

# 'Dutty Babylon': policing Black communities and the politics of resistance

Suzella Palmer charts the history of policing Black communities

*...it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the riots were to some extent an expression of anger and resentment towards the police by some young Black people*  
(Morrell et al., 2011)

The tensions that currently exist between the police and black communities are not recent phenomena. Since the 1950s, successive generations of black people in Britain have felt under protected as victims and over policed as suspects. Although it can be argued that the apparent over policing of black communities can be justified as a response to the disproportionate involvement of black males in particular forms of criminality, what cannot be ignored is that racism, whether institutional or that of individual officers, has played a central role in shaping the relationship that black people have with the police.

## Racist attitudes

The prevalence of deep seated racist attitudes amongst police officers during the 1970s and 1980s has been well documented. For example, in her research on the role of the police, Maureen Cain found that many of the police officers involved in her study believed that most black people, (whom they casually referred to as 'niggers'), were 'pimps' and 'layabouts' and she also found that it was common for black people to be treated with contempt and even brutalised by the police. Their actions were rationalised through the belief that black people were 'different', 'separate', and 'incomprehensible'

and therefore there was 'no good reason for not being violent if the occasion arose' (Cain, 1973).

In 1979, extensive accounts of police intimidation, harassment and brutality against black people taken from solicitors' case files, advice centres, black self-help organisations were recorded and published by the Institute of Race Relations (IRR). The document, entitled *Police Against black People*, also provide an insight into other forms of police malpractice such as their unwillingness to protect black people against racist attacks, treating black victims as perpetrators, the medical negligence of detained suspects, the fabrication of evidence and the use of forced confessions. According to Fryer (1984) the content of these reports exposed the ways in which 'criminal procedure was being used to harass (black communities)' and subsequently, the antagonism between the police and the black community during this time had culminated in the inner city 'riots' of the 1980s.

Lord Scarman, who was commissioned to conduct an inquiry into the 1981 Brixton riots, concluded that, essentially, the riots were an outburst of anger and resentment by young black people against the police. Scarman pointed to the combined effects of negative socio-economic pressures, racial prejudice and the 'irrational' beliefs

and attitudes of both the police and the (black) public as contributory factors. In an attempt to reassess the role of the police, he set out a number of recommendations to improve the way in which black communities were policed which included identifying racial prejudice among police recruits, the recruitment of more ethnic minority officers and measures to improve community relations.

Despite the recommendations put forward by Scarman and police attempts to implement them, racism within the police continued to be a problem for black communities through the 1990s. The racially motivated killing of Stephen Lawrence and the police's 'bungled' handling of the investigation meant that the issue of racism within the police had again become an issue that was high on the political

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agenda. In the subsequent government commissioned enquiry into the failures of the police investigating the case, Macpherson (1999) indicated that to some extent such

failures were a result of 'institutional racism' within policing. Amongst the recommendations made in the report, Macpherson proposed that to increase trust and confidence in policing amongst minority ethnic communities, police should begin using performance indicators, the overall aim being the elimination of racist practices and the demonstration of fairness in all aspects of policing. He also recommended that police officers should receive ongoing training in racial awareness, and the valuing of cultural diversity.

However, as with *The Scarman Report*, the recommendations proposed in The Macpherson Report appear to have failed adequately to address the issues of racism in the police. Thus as Sharp and Atherton (2007) found in their research on young black and ethnic minority people's experience of policing,

reports from the young people about the disproportionate extent of negative behaviour and misconduct by the police

towards young people from black and other ethnic minority groups, suggest that race plays a significant role in police/suspect encounters.

Likewise, research by the Centre for Social Justice shows the overall, interactions

between young black people and police were particularly problematic (Centre for Social Justice, 2009).

My own research which focuses on the young black males and their involvement in crime in post war Britain has revealed similar findings about black people's experiences of policing. Respondents who were in their youth during the 1980s and those currently under the age of 25 both talked about their own experiences of being stopped and searched in a provocative manner to 'get a rise' out of them. Others claimed that they were racially abused and beaten up by officers. One young male, who had never been in trouble with the police and by all counts

appeared to be of 'good character' claimed he was beaten up for no reason and talked about the impact that this had on him: 'I look at myself now as they see me, as a criminal. They make me feel like a criminal.'

The failure by police to provide documents after a stop and search implies that some stop and searches go unrecorded by the police. If the unrecorded stop and searches tend to be disproportionate to particular racial groups, then the reliability of the police statistics become (even more) undermined. Also questionable is the idea that the police are working

well with black communities, particularly in relation to Operation Trident, the Metropolitan Police

command unit that was set up to investigate shootings amongst London's black populations. Some of the respondents in my research referred to the unit as one of worst perpetrators of unwarranted aggression against not only black young people, but

against family members of suspects and victims and witnesses of gun crime.

The young people that I spoke to did not make complaints against the police as it was a 'waste of time', as 'nothing would be done' because the police 'are the law'. In many ways, this sentiment is responsible for what appears to be the gross underreporting of such incidents to the police or other agencies. During the 1970s and 1980s a number of organisations such as the IRR and black community activists and leaders were actively engaged in monitoring and campaigning against such incidents and providing support for the victims. Since the 1990s

however, these organisations are almost non-existent. Instead, black led organisations and community leaders appear to be far more concerned with supporting the police, who are viewed by many in Britain's black

communities, as illegitimate.

For example, Mike Best, the former editor of the national black newspaper, *The Voice*, controversially called for an increase in police stop and search practices against young black males in response to growing levels of 'gun crime' involving black young males as both perpetrators and victims.

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Perspectives which appear to be less concerned with the marginalisation and criminalisation of young black males and more amenable to harsher crime control measures to deal with 'black (youth) criminality', have been expressed by other prominent black figures such as Lee Jasper, a former Director for Equalities and Policing for the Mayor of London and Trevor Phillips, the former head of the Commission for Racial Equality.

In contrast, many within Britain's black communities hold views that are more critical of the police and instead emphasise the injustices experienced by young black males as a result of what they perceive as an institutionally racist criminal justice system that intentionally criminalises black people. Until the issues of racism in policing and the unjust and sometimes brutal treatment of black young people by the police are taken seriously by the police, politicians and, more importantly, black community organisations and black leaders who claim to represent them, we should expect more anti-police sentiments expressed through rioting in the coming years by young people expressing their frustrations with the status quo. ■

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