

Austere Curricula: Multicultural Education and Black Students

Robbie Shilliam

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Introduction¹

Austerity is not simply a macro-economic policy. Rather than a neo-liberal invention, austerity has a long history of racializing certain bodies as dangerously excess to requirements. To be specific, austerity has always informed the sensibilities of postcolonial governance in the imperial heartlands. In recent decades the UK has experienced a growth in peoples from ex-colonies settling in the 'mother country' at the same time as mainstream British culture has come to be marked by melancholia over the loss of empire (Gilroy, 2006). Melancholic sensibilities resonate with austere ones, connoting severity, strictness, frugality and unadorned simplicity that are at odds with the rich, complex and diverse peoples and relations that make up postcolonial UK society. In other words, the austere sensibility works through existing frameworks of mono-ethnic national belonging to render multiculturalism an indulgent embellishment and dangerous excess.

It is no surprise, then, that current economic austerity measures interact with and strengthen existing structures of racialized inequality (see for example Runnymede Trust, 2015). In the UK these structures have been at least somewhat ameliorated by multicultural policies and equality statutes. As Gurminder Bhambra and John Holmwood (2012) point out, education acts as a crucial site for the amelioration of inequalities in liberal societies. Indeed, in the struggles to integrate the rich and diverse social relations that postcolonial peoples bring to the UK, one of the key ameliorative strategies has been the introduction of multiculturalism into school curricula. However, from the austere point of view, multicultural education is necessarily a subversive indulgence of excess cultures. And sure enough, there has recently been a high-level attempt by government to extricate Britain's colonial history from the school curriculum in the context of a wider moral panic over the loss of 'British values' in an increasingly multicultural education experience (see Spafford, 2013; Holmwood, 2015).

¹ Thanks to Gurminder Bhambra, John Holmwood and the editors for constructive comments.

Whilst secondary education in the UK has at least entertained a struggle to address structures of racialized inequality by introducing multicultural principles, tertiary education has hardly begun to consider the problem. Only recently, with initiatives such as the Race Equality Charter (which seeks to address the racial inequalities that affect staff and students), has a systemic challenge to monocultural practices and pedagogies reached the higher levels of university management. Nevertheless, the level of awareness, enthusiasm and commitment to change by management remains extraordinarily low. In this context, and by reference to the UK context, I want to ask: how are universities and academics complicit in an austerity project that seeks to contain the dangerous multicultural excesses of a postcolonial society? And what is the relationship between an austere sensibility, racialized inequality, and the university curriculum?

To address these questions I look specifically at the experience of British students of African-continental heritage. These students share the racial appellation of Black with their African-Caribbean peers. However, African-continental students diverge from African-Caribbean students in achieving higher attainments at secondary school (11-16 years old). Nevertheless, African-continental students experience a subsequent reversal of their upward mobility at university so that upon leaving tertiary education they by and large come to share the broad racialized inequalities suffered by their African-Caribbean peers.

In order to explain this mobility/dis-mobility I engage with the so-called deficit model of education, which itself contains deep austere sensibilities and has its origins in the containment of enslaved and colonized peoples in the metropolises of imperial rule. I consider how the conventional curriculum at the university level undertakes similar containment policies with deleterious consequences for the social mobility of African-continental (as well as other Black) students. In making this argument I am seeking to remind scholars that while they might critique austere measures 'out there', they could be complicit in these same measures through their own professional practices. In making this argument I wish to suggest that austere curricula are integral to the production of austere histories and that this relationship facilitates wider austerity measures.

Austere Thinking and the Deficit Model

The deficit model of education has primarily been used as a sociological explanation of differential achievements between groups of students. When engaging with the deficit model nowadays it is difficult not to address Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of 'cultural capital', which

marks the mechanism whereby privilege is transferred inter-generationally, but in a site that is presumed to be meritocratic in essence – public education. For Bourdieu, the embodied affections and dispositions of the dominant culture, that is to say the ways in which individuals 'get on' socially, are transmitted through a particular knowledge base that is unavailable to lower-class families. In other words, only privileged families can inculcate their children with the requisite cultural capital required to achieve and attain, and in this way the education system reproduces the unequal 'structure of the distribution of cultural capital among classes' (Bourdieu, 1973). Bourdieu's thesis spoke to a particularly French delineation of 'high' and 'low' culture. But subsequent work has mobilized the concept of cultural capital to look at alternative contexts wherein the lines of cultural division are congenitally racialized (for example Kingston, 2001; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999).

Arguably, it is the question of race that gave rise to deficit thinking in education in its contemporary form. In the USA, concerns over the failures of African-American students arose in the 1960s during Lyndon Johnson's 'war on poverty' and, more importantly, at the moment when Black Power was seen to be overtaking a failing Civil Rights movement. Speaking to the abiding post-civil war problematique of the place of African-Americans in the civic life of the USA, educationalists and policy makers invoked the deficit model to explicate the cultural deprivation of African-Americans caused by the segregated schooling system (famously called to order in *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954). The stakes were high because the liberal promise of egalitarianism rested upon education acting as an effective ameliorative instrument for meritocratic advancement regardless of race or social status (Gutiérrez and Rogoff, 2003, 19; United States. Department of Labor. Office of Policy Planning and Research, 1965, 2).

