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Towards a Black radical independent education:

Black radicalism, independence and the supplementary school movement

Abstract

This word separation has been misused...a better word than separation is independence
Malcolm X (1970, p.9)

Black Radicalism believes in the centrality of racism to Western imperialism and a Diasporic commitment to the liberation of Africa; existing in distinction to Black Nationalism, Marxism and Critical Race Theory. A Black radical critique of schooling is presented and the mischaracterisations of Black radicalism as segregationist and separatist are examined. Black independent education is a necessary feature of Black radicalism and the Black supplementary schools movement in Britain exists as a potential space where such an education can be developed.

Keywords: Black radicalism, supplementary schools, racism, segregation

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Introduction

Black Radicalism takes the position that mainstream institutions in the West work to oppress people of African ancestry, across the globe. Examples such as Black Power (Carmichael, 1971), Pan-Africanism (Nkrumah, 1963) and Rastafarianism (Campbell, 1997) all view Western society as being structurally racist and promote the creation of independent Black organisations, institutions and nations as the only solution to overcoming racial inequality in society (Wilson, 2005). The first section of this paper will briefly define Black Radicalism, distinguishing the tradition from Black Nationalism, Black Marxism and Critical Race Theory. This reclamation of Black Radicalism is necessary, as the tradition has been in decline and has a distinctive perspective on how to overcome racial oppression, rooted in the Pan-African Diasporic project (Carmichael, 1971). A Black radical critique of schooling will also be outlined, which sees the system as inherently racist necessitating Black independent spaces of education.

Black Radicalism has been mischaracterised as encouraging both segregation and separateness and therefore criticised for increasing social conflict. The second section of the paper will address these liberal critiques and outline the call for a Black independent education, which is central to a Black Radical analysis. There is a history in both the United States and Britain of Black groups setting up extra schooling to serve the needs of the community. In the United States, the Black Panther Party implemented 'liberation schools' to engage children in revolutionary education that was not possible in the mainstream (Seale 1970, p.403). In the Britain the radical nature of the Panthers has not been as overtly present but there is a history of 'organised resistance to racism' (Grosvenor 1997, p.152), which has involved supplementary schooling dating back to the "Black education movement", given prominence by John LaRose in the nineteen sixties (Chevannes & Reeves, 1989). It is the contention of this paper that the long history of spaces of Black led education provides

fragments of what a truly Black radical independent education would involve; with the treatment of the supplementary school movement presented below being indicative.

For Black Radicalism it is essential to build an education in the West that can on the one hand allow for success of the Black population in mainstream society, whilst radically connecting Black communities into a Diasporic politics, which can liberate the African continent. Developing a comprehensive vision of a Black radical independent education is vital for future work and the history of the Black supplementary school movement in Britain offers potentially 'radical and subversive space[s]' (Mirza & Reay 2000, p.523) from which to build such an education.

Black Radicalism

Black radical thought is often linked and reduced to the Black power movement that occurred in United States (Joseph, 2008). However, the specific Black power movement in the United States was one of a number of Black political movements across the African Diaspora that called for and attempted to bring down the system of White imperialism, from the end of the 19th century (Campbell, 1997). Perhaps the first example of Black radical politics linking across the Diaspora is Ethiopianism, which arose in 1895 with the battle for Ethiopian independence from European powers. Across the world Black people identified with the struggle and saw Ethiopia's victory as their own (Campbell, 1997).

The politics of Black Radicalism can be seen in the work of such activists and politicians as Marcus Garvey (1923), Kwame Nkrumah (1963), Malcolm X (1970), and other examples across the Diaspora. These varied movements are connected by their radical take on society that highlights Western imperialism as the central feature to be overturned and a commitment to the African Diaspora to unite and work as a driving force for liberation. Black radical politics and actions are a continuation of the struggles against Europeans in Africa,

during enslavement, and also earlier conflicts with Arab invaders into Africa (Njoh, 2006). Black Radicalism must be understood as the politics of revolution, seeking to overturn the system of Western imperialism that oppresses the Black population worldwide.

