

From Black and White to glorious technicolour

Debate about segregation and integration still sees Britain in Black and White. The reality is that we live in a more complex community of communities. Integration is as much about how people of Nigerian heritage interact with people with Colombian roots, as the relationship between Black and White. Understanding and responding to the diversity between minority ethnic communities, argues **Rob Berkeley**, is a key step in facing up to the realities of life in a multi-ethnic Britain.

In reflecting on the changing nature of ethnic diversity in Britain, it becomes increasingly clear that we have to move beyond binary notions of white and non-white to explain the ways in which racisms operate, identities are formed and people live out their lives. The societies in which we live are becoming more diverse and will continue to diversify as migration patterns change and the impacts of globalisation are reflected in labour markets as well as in transnational movement of capital.

However, our policy discourses and frameworks concerning ethnic diversity are not yet facing up to this reality. The power structures that have been created and the dynamics of the debate are too frequently reduced to black and white, when the lived experience of our citizens is in glorious technicolour. Under this model the politics of recognition will require communities to stake their claim to resources and political attention through campaigning to be included in ethnic monitoring, building voluntary sector representation and rallying around issues that they feel are specific to their communities.

The longer view of post-war race relations in the UK suggests that this is the route that leads to 'success'. Battles for recognition have been waged throughout the period. They are often bitter. And they are regularly based on frustration with being ignored or indeed *assimilated* into a debate and a discourse that are ill-suited to that particular community. The battle for Muslim recognition in our political structures is one example of this pattern. Members of Somali communities, those of Latin American heritage, Irish communities and francophone African countries are beginning on this route by arguing for their exceptionalism and requesting attention in a debate on 'race' and racisms that has left them by the wayside.

It doesn't have to be this way. Or does it? The experience of minority ethnic communities in the UK over the past century could be used to change this pattern, so that smaller and more recently arrived communities can have access to power and the resources that they need to flourish. The structures that 'settled' minority ethnic communities have created and developed have required the mainstream of British society to accept and embrace diversity. The call now comes for minority ethnic structures to do the same.

Whether it is in housing, health, employment or education, the experience and expertise and access to political influence could be shared. Instead a great deal of energy is being put into the development of new parallel structures, straight back to the drawing board rather than building on existing good practice. Migrant community organisations and refugee community organisations are being established to respond to the needs of communities, while a separate group of bodies responds to the needs of 'settled' minority ethnic communities. Government

policy activity is similarly double-headed – with an integration strategy for refugees and another for ‘settled’ minority ethnic communities.

If we are truly a community of communities, does this approach make sense? Minority ethnic communities have distinct needs and experiences, yet similar sets of needs and a shared experience of marginalisation and racisms. The work of racists in redefining the insider and outsider in British society to include those from minority ethnic communities born in Britain (*pace* Muslims) and exclude the immigrant and the asylum-seeker, seems in this case to have been successful. We ignore the greater diversity of the minority ethnic communities in Britain at our peril. Separate development is not the only model, and certainly not the best model that is available to us.

In response to this state of affairs and the hyper-diversity that we can expect to be a feature of modern British life,ⁱ Runnymede is beginning a programme of work to understand more about the diversity of minority ethnic communities in Britain. Including those communities that don’t make it onto the Census, and those that have little political representation in terms of race relations. The aim is to celebrate our diversity, but also to reach out to communities, drawing their expertise and experiences into the broader narratives about ‘race’ and racisms in the UK.

Here, Malcolm James, a research intern at Runnymede, has begun this process with a study of London’s Ecuadorian community. We see this as the starting-point of a larger project that will form a reference database of the key issues facing communities and the organisations that work with them. By drawing out similarities and differences, this project will contribute to a reframing of the debates about race relations in the UK to truly reflect a community of citizens and a community of communities.

ⁱ See the September 2005 issue of the Runnymede *Bulletin*, pp. 1–6.