

On 'lived theory': an interview with A. Sivanandan

AVERY F. GORDON

Abstract: For a panel discussion on the work of the Institute of Race Relations (IRR) and *Race & Class*, at the Historical Materialism Conference 2013, Avery Gordon talked to A. Sivanandan as to what had guided his politics, thinking and writing on Black struggle, racism and globalism, over the last forty years.¹ He describes how the IRR reoriented itself to relate to subject people's experiences, how new theory was developed by him and IRR to speak, not to other theories, but to ongoing struggles for equality, and the importance of being flexible and addressing racism as it changes with larger societal changes.

Keywords: Council of Management, ethnicism, Institute of Race Relations, *Race & Class*, race relations, xeno-racism

Avery Gordon: You and the staff took over the Institute of Race Relations in 1972 after a protracted struggle with its Council of Management. First in a pamphlet and then later in an article telling the story of the Institute's transformation, you used a phrase that I took as the title of our panel because it seems to me to capture so well the standpoint of your collective work.

Avery F. Gordon, Professor of Sociology at the University of California at Santa Barbara, has been connected to the IRR for many years and serves on the Editorial Working Committee of *Race & Class*.

Race & Class

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You wrote: “‘race relations’ demands a holistic ... approach ... a reappraisal of the whole of society, its value systems and its political and economic structure ... since such an apprehension ... is fraught with strategies of change, ‘race relations’ comprehends both thinking and doing, be-ing and becoming. It restores, that is, the continuum between existence and politics: the experience and the power to change it.² So, let’s start at the beginning with the guidelines that you developed for working after the takeover and how they were different from what had gone on before?

A. Sivanandan: Quite simply the guidelines came out of the struggle. The Institute had been set up as an independent think-tank, as an ‘objective’ research body, but its work was becoming increasingly partisan – carrying out policy-oriented research which supported the racist acts of successive governments, particularly over immigration. In the course of which, we came to the conclusion that this kind of research was defining ‘the problem’ as one of racialism not racism, i.e. personal prejudice not structured injustice. Policy-oriented research inevitably pandered to the concerns of government, not its subjects. It was not relations between races that needed looking at but power relations on the ground. And that meant research which would speak to the needs of the subjected to overcome oppression and injustice. That in turn meant that the research had to translate their authentic experience into action. And that necessitated *not* taking away their authority over their own experience through either high theory or ideological orthodoxy. (For between the experience and the meaning falls the interpreter.)

We learnt that there has to be an organic relationship between the experience and its meaning for it to lead to action. In other words there has to be an organic relation between theory and practice – a relationship that takes in the general (state, society, economy etc.) and the particular (the individual, the community etc.) both at once, moving between the two levels – seeing the general in the particular and the particular in the general – the wood and the trees and the trees in the wood. This is especially so in the fight against racism because it combines the existential and the political, oppression and exploitation, race and class.

One of the things our struggle at IRR taught us was to break with orthodoxies, change the terms of debate – the political culture if you like. For example, we challenged the academic ‘race’ orthodoxy of push and pull factors as the reason for immigration from the colonies and showed that colonialism and immigration were part of the same continuum – that we were settlers and not immigrants, citizens not aliens. The purpose of my aphorism ‘we are here because you were there’ was to capture the idea of the continuum in a sentence intelligible to all. That’s what theory should do.

Similarly, we contested the Marxist orthodoxy that the race struggle should be subsumed to the class struggle because once the class struggle was won, racism would disappear. That did not speak to the lived experience of the black working class. Racism had its own dynamic. Black and White unite was a goal to strive for, not the reality on the ground and therefore required that White

and Black workers had to traverse their own autonomous routes to the common rendezvous. And in the course of the last forty years we have fought the official and academic versions of ethnicism (which divided communities and replaced the fight against racism with a fight for culture), racism awareness training (which personalised racism and made it a white disease), identity politics, who we are politics (which created hierarchies of oppression – our take was that who we are is what we do), Lord Scarman’s remedy of positive discrimination to counter ‘racial disadvantage’ (which was like breaking our legs and handing us crutches – our take was don’t break our legs in the first place i.e. outlaw racism), Macpherson’s definition of institutional racism (which stopped short of the state racism that gives the imprimatur to both popular and institutional racism), the idea that racism was an aspect of fascism (our take was that racism was fascism’s breeding ground), the idea promoted by Black professionals that anti-racism should primarily address the ‘glass ceiling’ (our take was that there were two racisms: the racism that discriminates and the racism that kills and our priority was with the racism that killed), we were not in the business of ameliorating the problems of the Black middle class.

On the international level we saw racism and colonialism as symbiotic. The struggles for Third World independence against colonialism’s racial oppression and class exploitation made for common denominators of struggle in the mother country. And the joint struggles (of Asians, Africans and West Indians) that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s defined us as a people and a class and a people for a class and had made Black not the colour of our skin – but the colour of our politics.