Radicalism is not Nationalism, Marxism, nor CRT

The position that argues Black people need to organise collectively to battle racial oppression has been commonly been referred to as Black Nationalism (Carmichael, 1971; X, 1970). Black Nationalism draws its name from the concept of Black 'as a country' (Joseph, 2008, p.188), where Black people as a group constitute a nation. Black Nationalism has been used to describe the radical politics of a Black Diaspora, for example Garvey consistently refers to the Black nation of Africans 'at home and abroad' (Garvey, 1923, p.138). However, Black Nationalism has developed its own sensibilities that identify it as separate, though related to Black Radicalism as outlined above.

A primary issue is how the Black nation has often been viewed within Black Nationalism in the United States as being a nation of Black Americans that needed to separate from White America, but remain in the geographic location. The Nation of Islam (NOI) is perhaps the most notorious Black Nationalist organisation and their plea for independence and unity is clear and addressed solely to the Black population of America. The NOI appeal to the government for a separate portion of land where they can start the Black nation, and is evident in the call to Black Americans from Elijah Mohammed (1965, p.222),

> Come and let us unite under the crescent and do something for ourselves in the way of supporting our won own needs. Go after some of this earth for our nation of 22 million here in North America.

Central to Black Radicalism is the connection to the Diaspora and though there may be similarities and lineages, narrow nationalist calls for independence fall outside of the wider Black radical movement. Black Radicalism constructs Black people as a nation that transcends national boundaries, connecting back to Africa, and does not seek to separate Black people of a particular nation into a residential grouping. The Black Nationalisms invoked by those such as Malcolm X (1970) and the Black Panthers (Brown, 1994; Newton, 1974), are part of a global strategy to overthrow Western imperialism. Calls for the development of a Black 'nation within a nation' (Dubois, 1935, p.269), do not involve the revolutionary analysis, nor the politics of Black Radicalism.

When exploring the Black radical tradition it is also necessary to make a distinction between Black Radicalism and Black people engaged in radical movements. This is particularly the case when dealing with the Marxism, where there is a long tradition of Black adoption and involvement (Robinson, 1983). Marxism is a revolutionary politics; however it is based on a class analysis of global capitalism and does not view racism as the fundamental organising principle of the West (Hall, 1983). The Black radical tradition is organised around the Diasporic connection of people of African ancestry and the economic determinism of Marxism led to some Black scholars turning away from the movement (Wright, 1954). The point here is not to argue that the Black radical tradition outlined in this paper is the correct perspective for Black people to endorse, but to explain how that there is a distinction between Black Radicalism on the one hand and Marxism embraced by Black people seeking radical alternatives.

Black Radicalism has been in decline over recent decades, in the United States, suffering from the same assault from the State on the Black Panthers, which ultimately led to the demise of the movement (Haas, 2009; Wendt, 2006). In the African context Black Radicalism was also attacked in the form of Western intervention against Pan African leaders

such as Patrice Lumumba in the Congo (Blum, 2004). Academia has picked on strands of the Black Radical analysis, which places racism at the core of Western society. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is perhaps the best example with this Bell's (1992, p.3) stark message on racism and advancement in society that 'what we designate as "racial progress" is not a solution to that problem. It is a regeneration of the problem in a particularly perverse form'. CRT presents a clear conceptualisation of the permanence of racism in Western society, however this leads Bell to conclude that there is nothing that can be done to end racism leaving the Black population in the position of having to understand '*both* the recognition of the futility of action ... *and* the unalterable conviction that something must be done, that action must be taken' (Bell, 1992, p.198). What CRT presents then is a claim that stating the truth of oppression loudly and firmly is put forward as the best solution possible to the problem; for Bell 'we *de*legitmate it [racism] if we can pinpoint it' (p. 198). The role of CRT then, becomes that of leading chorus of rebellion against racial oppression, and ultimately making the best out of the situation as possible. This is a simplification of a complex position, however for the purposes of the present paper it is enough to illustrate that CRT does not embrace a revolutionary, and therefore radical, politics in response to endemic racism.

