

Book Review

Robbie Shilliam (2018) *Race and the Undeserving Poor. From Abolition to Brexit*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing. ISBN: 9781788210386. 192 pp. US\$30 (softcover)

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Race and the Undeserving Poor is a timely book that brings the importance of race to the heart of British socio-economic and political history. The book offers a methodical exposition of the contours of race and racialised politics in Britain from the sixteenth century onwards. That is to say, it discusses some salient manifestations of the racialised nature of British politics through policy discourses that deal with the poor. A confession is apropos. Once one starts reading the book, one cannot put it down! Page upon page, it brims with historically grounded information about the evolution of race as a category of uppermost significance for the governing and the governed alike. The book's clarity owes a lot to its coherent structure. Indeed, it is remarkable how Shilliam navigates between the generic and the specialised, without overburdening the narration or compromising the narrative style. This is a laboured text and I say this in the best possible way!

The main thesis of the book is revealed in its last pages, though it is carefully crafted from the outset. It amounts to a pithy phrase, which alludes to a provocative mantra rather than an apophthegm that sums up as dense a book as this one: class is race. Shilliam explains that by this he means that "there is no politics of class that is not already racialised" (p. 180). Further, he contends that "this reality [that class is race] must be confronted rather than avoided for fantastical definitions of class purified of racial contamination" (p. 180). True, purifying class from race is a futile exercise and, as Shilliam shows, it comes with considerable challenges and dangers. However, if class is race, then what is race? And what about gender? Is it also racialised?

But, let us return to race. For Shilliam, the latter seems to be a *sui generis* category that gives meaning to all politics, past and present. However, if that is the case, then are we supposed to understand capitalism as the outcome of deeply rooted processes of domination of one racial group (white) over all others? That would be a risky business, as not all capitalists are white and even if the classification of races vanished, as Shilliam would rightly want to see, capitalism would still reign supreme. In other words, Shilliam tries to show that processes of racialisation were ingrained into the DNA of British policy-making long before capitalism organised differences along material lines. In the same vein, for Shilliam, racialisation as a system of allocation of resources and rewards predates capitalism and it is the historical foundation of British social policy. As such, Shilliam argues, racial classification and attendant racialisations (e.g. of social policy) are the manifestation of the domination of British (read white) elites over all other (read non-white) groups.

While I concur with Shilliam's analysis on the racialised motivations underpinning the emergence of deserving and undeserving subjects as recipients of differential amounts of social policy attention and attendant resources, I am less convinced about his angst about depriving class of the analytical contribution it can make. As a result, the book can be read as a latent critique of the primacy of class, though it is in the elevation of the importance of race that it thrives. From a methodological point of view, what makes the "class is race" equation problematic is that nowhere

in the book does class make as prominent an appearance as race. In other words, if race is the primary focus of the study, then it is not at all surprising that class seems of secondary significance!

The core argument of the book – namely that “elite actors have racialized the historical distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor through ever more expansive terms that have incorporated working classes, colonial ‘natives’, and nationalities” (p. 6) – is telling of the author’s preference to focus on terms found in policy discourses over processes, such as collective struggles. Shilliam supports this claim by arguing that “elite actors have always been driven in this endeavour by concerns for the integrity of Britain’s imperial – and the postcolonial – order” (p. 6). However, the need to maintain Britain’s imperial and postcolonial integrity is not immune from class politics, no matter how racialised the latter is.

In fact, this is one of the biggest bones of contention to be found in the book. For example, the author states that “this book narrates a history of political domination throughout the moralizing discourses and rhetoric of the undeserving poor” (p. 7). Consistent with his argument that “the ‘white working class’ is not a natural or neutral category of political economy” (p. 6), Shilliam further argues that “crucial to this adjudication of order has been the racialized distinction between those deserving and undeserving of social security and welfare, including the most recent return of the ‘working class’ as a deserving constituency” (p. 8). True, the project of racialisation has been an integral part of British history for well over three centuries, as Shilliam so eloquently demonstrates. However, racialisation needs to be understood not independently but alongside the development of capitalism. Marx forcefully argued for the need to understand slavery as an economic category as a fundamental element in capitalist expansion:

It is slavery that gave the colonies their value; it is the colonies that created world trade, and it is world trade that is the precondition of large-scale industry. Thus slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance (Marx, 1976: 94–5).

Likewise, we need to understand contemporary forms of racialisation as part of the current phase of capitalism. The emergence of right-wing populism, from Trump to Bolsonaro and from Salvini to Farage, testifies to the continuity of this racialised politics and, on this point, I agree with Shilliam. However, my point of departure is that racialised politics, indeed racism, needs to be understood together with capitalist development. As such, I would argue against an either/or treatment of class and race. One qualification is necessary here. The approach to combine the analysis of the politics of race with that of class should not come to the detriment of the subjective experiences of domination suffered by what Shilliam calls deserving and undeserving poor. Indeed, such an examination, I would argue, would justify the elevation of race as an analytical tool over that of class. However, Shilliam is not interested in race as a lived experience but as a discursive category and policy artefact.

The final point I would like to address is Shilliam’s argument about the way “British elites” seem to be incapable of conceiving social justice outside the “normalization of race and empire” (p. 8). Notwithstanding the importance of making race central to the British political economy, history teaches us that it is to the detriment of the poor, deserving or undeserving, to use Shilliam’s terms, to leave the elites in charge of any social justice considerations. By contrast, it is the ones who suffer the most who have to stand in the way of elites and speak their mind about what is socially just or otherwise. The Peterloo Massacre, the struggle of the suffragettes, the 1980s Miners’ Strike, the poll tax strikes, even the student protests against the trebling of tuition fees in 2010, are but a few examples drawn from recent British history and speak to the need to rethink social justice from the bottom up. And this is what the concept of class can help us achieve. For social class is

useful both as a concept for understanding political organisation but also struggles against domination without, as Shilliam fears, this endeavour obfuscating the importance of race. As Fanon (2008) would argue, class and anti-racist struggle both aim at the creation of new human relations. This “new humanism”, as Fanon (2008) put it, is achieved by overcoming alienation and dehumanisation.

While in the US context race seems to be charting an independent intellectual life over – even against – class, it still remains to be shown how a discursive transformation of the kind that Shilliam provokes us to consider can be achieved without any radical changes in the material circumstances of those he is concerned with, namely the undeserving poor. As Shilliam shows, no matter how much more welfare might be made available to these groups, the intrinsic racialisation of social policy might redraw the boundaries against them at any point in time. But isn't this racialisation to be fought along with the hierarchisation of welfare recipients along “deserving” and “undeserving” lines? To put it plainly, the pursuit of social justice need not be conceived as a racialisation-or-redistribution binary opposition. Their combination in the same struggle is what contemporary social movements, such as Occupy or the Landless People's Movement in Brazil, have been fighting for and what we need to return to.

Overall, this is a thought-provoking book that deserves serious attention. While it cannot be claimed that it has answered in any emphatic way how we can transcend the political domination of the British elites, it nevertheless opens up possibilities for a much-needed discussion. If anything, Brexit has shown us that Britain is more divided than we thought it was. And, as Shilliam shows, these divisions are the outcomes of policies that never took the poor into account.

REFERENCES

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