michael Dummett, *Southall 23 April 1979: The Report of the Unofficial Committee of Enquiry*, National Council for Civil Liberties 1980, p7.

12. Campaign Against Racism and Fascism/Southall Rights, *Southall: The Birth of a Black Community*, London, Institute of Race Relations and Southall Rights 1981.

13. Paul Gilroy, 'The myth of black criminality', in Phil Scraton (ed), *Law, Order and the Authoritarian State*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press 1987, pp107-120.

14. *Southall: The Birth of a Black Community*, pp2-3.

15. Dummett, *Report of the Unofficial Committee of Enquiry*. According to the pamphlet, *Southall: The Birth of a Black Community* (see note 12), 342 people were charged with offences. While acknowledging the figure of 342, *The Report of the Unofficial Committee of Enquiry* refers to official data from the Home Secretary's memorandum to state that 345 people faced charges in relation to the events of 23 April 1979.

16. *Southall: The Birth of a Black Community*, p51.

17. Max Page, 'Radical Public History in the City', *Radical History Review* 79, 2001, pp114-116, p115.

18. Adam Elliot-Cooper, *'Britain Is Not Innocent': A Netpol report on the policing of Black Lives Matter protests in Britain's towns and cities in 2020*, Netpol 2020; Netpol, *Lost in the Matrix - how police surveillance is mapping protest movements*', The Network for Police Monitoring, 2 August 2022: https://netpol.org/2022/08/02/lost-in-the-matrix/. Accessed 29 January 2024.

19. See Emma Bell, 'Normalising the exceptional: British colonial policing cultures come home', *Mémoire(s), identité(s), marginalité(s) dans le monde occidental contemporain*, 10, 2013: https://journals.openedition.org/mimmoc/1286.

20. Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Have Black Lives Ever Mattered?*, San Francisco, City Lights Books 2017, p181.

21. Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, London, Macmillan 1978.

22. Ash Amin, 'The Remainders of Race', *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol 27 No 1, 2010, pp1-23.

23. Giroux, *The Violence of Organized Forgetting*.

24. Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, Durham, Duke University Press 2017, p177.

25. Howard Zinn, *The Politics of History*, Chicago, University of Illinois Press 1990, p48.

26. See also Suresh Grover, 'Save Southall Town Hall', *IRR News*, 16 February 2019: https://irr.org.uk/article/save-southall-town-hall/. Accessed 6 March 2024; Jasbinder S. Nijjar, 'Baptised by fire: an interview with Suresh Grover', *Race & Class*, Vol 62 No 3 2021, pp88-101.

27. Micol Siegel, *Violence Work*, Durham, Duke University Press 2018, p3.

28. See Nijjar, 'Racial warfare and the biopolitics of policing'.