Having drawn quite clear lines of demarcation around Black Radicalism it remains very difficult in terms of analysis to discuss the position, without making reference to work that is Black Nationalist or Black Marxist, as these are the dominant frames through which Black collective organisation are seen through and; CRT has produced valuable scholarship on the racist nature of society (e.g. Crenshaw et al, 1995; Gillborn, 2008; Harris, 1993). Black Nationalism has become a 'system of meaning' through which Black collectivity is seen, devoid of an analysis of global politics of revolution (Collins, 2006, p.96); whilst the Black Panthers remain the beacon for the politics of Black rebellion due to their impact on the popular imaginary and the wealth of writing that has come out of the movement (e.g.,

Brown, 1994; Newton, 1974 Seale, 1970; Shakur, 2001). In terms of Black collective organisation and an analysis of racism, these perspectives do connect with the Black radical tradition and therefore are necessary to articulate a Black radical perspective of mainstream society. However, the focus of the current paper is on outlining the position of Black Radicalism on education, which as will be detailed below understands mainstream school systems to be endemically and unalterably racist, necessitating Black radical independent education.

The schools work, to make things work

Central to liberal portrayals of education is that the system is meant to be equal and that will improve as it progresses (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1986). For Black Radicalism this liberal understanding is a myth and the reproduction of racial inequality in schooling is seen as a fundamental part of the functioning of the school system (Seale, 1970). The perpetuation of racism in the schooling has been most extensively explored in discussion of the "hidden curriculum" on both sides of Atlantic.

Carter (1993) explains that American schools reflect the middle class White habitus of the dominant group in society and as such put Black pupils at a disadvantage. In the case of African American school pupils Carter argues that the 'non-dominant' cultural capital that young Black pupils need for life in their own communities is antithetical to the dominant cultural capital that is necessary for success in the schools. Ladson-Billings (1995) talks of the need to code-switch, which means to have knowledge of both the dominant and non-dominant cultural capital of the schools and the community, respectively and using them accordingly. It is not difficult to see how these ideas may apply also in the British context behind the backdrop of disproportionate exclusion rates and low expectations of teachers (Figueroa, 1991; Graham & Robinson, 2004). Code-switching and non-dominant cultural

capitals are welcome ideas because they diagnose a structural problem within the schools and provide a solution that does not denigrate Black cultural forms.

To some extent code-switching cedes that the dominant cultural capital of the school is legitimate, or at least it does not challenge the dominance of a particular habitus. By accepting that there are arenas where people have to behave, talk and dress differently, some Black students are still put at a distinct disadvantage because success in schools requires extra skills than for those whom are at home in the dominant cultural sphere. This creates a twoness reminiscent of Dubois's (1903) double consciousness, an image of the Black student and citizen being pulled in competing directions by virtue of their Blackness.

Black Radicalism recognises the necessity to code switch as an inevitable strategy given the present conditions, however it is not taken as the overriding solution, which is a school system that does not privilege the dominant and where Black students are not prejudged for their presentational styles. Further to this, the code-switching position also places too much emphasis on the cultural and tends to essentialise Black students by virtue of particular cultural forms. It is very difficult to talk about the generic Black student and a focus on culture tends to make the problem of the school system a particular one for the Black poor. It is the "ghetto" children that do not succeed and it is they who need to learn the appropriate cultural codes for success. Within this argument it is presumably accepted that the Black middle class student, with better access and knowledge of dominant cultural capital is above and outside of the discussion about the schools failing Black pupils. However, it is inappropriate to exclude the Blacks students in higher economic positions, as they continue to suffer educational disadvantage in relation to other students from similar socioeconomic backgrounds (Strand, 2007).