Central to the deficit model, in this respect, was the assumption that the lack of contact by low-income African-American children with middle-class white children curtailed a transfer of positive cultural values that would support attainment. Such an assumption placed the African-American family at the centre of the deficit problem. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, sociologist and assistant secretary of labour during Johnson's 'war on poverty', articulated these assumptions in his influential report on 'the Negro family':

the white family has achieved a high degree of stability and is maintaining that stability. By contrast, the family structure of lower class Negroes is highly unstable, and in many urban

centres is approaching complete breakdown (United States. Department of Labor. Office of Policy Planning and Research, 1965, 5).

Effectively, Moynihan's report sought to redeem the ideal of liberal egalitarianism not by questioning the normativities of mono-cultural analysis but by sociologically comparing a structurally disadvantaged racial minority with a structurally privileged racial majority and imputing the 'norm' to the latter and the 'deviance' to the former (Kirk and Goon, 1975, 606). And by developing policy prescriptions that targeted structural racialized inequality, Moynihan pathologised African-American family life, pointing out for example that, compared to white families, more African-American marriages dissolved, more births were illegitimate, and more households were female headed and in welfare dependency (United States. Department of Labor. Office of Policy Planning and Research, 1965, 6). For Moynihan, African-American children possessed no cultural capital to achieve at school; their familial and community heritages held no value in or for the public sphere.

I would argue that the pathologisation of African-American familial and community heritage was directly linked to a fear of integration by white Americans in general but also, specifically, to a fear of failed integration and its consequence – namely, the rise of Black Power. The deficit model was thus both a prescription for assimilation and, if that was not possible, then a tool for the continued pacification of a historically resident yet structurally excluded peoples.

The deficit model emerged in the UK at roughly the same time as in the USA. But here the model was mobilized principally (albeit not only) to address the failings of African-Caribbean children in school. Similar to the racialized defence of mono-culturalism in the settler-colony, the defence of mono-cultural British nationalism required post-colonial arrivants to the 'mother-country' to assimilate or be contained. However, while fears of the social consequences of failed assimilation bridged both societies, in the UK there was no equivalent of the Moynihan report and so considerations of egalitarianism in education did not, at this point in time, significantly shape policy discussions towards African-Caribbean children. Indeed, by the late 1960s it had become clear that the UK education system refused to countenance any substantive accommodation of the long-term presence of African-Caribbean families in the post-imperial heartland. Instead, schools became one more site wherein a racist austere sensibility was practised.

Very similar arguments made by Moynihan regarding the Black family also took root in the UK.² Henceforth, educationalists talked of the corrosive hyper-patriarchal or hyper-matrifocal nature of the 'West Indian family', its lack of proper English language and its poverty-stricken status (see Carby, 1999). Deficit thinking assumed that African-Caribbean children possessed no cultural capital with which to achieve at school. Indeed, attempts by African-Caribbean children born in the UK to actively address the trauma of racism was read by educationalists as the display of innately negative cultural traits such as disinterestedness and disruptiveness (Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe, 1985, 60–65). On top of all this, IQ testing framed by eugenicist theories resulted in African-Caribbean children being disproportionately assessed as in need of attending Educationally Subnormal Schools (John, 2014). Thus, instead of acknowledging and addressing visceral and institutional racism in schools, commentators opted to explain the suffering of African-Caribbean children via an austere deficit model: their familial and community heritages lacked any cultural capital that could be mobilized to achieve in the English education system. (And in any case, these children were presumed to genetically lack a sufficient IQ).

At the time, Bernard Coard (1971) wrote an influential thesis that sought to critically detail the making-sub-normal of African-Caribbean children in the school system (see also Warmington, 2014, 66). But it was not until the Swann Report of 1985 that the science of eugenics was officially discredited and declaimed as being able to explain the differential attainments of African-Caribbean children vis-à-vis the white majority (Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups, 1985, 68). As an alternative and more plausible explanation, the report identified teachers' low expectations of African-Caribbean children as a key contributor to unequal attainment. Moreover the report suggested that, rather than a simple prejudice, these expectations were part of a wider social and economic system of racial discrimination that resulted in 'cumulative disadvantage' (Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups, 1985, 66–67). In many ways the Swann Report was incisively damning of the deficit model used to justify the status quo at schools, charging those who believed in its austere tenets as failing in their professional duty:

any teacher who sought to explain away, or who expected low achievement as the inevitable result of poor circumstances, would be failing in his task as an educator (Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups, 1985, 76).