Hence the academic journal *Race* subtitled ‘*a journal for race and group relations*’ was turned into *Race & Class*, subtitled ‘*a journal for black and Third World liberation*’. And the Editorial Working Committee was chosen to reflect that political line – with the help of scholar activists and radical thinkers. And the basic principles that guided and still guide us were that the function of knowledge was to liberate, that we should think in order to do, not think in order to think, that the writing should be simple and direct and free of jargon because ‘the people we were writing for were the people we were fighting for’ – again the aphorisms that signposted the direction *Race & Class* would take and pass on to our contributors.

AG: *The dynamic of moving from the general to the particular and moving from the particular to the general, authority over one’s own experience and the well-being of the aggrieved as the critical measure of theory and practice’s adequacy: these seem to me to be the key components of your and the Institute’s method. How did this sensibility or these guidelines translate into the way the IRR worked?*

AS: The boards we had around the journal and the organisation were composed of hands-on people, not absentee landlords from multinationals like Barclays or

M&S or Booker McConnell as before. They were people who had been involved in liberation struggles in Palestine, Africa, the Americas like Thomas Hodgkin, Basil Davidson, Malcolm Caldwell, Ken Jordaan, Eqbal Ahmad, Jan Carew, Orlando Letelier, Edward Said. Later, those involved in Black radical struggle such as Cedric Robinson, Manning Marable, Barbara Ransby, Colin Prescod, and radical insurgent thinkers and creative writers or journalists such as John Berger, yourself, Victoria Brittain, Nancy Murray, Barbara Harlow, David Edgar, Neil Lazarus et al. They were not traditional, ivory tower academics and they were keen in the early days to help us thrash out our perspectives and later saw the value of working alongside the staff on new ideas. Similarly the Council of Management has, ever since 1972, been composed of those connected to community struggles or working to further causes of social or racial justice. And they not only work alongside the staff now, but tacitly understand that the 'line' on an issue comes from the staff because it is they who are involved on the ground with the communities under attack. They consult the staff on key topics of the day.

In a sense the IRR is an inverted pyramid. For the strength of IRR, what allows us to make the occasional 'conceptual leap', lies in the fact that every member of staff is committed and connected to real struggles and campaigns on the ground – about deaths in custody, racial violence, against the English Defence League, justice for detainees, stop and search, the anti-terror laws, anti-Muslim racism etc. It is that connectedness, groundedness that allows us to gather a picture of what is happening across the country, to take new facts and move, as I said before, from the specific to the general and the general to the particular to make sense of them, within the system as a whole.

Most of my own thinking has come out of the workaday discussions with my colleagues. The IRR, after 1972, broke down its internal hierarchies and also divisions of labour – well we are tiny, between three to six staff members at any one time. If anyone goes out to speak, they report back to everyone at daily staff meetings around the lunch table. Those who eat together fight together. The issues they found, the questions they were challenged by are the grist to the mill taking our thinking further. It was in such a discussion that some years ago with Liz [Fekete] – our European desk – on how to conceptualise the discrimination against foreigners who are not colour-coded that the concept of xeno-racism was born.

AG: I am particularly interested in how those new ideas emerge. You've been equally critical of the abstractions and reductions of 'high theory', of positivism, and of dogmatism. How would you describe what you do, your method, if you like?

AS: I suppose I am what academics abhor: an empiricist and eclectic. But if there is a method in my madness it is firstly to contextualise a problem in the larger scheme of things. Second, my thinking is constantly being fed or being challenged by our immersion in 'the facts on the ground'. Third, my thinking does not come from an abstract wish to engage with another theory but to answer

directly to a problem being thrown up on the ground. For instance, my attack some years ago on the New Times Marxists in 'The Hokum of New Times' was because they endangered the struggle against racism and fascism by over-balancing into culturalism. For example, today, the problem might be someone coming back from a conference in Europe and asking, 'what do we do with these new theorists who are into cumulative extremism, who see any extremism, including that of the Left as the problem, and not fascism?' Twenty, thirty years ago, it was me going to conferences in Europe being troubled by the limitations of the world systems theorists like Wallerstein, Samir Amin, who did not speak to new realities of the technological revolution, for example what was happening in the new free trade zones, and the new resistances that this threw up. From that encounter I went on to think about 'imperialism in the silicon age', 'new circuits of imperialism', the difference between globalism and globalisation and later the nature of the market state and the failure of the Left to what I term 'catch history on the wing'.