A radical critique of education also goes further than to challenge the cultural codes of mainstream schooling, but also the knowledge that is reproduced. Freire (1985) argues that

knowledge in the school system is produced by the elite and therefore fused with dominant values. Following on from this, Black Radicalism questions the values of the schools system and instruction. Light is shone, not simply on whether the cultural bias in the schools is keeping Black students from equally achieving successful grades, but onto whether the knowledge *itself* is appropriate for any Black pupil, no matter how well heeled. The entire substance and basis of mainstream schooling is challenged, as Dove (1993, p.431) argues,

> anyone aspiring to and believing in the same European-centred cultural value system will undermine and devalue the potential for Africans to appreciate African self-worth and self-development as a basis for self-determination.

Mainstream schooling, then, not only filters disproportionate numbers of Black people into the bottom rungs of society, but also works to condition all students into Eurocentric understandings that reproduce an iniquitous and racist society. There is no "success" to be found in equal levels of achievement in this position. What is necessary is an entirely different approach to schooling where the necessary education for the uplift of the Black community can be achieved. Therefore, from this position, the only solution to the problem of schooling is a re-conceptualisation of education devised and controlled by Black communities. This is the essence of the call for a Black independent education

Black independent education and supplementary schools

Separateness to independence

Black radicalism calls for the collective organisation of Black people, and therefore often talks of the need to have separate organisations from White society (X, 1970). For Black liberal leaders this call for independence has been seen as problematic as 'the black man needs the white man and the white man needs the black man' (King, 1969, p.56), and the

desegregation was of course one of the primary aims and success of the American Civil Rights movement (Valien, 1956). This rejection of separateness can be seen in the British context by the current British Prime Minister David Cameron viewing multiculturalism as a 'wrong-headed doctrine' that has led to communities living 'separate lives' (Sparrow, 2008, n.p.). Such separateness is said to breed mistrust and hatred between ethnic minority groups and the majority population (McGhee, 2005). In the field of education we can see this idea at work in the schemes which bus young Muslim and White children into each other's schools (Barnard, 2010).

Black Radicalism has always been opposed to the idea of segregation. As Malcolm X (1963, n.p.) explained,

> Segregation is that which is forced upon inferiors by superiors.... The Negro schools in the Negro community are controlled by Whites... the economy of the Negro community is controlled by Whites. And since the Negro... community is controlled or regulated by outsiders, it is a segregated community.

Segregation is something that is done to a people in order to control and exploit them. The situation in schools in the United States where Black students find themselves segregated into poor schooling and lower ability levels is an example of segregation (Mickelson & Heath, 1999). When Malcolm X called for separation he was arguing that the racial makeup of the school population that was the problem, but that the schools were not controlled by Black people, for the benefit of the Black community.

It is also important to highlight the difference between the call for separation in Black Radicalism and those of far Right racist ideologies. The key distinction is that within Black Radicalism there is no inherent hatred for any group. When those like Malcolm X excoriate Whites this is not because of their ontological position of being White, but rather because of

what Western society has done as White people. This is in stark contrast to racist beliefs and ideologies that Black people are biologically inferior. There is no advocating of separation for reasons of racial purity as seen in Apartheid, or because of feelings of superiority and difference to Whites. In fact, as Malcolm X (1970, p. 9) argues, 'this word separation has been misused...a better word than separation is independence'.

Black Radicalism sees separateness as a tool for the Black communities to gain control of their own resources and therefore the real issue here is of independence. In terms of education this involves the institution of a Black independent education, which can meet the needs of uplifting Black communities.