² In his inquiry into the Brixton riots of 1981 Lord Scarman was directly influenced by Moynihan's work (Kushnick, 1993, 18). For a comparative analysis of USA and UK contexts see (Majors, 2001)

The Swann Report reflected at least a decade of more or less serious attempts to implement multiculturalism in school curricula, albeit usually attenuated to aesthetic diversification rather than an intellectual transformation of teaching and learning which would moot political consequences (see Carby, 1999, 203–204, and in general Warmington, 2014). In contrast, Black community responses to racist education had long sought to address the problem at its root. The late 1960s, for example, witnessed the emergence of weekend 'supplementary schools', independently run by African-Caribbean parents (especially mothers), intellectuals and community activists (see Mirza and Reay, 2000; Andrews, 2013). These voluntary schools imparted basic skills. But some also taught what would nowadays be called an 'Afrocentric' curriculum that allowed the student to utilize her/his familial and cultural heritage within the wider learning process in contrast to its active exclusion from mainstream school curricula. Gus John (2014), professor of education and one of the initiators of the supplementary school project in the late 1960s, argues that the majority of supplementary schools 'never operated a 'deficit model' with regard to the needs of Black children'.

Likewise, a number of critical education scholars have confronted the deficit model, asserting that Black families and communities in the USA and the UK possess a wealth of cultural capital, albeit capital that is garnered from and transmitted through heritages that might not be shared or valued by majority groups. For example, Black children might cultivate aspirational attitudes from the pursuit of dreams in the face of societal barriers, navigational tools from the need to work through hostile institutions, and linguistic abilities where more than one language or register of communication is quotidian to family and community life (Tara J. Yosso, 2005; Wright, Standen, and Patel, 2010; Goulbourne, 2006). Hence critics of the deficit model argue that Black children do not enter the classroom deficient in (or entirely lacking) the affections, dispositions and basic techniques required for learning - at least, no more than students from majority groups. The deficit does not lie with Black heritages – familial and community - but in the racist structures that devalue, demean and exclude the sources of cultural capital that Black children carry with them into the classroom.

Despite such critical responses by practitioners and academics to the deficit model its associated racial stereotypes still circulate today. In recent years, the deficit model has returned to the USA as part of the 'no child left behind' agenda, where poor and minority children are singled out for special pedagogical and cultural interventions (see Dudley-Marling, 2007). In the UK, meanwhile, many teachers still interpret the actions of African-Caribbean children as disrespectful regardless of the intentions of the student. For example, the cultural practice of looking down as a sign of respect when talking to adults is often interpreted as a display of defiance. Moreover, these Black

stereotypes can travel and proliferate; the same cultural misreading is made now of Somali children (Gillborn, 1992, 62; Coretta, 2011, 180–182). What is more, African-Caribbean students still suffer a disproportionate amount of exclusions relative to any other ethnic group. Crucially, the reasons for exclusion are less to do with actual infringement of rules but the perception by teachers of a bad attitude exhibited by the student (see in general Strand, 2012).

In sum, deficit thinking presumes that Black families and communities have no cultural capital to gift their children as an inheritance, or, that the only 'gift' that Black children receive is a transmission of pathological behaviour. Deficit thinking is a technology that reproduces structural inequalities along racial lines in so far as it polices which heritages – and struggles - can be seen as worthwhile matter for education. Deficit thinking is congenitally austere, and, in its implicit defence of the racial hierarchies and exclusions of mono-culturalism, of colonial/post-colonial provenance. If, as Holmwood and Bhambra argue, the liberal egalitarian function of education is to provide a meritocratic opening for the partial disturbance of inherited privilege, then deficit thinking mitigates against even this ameliorative impulse (see Kingston, 2001).

In what now follows I explore how students from African-continental heritages have confounded the expectations of the deficit model at secondary school level in England specifically. But I will also argue that their success and upward mobility has been neutralized at tertiary level education. Having detailed this trajectory I will, in the final section, suggest that the mono-cultural university environment and especially the 'conventional curriculum' is complicit in making deficits where there are none and thus contributing to the racialized effects of austerity.

Black Students and the Making of a Deficit

Answering a call for labour by the British state in the aftermath of World War II, African-Caribbean families began to settle in large numbers as adults took on predominantly public sector work. For some while, these communities defined the 'Black experience' in the UK and suffered the formative racist pathologisation that I have glossed above. More recently, however, African-continental families have arrived (once more) in large numbers as part of a new post-Cold War era of postcolonial migration. The route of African-continental peoples into the UK is in general markedly different to that of African-Caribbean peoples especially in terms of their insertions into the national economy and their experiencing of the formative pathologisation of blackness in Britain. These differences do not stop both groups from falling under the broader label of Black. Does the

educational experiences and outcomes of African-continental and African-Caribbean students reflect these divergences? Or do Black students share a common fate?