I guess what distinguishes our thinking at IRR is that ability to stand things on their head, challenge orthodoxies, our thinking is *flexible* – because we are not tied to long-term research projects but essentially addressing ourselves to problems on the ground. And within that is the recognition that racism never stands still but changes its shape, contours, impact, etc. according to changes in the political and economic worlds. We are always keened to racism's new avatars as it were. But we never essentialise racism, we never view it outside of the larger context, and the fight for racial justice opens us out to all the other fights for justice and leads to solidarity.

AG: *You have a gift – that you have shared and passed on to other members of the Institute – for capturing the spirit of struggles and translating or transmuting that spirit into a working knowledge that can be reinvested in them. I would call it lived theory.*

AS: It is kind of you to say so (laughs).

AG: *Well, yes, 'existence and politics, a comprehension both thinking and doing, being and becoming, the experience and the power to change it'. You said that! You've been talking impersonally so far and I'd like to ask you if you would speak about some of the experiences that informed you and your theoretical practice.*

AS: First, the experience of poverty. My paternal grandfather was a tenant farmer in the Tamil north of Ceylon and nothing grew on his land except children. My father left school at 15 to be a clerk in the Postal Service – so as to support his brothers and sisters – and was transferred from town to town. But my holidays were spent in the village, so I grew up with a double consciousness, if you like, of the village and the town, the peasantry and the working class. Later, after university, I worked in the tea country, teaching the children of plantation workers, indentured slaves, and came to understand the extreme hardship they faced at the bottom of the pile.

My parents were Hindu and my father was into Hindu philosophy. So he would quote the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, Tagore and Gandhi. He was a self-taught man and, as I would come to realise later, had an authority over his own experience (which must have trickled down to me). And when he became Chief Postmaster, he remembered to fight for the postal workers. My mother was the soul of simplicity – emotional and direct, which perhaps also trickled down to me as passion. But the thing I remember my father most clearly for was the way he pulled me up for wrong-doing. He wouldn't say what I had done was wrong but that it was ugly (in Tamil unbeautiful) or beautiful (which in my case was rare). That sort of gave me the feel and sense of morality, a moral aesthetic if you like – which later I came across in Keats' writing about 'the holiness of the heart's affection and the truth of the imagination' and found its social resonance later still in the *Sociological Imagination* of C. Wright Mills.

But as against that, I was educated, on a scholarship, in a Catholic Public School where I learnt first-hand the meaning of bigotry – and hated it with a visceral hatred.

But what I made of my personal experiences and helped me to interpret them in terms of the material reality of historic colonialism (Ceylon was occupied by the Portuguese, Dutch and British for over 400 years) came when I studied for a degree in Economics and Political Science at the University of Ceylon under the influence of brilliant leftwing teachers (themselves influenced by socialist thinkers at the LSE like Harold Laski, and themselves involved in the struggle for Independence). And that is when I came across Marx and dialectical materialism – and it opened up the world for me, gave me the tools to interpret reality. In dialectical materialism, I found a way to analyse my own society, to resolve my own social contradictions, a way to understand how conflict itself was the motor of one's personal life as well as the regenerating force of the society one lived in. It was like a miracle and in Dylan Thomas' words 'the moment of a miracle is unending lightning'.

AG: *You often quote poets – and write fiction too, of course – why has poetry especially been so important to you?*

AS: Because the poets explain experience vividly and succinctly, in words that wake. For example, my whole thinking around experience derives from T. S. Eliot's stricture about having the experience and missing the meaning, or his lament, which is truer now than then, 'Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?' But along with poetry there were writers and novelists who influenced me deeply – Fanon with his quest to find the universal in the human condition, Amilcar Cabral on culture not as a thing in itself but as the combusting force of revolution, Nyerere on returning my education to the people who gave it to me, Richard Wright on the violence of the violated in *Native Son*, Camus on the distinction between the

personal and the political when his erstwhile leftwing German friend joined the Nazis: 'I want to destroy you in your power without mutilating you in your soul'. And so to the Upanishads and existentialism: 'He who sees himself in others and others in himself is no longer alone.'

AG: *A final word on what you've called 'the thinking struggle' for the conference audience?*

AS: The anti-racist struggle as we knew it is over. We've got to fight new racisms such as xeno-racism and anti-Muslim racism that globalisation and the war on terror have thrown up - within the larger framework of the fight against a growing state authoritarianism and its bedfellow fascism. And we've got to fight the idea that there is a 'good capitalism', that the market state will give us a good society. We've allowed the Tories to dictate the political culture. Unless we on the Left - whatever is left of us - begin to fight the political culture of neoliberalism and change the terms of debate, we cannot get off the ground for a real struggle to come together.

References

- 1 The panel entitled 'Existence and politics: the work of *Race & Class* and the Institute of Race Relations' was part of the Historical Materialism Conference and took place on 10 November 2013.
- 2 A. Sivanandan, 'Race and resistance: the IRR Story', *Race & Class* (Vol. 50, no. 2, 2008), p. 3.