A comprehensive Black independent education does not exist at present, however there does exist models that are instructive in helping to outline a definition. In the United States, one of the main programmes of the Black Panther Party was to set up what they labelled 'liberation schools' (Seale 1970, p.403). Huggins and LeBlanc-Ernest (2009) explain how the goal was not only to improve the standards of literacy but to provide a political education from a perspective that would allow the pupils to think outside of the constraints of the mainstream. In the case of the Black Panthers this was a revolutionary education, to engage Black people in class struggle. The criticisms of such a political stance on education are obvious, as what the Panthers deem education can easily be construed as indoctrination. However, the implicit argument of the Panthers is that the school system at present is indoctrinating young people into following Western ideals and maintaining the status quo. The "political" education that they prescribe is no less political than the liberal mainstream version, which hides behind objectivity and universality whilst privileging and promoting the subjective and particular. A radical critique of schooling does not see any knowledge created as free from the political values of those who produced it (Freire, 1972).

Black Panther liberation schools were based on a Marxist understanding, and therefore would differ from schools built on the principles of Black Radicalism. The Panther schools were radical as they taught and prepared students for the Marxist revolution (Seale, 1970). Black Radicalism accepts the racism as a permanent feature of Western society, therefore necessitating revolution. However, the liberation of Africa and the creation of a truly Pan African union is the solution to this problem for Black Radicalism (Garvey, 1923; Nkrumah, 1963). Therefore, the role in the West for the Black population is not to cause revolutionary overthrow but to organise and prepare to assist in the eventual Pan-African revolution. Black radical independent schools would not solely be Black solely in terms of students and teachers but would present a critical pedagogy based from an understanding of a Black radical positionality and truly transform teaching and understandings.

Academic attainment vs. Black education

Black people in Britain have created Black led spaces of education, which are embodied in the Black supplementary school movement (Best, 1990). What makes the these projects distinctive from other ethnic minority extra schooling is that they do not focus on language or religion but rather on teaching the basics of schooling to overcome inequalities in education and providing education about Black history and culture that is absent from mainstream curricula (Chevannes & Reeves, 1989). Within Black supplementary schooling there are differing ideologies and purposes of the programmes, which explicate the split between efforts to supplement mainstream schools and those that try to present an alternative form of Black education (Chevannes & Reeves, 1989; Reay & Mirza, 1997). It is this cleavage that we can begin to define what a Black radical independent education would entail.

Due to the inequalities in the education system a focus on the fundamentals of schooling, Maths and English, has been at the centre of the movement as Stone (1981, p.97) explains 'acquiring basic educational skills was the basis of what went on in supplementary schools'. Stone (1981) highlights the difference in supplementary school projects by drawing a distinction between on the one hand 'official' and on the other 'self-help' projects. Official projects are those that are state funded and can afford qualified teachers with some form of payment, whilst 'self-help' programmes are those that fund and rely on themselves. There has been a tension around this split and the balance between promoting success in schools and a developing a more culturally and historically based learning (Mirza & Reay, 2000) For Stone (1981, p.246) 'left wing teachers have done more harm to Black children' in the self-help projects by focusing more attention on the teaching of Black history and culture than on the basics of Maths and English necessary for the school system.

Lacking from Stone's focus on supporting the school curriculum is the distinction between academic attainment and acquiring skills necessary for success in mainstream schooling. From a radical perspective learning English skills, in particular, is a language skill as much as it as an educational one. Gordon (1998, p.66) argues that 'students do not learn to read and write, they read and write learn'. By this she means that basic skills are necessary in order to be educated; it is not the teaching of the basics that the differing perspective disagree but on the basis and purpose of the education that these skills should be used to learn. Official projects tend to deal in results from standardised examinations and school attainment, whilst self-help projects are concerned with developing a Black centred education.

It should also be acknowledged that even when not focussing on the mainstream curricula, the skills being developed in self-help projects could assist children in mainstream schools. An ethnography of a self-help project found that the activities around Black history involved reading writing and debate (Andrews, forthcoming). Therefore, even if the aim is to

get children to succeed in a mainstream school there is no necessary loss by focusing on Black history and culture. Innovative forms of curriculum and pedagogy are central to building educational practice that can engage and challenge pupils (Ladson-Billings, 1995). It is in the self-help projects that the emergence of a Black independent education could be located.