Structural inequalities in the English school system are measured primarily from attainment gaps. A key measure, in this respect, is the achievement of five General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) qualifications (from A* to C grade) including the subjects of English and Maths. Although students take GCSEs at the age of 16, this is also an important indicator for prospective tertiary education because often times General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (A-level) qualifications, taken at the age of 18, are not yet completed when universities make admission decisions. African-continental students have improved significantly in this measure over the past 10 years. For the 2009/2010 year, 54.8 per cent of white British pupils achieved 5 such GCSEs, and this figure was also the national average, in comparison to 48.9 per cent of African-continental students (Department of Education, 2011). However, for the 2013/14 year, 56.4 per cent of white British pupils achieved this measure, just under the national average of 56.6 per cent, while 56.8 per cent of African-continental students achieved the same measure (Department of Education, 2015). Therefore, although African-continental students are by no means the highest achieving ethnic minority, they are now slightly outperforming their white British peers – the majority group - and are just above the national level.³ What is more, they are outperforming their Black peers from an African-Caribbean heritage by nearly 10 per cent.

One reason offered for this success lies in the putative difference between being an 'immigrant' or a 'diaspora'. Many educationalists argue that immigrants arrive with cultural capital that translates into high aspirations for social advancement of their children through educational achievement (see Strand, 2014, 162). In other words, migrant parents are presumed to especially value schooling and so will forge productive relationships with teachers and be far more directive with their children's education. Meanwhile, 'settled' diaspora groups, especially the African-Caribbean community, are assumed (as we have discussed above) to lack similar levels of aspirations due to the inter-generational transfer of disadvantage and/or the familial absence of such cultural capital. The Minister of Education in the 2010-2015 coalition government certainly believed in the

³ It should be noted that it tends to be English-speaking African-continental families that perform at this level (see Hollingworth and Mansaray 2012).

explanatory power of the immigrant paradigm as well as the putative deficit suffered by other disadvantaged students (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014, 27, 37).

The immigrant paradigm does partly describe some of the reality of attainment in secondary education. For example, many commentators have noted, over the last few years, a 'London effect' wherein attainments from children in the capitol city are significantly higher than in the rest of the country. Moreover, this effect is shared widely across socio-economic divides and ethnic groups. Some argue that the general rise in attainment might be driven by the high percentage of students from immigrant parents who have made a new home in the city and are now spreading their aspirational attitudes to 'settled' groups (Burgess, 2014). The London effect is especially noteworthy due to the fact that a relatively high percentage of African-continental students arrive in the UK between the ages of 5 and 14 (Strand, Malmberg, and Hall, 2015, 11) and a significant percentage of these students live in the capitol city ('The London Annual Education Report 2013', 2013, 17–19). A recent report in the Lambeth borough of London found that 71 per cent of African-continental students attained the five GCSE measure - significantly higher than the national average for the group (Demie, 2013, 6).

Nevertheless, while the immigrant paradigm might hold descriptive validity, its explanatory power can sometimes rest on a premise that reintroduces deficit thinking as a way of explaining the divergence between two minority groups that share the codification of 'Black' in the British racial schema. African-continental families, despite being Black, are said to enjoy migrant cultural capital, while African-Caribbean families, as part of a historically 'settled' and, as we have seen, demonized diaspora, are presumed to suffer from a lack of this capital. However, such binary presumptions have been critiqued in studies by the Joseph Roundtree Foundation which have found little actual correlation between aspiration (considered to be a key attribute of cultural capital) and socio-economic background/ethnic minority group (Cummings et al., 2012). In fact, as a number of scholars have argued, the diminution of aspiration occurs not when students enter school but when they observe that their aspirations do not fit with the reality of so many of their group peers who do not or cannot enter into university or apprenticeships. In other words, it is not initial low aspirations that cause lower attainment but rather the subsequent demonstration effect of structures of racialized inequality and other intersectional determinants, which often take particular forms in particular locales (see in general Kintrea, St Clair, and Houston, 2011).

I would therefore suggest that any binary contrast of 'good' immigrant families with 'bad' settled minority families necessarily draws upon the modalities of the deficit model. Nevertheless, it is the case that, as a group, African-continental students do seem to be fulfilling the upwardly mobile aspirations of their parents, despite the historical pathologisation of Black heritage as deficient in cultural capital and hence requiring austere remedies. So let us now follow these students through university.

Over the past decade increasing numbers of Black youth have entered university. 6.3 per cent of the UK-national student population in Britain is now Black, and amongst first year students this number rises to 6.7 per cent.⁴ For the sake of perspective, the 2011 UK census reports that Black peoples make up 3.3 per cent of the general population. Hence, Black students are significantly over-represented at university. The bulk of this growth has come from students with an African continental heritage, who make up 4.4 per cent of the UK-national student population, with those from an African-Caribbean heritage making up 1.3 per cent and 'other' Black heritage 0.3 per cent. This growth doubtless reflects not just a population increase, but also demonstrates that, at secondary school, African-continental students aspire and attain. As I have argued above, it is difficult to argue that such students enter into the university system with a deficit - cultural or otherwise. Yet despite this over representation, university life for Black students in general (including those from African-continental backgrounds) is marked by differential experiences to that of white students and, in some cases, to many other minority groups.

Firstly, Black students tend to attend institutions that are considered by industry and government to be less 'prestigious'. I want to parse this term through Bourdieu's argument about cultural capital. Rather than acting as a neutral mark of excellence, prestige should be understood much more as a marker of cultural capital and therefore its use is implicated in the unequal reproduction and transference of inherited privilege through tertiary education. In the most prestigious Russell Group of universities, Black students have remained at 2.7 per cent of the student population in recent years (it should be remembered that Black students constitute 6.3 per cent of the UK-national student population). Compare the Russell Group to the least 'prestigious' Million+ Group of universities wherein Black students make up 11.9 per cent of the student population. This placement of Black students is not simply down to personal choice, nor is it only an outcome of lesser-achievements at secondary school. One recent study (Boliver, 2013) has found that, controlling for other variables such as attainment, ethnicity exercises a discrete and negative effect on the

⁴ Unless stated otherwise all statistics in this section are sourced from (Equality Challenge Unit 2015).

chances of Black students being admitted into prestigious universities. In sum, having achieved at secondary school, Black students, including those with African-continental heritages, are funnelling themselves and being funnelled into institutions that are relatively disadvantaged in the broader valuation of undergraduate degrees and subsequent pursuit of social mobility.

The second difference lies in the route that students take at the end of each academic year. Presently, 92.2 per cent of white students continue to the next year, 1.5 per cent transfer institutions and 6.4 per cent leave higher education. In comparison, 86.8 per cent of African-continental students continue, 4.1 per cent transfer and 9.1 per cent leave higher education. While comparatively more African-Caribbean students exit higher education than their African-continental peers (10.8 per cent), over the last couple of years the number of African-Caribbean students exiting is declining and the number of African-continental students exiting is increasing. Suddenly, then, at university, African-continental students seem to be demonstrating more 'deficit behaviour' than white students while approximating that of their African-Caribbean peers.

But thirdly, and most importantly, end of degree attainment statistics starkly demonstrate racialized differences. In the English university system, degrees are classified in terms of first class honors (1st), second class upper division honors (2:1), second class lower division honors (2:2), third class honors (3rd), pass and fail. In the 2012/13 academic year (the most recent data available at the time of writing), 20.3 per cent of white female and 20.6 per cent of white male students attained a 1st classification in comparison to just 7.4 per cent of Black women and 7.7 per cent of Black men. 74.7 per cent of white female students and 71.2 per cent of white male students achieved either a 1st or a 2:1 classification compared to just 44.1 of Black female and male students. I want to make it clear, again, that this difference cannot be simply explained by reference to the educational deficits that Black students bring with them to university visavis the merits that white students arrive with. For instance, a recent report by the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE 2014) for England found that 72 per cent of white students who entered university with three 'B' grade A-levels attained a 1st or 2:1 classification degree compared to only 53 per cent of Black students who entered university with the same A-level results.

Despite these divergences we would expect that African-continental students specifically, and given their relative success at secondary school, would not suffer significant divergence from the white norm. Indeed, we would imagine that they are comfortably outperforming their African-Caribbean peers. Yet neither is the case. In the 2012/13 academic year, 48.7 per cent of African-

Caribbean students attained a 1st or 2:1 classification degree compared to 46.4 per cent of African-continental students. And while, in 2011/12, African-continental students just outperformed African-Caribbean students in the attainment of a 1st classification, in 2012/13 these attainments were on a par (both groups being within 0.1 per cent of each other). In 2012/13 African-Caribbean students attained 2.5 per cent more 2:1 classifications than their continental counterparts, 1 per cent less 2:2 classifications and 1.4 per cent less 3rd classifications. One might argue that this might all be due to a 'lag' in the time it takes for the superior-performing African-continental students to work their way through to the third year of their degree. And yet for the past ten years African-Caribbean students have *outperformed* African-continental students in attaining 1st and 2:1 classifications. Remember that in secondary school African-continental students in general comfortably outperform their African-Caribbean peers. There seems to be no discernible improvement in the attainments of African-continental students in higher education that would match their improvements in secondary education. And remember, when it comes to university degrees, Black students attain *significantly* below the levels of all other ethnic groups.

The significance of differential undergraduate attainment combined with the relative 'prestige' of the awarding university cannot be over-estimated. It is a well established fact that the major employers of graduate students do not look below a 2:1 classification when recruiting (Snowdon, 2012). Additionally, the prestige factor directly influences employability especially with regards to professional jobs (Boliver, 2013, 345). The combined effects, therefore, are very detrimental if we consider that less than half of Black students are graduating with a sufficient classification *and* those that do tend to graduate from less prestigious institutions. For example, six universities accounted for almost one quarter of Black male undergraduates in 2012/13. All these universities are considered less prestigious. The average 'career score' for these six institutions was 52 per cent, compared to the six most prestigious universities, which scored 79 per cent yet wherein Black males made up only 0.7 per cent of the student population (The Black Training and Enterprise Group, 2014, 15).