Independence

State funding has been a central issue in the supplementary school movement as programme leaders have been wary about the prospect of being co-opted by the authorities (Best, 1990; Dove, 1993). There has been a desire throughout the movement to 'maintain autonomy from the state' (Dove 1993, p.444) in order to keep control over the practice of the programmes. Being born out of a community response to a need created by the inadequacies in the school system this should come as no surprise. As Best (1990, p.195) explains there is caution that if receiving money from the state then programmes will have to 'avoid criticising the funding agents'. Supplementary schools by their very existence criticise mainstream schools and there has been a concern raised over the years to make sure that the state should not interfere with their practice. However from the days of direct conflict with the local authorities there has developed a much more open relationship with the state (Andrews, forthcoming). Official projects have to an extent be co-opted by mainstream schools and education authorities to so supplement the work of the schools, with in some cases the funding arrangement dictating the background of the student in the programmes and the curriculum (Andrews, forthcoming).

Rejecting state funds allows the self-help projects to develop an arena where they teach that which is missing from the school curricula (Dove, 1993), alongside helping students to survive mainstream schooling to achieve success. A fundamental point to get

across here is that Black radical independent education is not simply based on the students and teachers being Black. The official projects rely on the 'fraternity of colour' (Reeves & Chevannes, 1983b, p.53), however they do not qualify as independent education, because they simply supplement what happens in the mainstream. Self-help projects can have an independent curriculum and innovative forms of curriculum and pedagogy are central to building educational practice that can engage and challenge pupils (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Drawing on volunteers from within the community, often parents, also embeds the self-help programmes into the concerns and functioning of the locality (Best, 1990). It is not being argued here that self-help Black supplementary schools offer a perfect model of Black radical independent education. Indeed there is an important debate as to what constitutes Black education within self-help programmes. A focus on a cultural and historical teaching of history could simply reinscribe the idea discussed earlier that Black children need Black education to solve a psychological crisis, and will then be able to succeed in school and society. A Black radical independent education based around a radical critique of schooling necessitates a much more fundamental reformulation of education. However, it is here argued that within the self-help projects there are fragments of the ideas and practice from which a potential Black radical independent education could emerge. Self-help projects contain the key ingredients to explicating what such a Black independent education could entail, being Black controlled, having a Black curriculum and being embedded within local communities.

Conclusion

Education is a key battlefront in the fight to transform the conditions facing Black people in British society and connecting to the problems in the Diaspora. Racism is embedded in the structure of a school system that consistently reproduces racial inequality for the Black population of Britain. Black Radicalism argues that it is necessary to create spaces

of Black radical independent education where mainstream ideologies can be challenged and Black students equipped with the education necessary to succeed in society. A fundamental criticism of Black independent institutions from a liberal perspective is the fear of separateness. However, Black Radicalism does not call for separateness in the vein of Apartheid, but rather for independent control of institutions in Black communities. Black supplementary schools have existed in Britain for over forty years and present a 'both radical and subversive' space that to some extent lies outside the provision of the mainstream school system (Mirza & Reay 2000, p.523). The history of Black supplementary schools has seen ideological cleavages, with the more official projects dedicated to supplementing mainstream schooling. There exists, however, a more radical tradition that attempts to overcome the hidden curriculum and provide a more overtly political education aimed at not only school success but a radical critique of society. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to outline precisely what and how to achieve Black radical independent education, but future work needs to build on the foundations laid by the supplementary school movement. There are numerous other politics and perspectives on both the problem of and solution to racism in society. However, Black Radicalism represents an important tradition, which aims to ultimately overthrow a system of Western imperialism, which oppresses Black populations globally. An important starting point for this politics in the West is a Black controlled education with a Black radical curriculum, embedded within localities is created that can work for the uplift of Black communities.

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