It seems, then, that the upward mobility of African-continental students has lost much of its momentum by the time that their degrees have been attained. And this immobilisation needs to be contextualised within the era of austerity, which has impacted negatively upon racialized minorities at a rate proportionately greater than that suffered by the white majority (see in general Fisher and Nandi, 2015). Between 2009 and 2012, the years that saw the entrenchment of austerity measures in the UK, the employment gap between young white men aged 16-24 and young Black men has

grown even wider: 13 per cent of young white men were unemployed in 2009 compared to 28 per cent of young Black men, while by 2012 22 per cent of young white men were unemployed in contrast to 50 per cent of young Black men (The Black Training and Enterprise Group, 2014, 11–12). Moreover, young Black men have, on average, higher rates of post-16 education than their white counterparts, but this has made no dent in the increasing divergence of employability along ethnic lines during the era of austerity.

Tellingly, these racialized differences in employment prospects are also evident in the graduate population specifically. 47.3 per cent of white graduates find professional full-time work compared to 38 per cent of Black graduates and 5.2 per cent of white graduates are unemployed compared to 12.1 per cent of Black graduates. Crucially, African-continental graduates share the same outcomes as the Black population in general, although the differences are also instructive. Slightly less African-continental graduates find professional full time work (37.7 per cent) than African –Caribbean counterparts (38.8 per cent) and more African-continental leavers are unemployed (13.2 per cent) than African-Caribbean (9.1 per cent). This suggests that job prospects are less attractive for African-continental graduates than for their African-Caribbean counterparts, although both groups fall significantly below the baselines of the white norm. I say all this in light of a recent study on inter-generational (im)mobility published by the Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity (2014), which reports that African-continental men and women are in general less upwardly mobile and more prone to socio-economic decline than not only their white but also African-Caribbean counterparts.

What we might now be witnessing is the university operating for some as a site that does not just reproduce privilege – as in Bourdieu’s model - but a site that is complicit in *creating* racialized disadvantage. By the time that they leave university, African-continental graduates have lost much of the social mobility that was promised to them through their attainment record at secondary education. They have even lost their mobility relatively more than African-Caribbean counterparts who they had outperformed at secondary school, and who, in the quotidian racial schema of the UK are far more of a historical 'deficit problem' than recent arrivants. And so, despite being an increasingly 'model' migrant group, despite not sharing the same intimate and historical entanglement with deficit thinking as the African-Caribbean community, African-continental students are still suffering from the same (and sometimes worse) negative outcomes upon exiting university as Black students in general. The reasons for this dismobiliation are doubtless complex and interlocking. In what now follows I will focus on one plausible contributing factor – the austere

nature of the 'conventional curriculum'. Here, it has to be said, I am talking specifically about the curriculum of the Social Sciences and Humanities.

An austere Curriculum

At this point we must revisit the relative success of African-continental students at secondary school. Certainly, the aspirations enjoyed by these students are an important part of the reason for their improved attainment record. However, (as I noted above) aspirations are not the exclusive domain of immigrant families. And, conversely, African-continental students do not entirely escape the pathologisations of Blackness suffered by their African-Caribbean peers. For instance, Steve Strand has recently demonstrated that African-continental students are relatively more advantaged in cultural capital than white British students and yet this advantage does not translate into a proportionately greater attainment of GCSEs. In short, African-continental students are doing well, but should be doing even better (Strand, 2011; see in general Solorzano, 1992). Thus, I would argue that in order to identify the reasons for African-continental students' success at secondary school, we must focus upon structural transformations in education that have attempted to displace the mono-cultural logics that breed austere notions of Black deficit.

Some secondary schools – especially in London - have embraced multicultural models that go beyond the strictly aesthetic pluralization of education environments. A fundamental aspect of this shift has been the mobilization of a curriculum that 'reflects the African pupil's heritage, culture and experience' (Demie 2013,20). Through a multicultural curriculum multiple heritages can be mobilized as matter for learning in general: as one school puts it, 'we will use what children know and understand about themselves in our teaching' (Demie, 2013, 29). In this way children are able, with their families and communities, to engage meaningfully in UK life *through* their familial and community heritages. Rather than considered a deficit that must be discarded, these heritages are seen, in principle, as positive cultural capital that can feed an aspirational education process. A multicultural curriculum along these lines holds the potential to provide a countervailing meritocratic influence upon inherited and racialized hierarchies and inequalities. It is therefore painful to witness the current overhaul of the national curriculum that is intended to curtail multicultural pedagogies for the sake of returning to ostensibly traditional 'British values' alongside a retrenchment of race equality funding for schools (see Alexander, Weekes-Bernard, and Arday 2015).

As partial and contested as they are, these innovations in secondary education stand in stark contrast to the elitism and conservatism of most universities. In order to meet the statutory duties of the Equalities Act of 2010 (a piece of legislation that brings together many previous equalities acts including “race relations”), the Higher Education Funding Council for England expects universities to ensure not just an equality of opportunity but even - and this surpasses the 2010 Act – to demonstrate compliance to this duty via equality of outcome amongst racialized groups (not individuals). But despite these benchmarks, the university sector has never received anything similar to the Swann Report, and the levels of reception of the problem of racialized discrimination and stratification amongst senior management remain extremely low (see ECU, 2011). This is not just a question of ignorance, but much more evidence of the institutional mono-culture culture of higher education. One of the key pillars of this culture is the tradition of readings, arguments, registers and debates that form the conventional curriculum.

More than simply a professionally selected portmanteau of edifying knowledge, the conventional curriculum makes manifest what might be called in Bourdieuan terms, institutional habitus - the unchallenged social and cultural practices as well as forms of tacit knowledge that invest the academic with professional competency (Thomas 2002). And perhaps the best way to understand the mono-cultural exclusivities of the conventional curriculum is to inquire into the nature of the conventional student body that it is designed to edify. Influential British philosopher Michael Oakeshott (2004), debating in 1950 on the purpose of higher education within the pages of the BBC's *Listener* magazine, argues that university study should not be for an 'ulterior purpose' but for the sake of a scholarly conversation that is its own purpose. Oakeshott is careful to point out that the privilege of taking part in the conversation should not depend on any external privilege, including financial ability. However, Oakeshott is just as clear that the student should be understood to occupy a position in-between that of a child and adult so that the scholarly conversation takes place through 'the gift of an interval' (Oakeshott, 2004, 29–30).

To this portrait I want to add an influential argument by John Searle (1993). Writing after the confrontation of Black, First Nations, Feminist and Latino/a struggles within the American academy, Searle wishes to defend the 'traditional canon' against what he deems to be this 'multicultural' challenge. Specifically, Searle bemoans the entrance of 'politics' into disciplinary inquiry, especially the politicisation of the racial, gendered and class characteristics of those thinkers included in the canon and also of those who teach the canon. While Searle is writing in the US context, his argument is useful to place besides Oakeshott's in so far as it suggests that the ability and availability to

disavow political attachments and/or commitments – i.e. taking the 'interval' - is also racialized. An interval requires you to unencumber yourself from familial, social, cultural and political commitments, duties and ties. But is it possible to unencumber yourself if your very bodily presence in the academy is unavoidably political in so far as it viscerally references not only a struggle over integration but just as much the problem of deficiency itself?

Here I want to argue that race is a great and perverse downward democratizer. Black is black is black – just as much for the children of African-continental migrant parents as it is for their African-Caribbean peers. And in a racially structured society such as the UK, including its public higher education system, Black connotes extreme deficit, regardless of the disparate routes one takes to arrive and the diverse heritages that one holds onto upon settlement.

One technique to make 'troublesome' minority students compliant in secondary school is to 'decontextualise' their (deficient) family and community heritages via a focus on training standardised skills and methods (Dudley-Marling, 2007; Haberman, 2010). At university, compliance and decontextualisation is achieved through the deployment of particular canons that are presumed to prepare the student for impartial and detached inquiry – i.e. Oakeshott's scholarly conversation (see Morley, 1997, 232). Yet these thinkers, traditions and narratives are anything but impartially selected and pedagogically detached: they are epistemically white. By this terminology I mean to say that what counts as adequate frameworks of cognition and useful knowledge is racialized as exclusively white in order to then be rendered as neutral, transparent, universalisable and, increasingly, a marker of international 'excellence' (Hong, 2008, 104–105; see also Sousa Santos, 2014). By contrast, Black heritages – historical, intellectual, cultural - cannot be made transparent as in the racial schema of society they are constitutive of struggle, deviance from the norm, and deficit. Indeed, when Black students (and staff) critique the whiteness of the conventional curriculum their actions are more likely to be 'instinctively' apprehended by academic institutions, in the finest traditions of postcolonial austerity, as at worst 'uncivil behaviour' or at least evidence of 'dumbing down' (Margolis and Romero, 1998, 21; Berry and Loke, 2011, 15, 51) .

Black is black is black. And so for Black students, whose bodies speak of deficit regardless of their different roots and routes into the UK, to be made unencumbered is to be made austere: your 'excess' – the heritage that necessarily entangles you, regardless of intention, with extra-academic material – must be stripped. What, we might ask, is then left for scholarly conversation except a black hole? There does, though, exist a special kind of student who does not require compliance to

an austere process of decontextualisation in order to prepare him for the scholarly conversation: the white student whose very heritage is a privilege that constitutes the apparently impartial, detached and universal conventions of the curriculum. And this remains the case, even though this student increasingly shares the halls of higher education with racialized minority students. It is entirely plausible, then, to consider that the racialized exclusions that deeply structure the conventional – mono-cultural - curriculum have a negative impact upon the experiences and even attainments of many Black students. This is certainly the connection made in a number of recent reports that advocate a movement towards multiculturalism – or a more 'inclusive curriculum' - in order to address inequalities – including racialized ones - in degree attainment (Berry and Loke, 2011, 15; Haggis, 2006; Hockings, 2010; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015, 24-25, 67-71).

To demonstrate these connections a little more, I want to reflect on the comments made by African-continental students in a recent focus group that I personally organised for BME students.⁵ I should add that it is not uncommon to discover similar sentiments in the wider literature. In terms of their attempted engagement with a social science curriculum, students commented that 'I've been omitted', and 'you don't see yourself in the learning' (see also Jones, 2001). It seems that this structured – and not random or incidental – absence resulted in students feeling that their heritages could not be 'brought in' to the teaching and learning process. These comments align with the notion that, for some, the conventional curriculum provides an austere rather than enriching experience. Such epistemic exclusions understandably produced a crisis of investment in students: 'It's so boring. It limits the way I think.'; 'I have an opinion but I have to translate it so that it becomes tedious and I am disengaged'. Of course, a crisis of investment can easily result in alienation: '[I'm] just writing essays to get the grades'; 'I've learned to give people what they want. And leave me behind' (see also NUS 2011, 21). Interestingly, considering my argument above, at least one of the participants explained that her experience of multicultural learning at secondary school was far more challenging than her confrontation with a monocultural curriculum at university: 'I would [actually] like to be exposed and challenged to diversity'.

The absence, forced disinvestment and alienation that the conventional curriculum produces is, whilst not the only cause, nevertheless central to understanding the drastic drop in attainment collectively suffered by Black students in general, but in particular by African-continental students whose collective attainment record, prior to university, displays no evidence of 'deficit'. The conventional curriculum is a rich one for white students who can draw upon their family and societal

⁵ To preserve the anonymity of the participating students I will not disclose the university or the programme that the focus group was drawn from.

heritages that constitute the *particular* matter for scholarly conversation; in principle, they are able to mobilize their cultural capital. But for African-continental students, as for Black students in general and many other marginalized groups (including poor white students, but in different ways), the conventional curriculum is an austere one. Many academics claim their curriculum to be an impartial and universal tool of edification. But its whiteness speaks - sometimes subtly, usually corrosively - to Black students of their deviance, or even deficit. To those who have been on an upward academic trajectory the experience can be disorienting and disheartening.

Conclusion

Austerity is not just an economic project but a broader sensibility that structures exclusions and inequalities across the many dimensions of social life. The austere sensibility, now rampantly deployed as part of a neo-liberal agenda, is also, and more foundationally, a post-colonial sensibility long used to contain the presence of formerly enslaved and colonized peoples in metropolises that were never designed for them. Education has been one of the major battlegrounds of austerity wherein the deficit model has pathologised particular storehouses of cultural capital. At university, racialized minorities are required to unencumber themselves of the heritages that fill these storehouses. The process of unencumberment does not reveal the conventional student underneath the cultural baggage, now freed to adequately tackle the conventional curriculum; rather, in this process Black students especially tend to become absent, disinvested and alienated as they confront these curricula. I strongly suggest that the racialized differentials of degree attainment testify to the effect of this austere process.

I have also provided evidence that the austere nature of university environments do not just impact negatively upon teaching and learning, but are rather implicated in a wider phenomenon wherein racialized minorities, especially Black peoples, are disproportionately made to bear the brunt of society-wide austerity programmes. How far academia is implicated can be gleaned from the fact that although university education is supposed to ameliorate inequalities-at-birth, it is instead not only reproducing inequalities (as Bourdieu argued) but is now complicit in *creating new* racialized inequalities. Well-meaning commentators on the left often argue that the real problem with racialized inequality in education lies not in academia but in broader socio-economic structures. Yet, counter-intuitively, this leftist strategy can all too easily accommodate austere sensibilities that assume deficits where there are none. Moreover, this strategy might mitigate against well-meaning academics taking a sober investigation of their own complicity in the reproduction and even creation

of racialized inequalities through higher education. If the problem is “out there” then it is not necessary to critically account for our academic practices and all too easy to rail, instead, against “falling standards” and the “declining quality” of the character and abilities of our students.

In conclusion, I would suggest that it is in austere curricula that our colonial histories and our austere presents collide. Although the austere sensibility is currently mobilized by neo-liberal ideologues, its provenance lies in the racialized governance of colonial and postcolonial peoples. In part, this form of governance requires the outlawing of certain familial and community heritages that are necessarily entangled with struggles over European colonialism by design or by fate, and which inevitably present a deep challenge to white supremacy in its current neo-liberal expressions. But surely, stories of (post)colonial provenance must edify all of us who inhabit empirically multicultural societies? If so, then as long as a foundational and principled engagement with multiculturalism is disavowed by austere sensibilities we are all the poorer in thought and in action.

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