

‘Police On My Back’ and the Postcolonial Experience

‘Police On My Back’ was written in England by Eddy Grant and recorded by his group, the Equals, in 1967. Since then it has been covered by a number of artists. In this article I am concerned with the original and four covers. Over the forty years between the Equals version of the song and the final version with which I am concerned the meaning of the lyrics has changed from being an expression of Jamaican rude boy culture to being a song that expresses the oppression of migrants from British and European colonies living in the metropolises of the colonisers. This article tracks the changes in musical and lyrical expression in the song against the increasingly oppressive circumstances of those migrants and their descendents. These are the circumstances that contributed to the British riots of 1981 and of 2011, and the French riots of 1981 and the many subsequent riots climaxing in those of 2005. ‘Police On My Back’ has always been hybrid. Grant’s version placed rude boy lyrics with a British beat group sound. Later, as the lyrics came to reflect the circumstances of the migrants, so the musical backing came to include a variety of musical forms many of which expressed the heritages of the performers and asserted the legitimacy of those heritages in a multicultural context.

‘Police On My Back’; postcolonial; Equals; the Clash; Lethal Bizzle; riots

One song that can be read as a marker of the changing experience of migrants in Britain and Europe is ‘Police On My Back’. In this essay I want to trace the shifting meanings of the song over forty years. Originally a genre song about Jamaican rude boys, the song was revised thirteen years later as an expression of the experience of oppression. In later versions this experience has been more clearly identified as that of the migrants from Europe’s colonies and ex-colonies who arrived in the post-Second World War period, and their descendents. These people remain not only oppressed but, in the neoliberal capitalist restructuring that took place after the economic crises of the 1970s, increasingly dispossessed and excluded from the dominant social order.

One element of the song’s form which reappears in the versions with which I am concerned is what we can call its hybridity. Now, as a theoretical term hybridity has been much debated in recent years and this is not the place to assess this discussion.¹ In this essay hybridity, and its roughly equivalent French term *métissage*, is used to signal the merging of musical forms, lyrical genres, and even languages, in the context of a single song. From the start, as we shall see, ‘Police On My Back’ was a hybrid song, mixing a Jamaican, colonial genre with a British musical form of beat music. In this version, the song appears to be an attempt to meld elements from different cultures, and can be read as an expression of the productivity of the engagement of those different

cultures. In later versions, the lyrics change their meaning to refer to the experience of oppression. As this happens, the focus of the hybridity shifts to the incorporation of a variety of musical forms, mostly with colonial heritages, though coupled with forms more characteristic of dominant cultures, most importantly punk. Of course, hybridisation always involves power relations. As the song becomes more clearly an expression of the oppressed circumstances of colonial migrants and their descendents in the colonising metropolises, so the colonial elements of the song take on the quality of an assertion of presence and a demand for multicultural recognition.

Written by Eddy (aka Eddie) Grant, who was a founding member of the British racially mixed group, the Equals, 'Police On My Back' was released as a follow-up single to their hit 'Baby Come Back' in 1967.² Later that year the track appeared on the group's album *Explosion*. Of the later reworkings of this song, there are four of importance for my purpose here. In 1980 the Clash offered a rockier revisioning as the first track on side four of their triple album release, *Sandinista!* Seventeen years later, the Spanish group Amparanoia, founded and led by singer Amparo Sánchez, put a Spanish-language version of the song, now titled 'La semana', on their first album, *El Poder de Machin*. Sánchez has explained that she included this track on the album as a recognition of the influence on her of both the Clash's music and their political philosophy.³

In 2003 the French group Zebda, who were also influenced by the Clash, along with the English group, Asian Dub Foundation, recorded a live version of the song. Zebda and Asian Dub Foundation's version of 'Police On My Back' makes a strong

statement about police treatment of those people with colonial histories still discriminated against and even sometimes refused full membership of European states. The final version of the song that I am discussing is that by the English grime artist, Lethal Bizzle. Bizzle's version was released as a single in 2007. It samples the Clash's version while, over the top, Bizzle recounts a story of organised car-theft that he claims is from his own life before he became a performer. Where the Equals' original version failed to make the charts, Bizzle's version climbed to number 37 on the UK singles chart. Invoking the Clash's version which, in turn, recalls that of the Equals, Bizzle's track marks out a history of 'Police On My Back' from Grant's colonial invocation of a Jamaican rude boy running from the police to a neoliberal present where, as it turns out, Bizzle's accomplice is caught by the police and, we are told, as Bizzle laughs ironically: 'You know what happened to him, init.' We do not know, but in that silence lies a history of the maltreatment of black migrants to Britain.

Postcolonial Migration to Britain and France

Over the forty years between the Equals' version and Bizzle's version the situation of the migrants and their descendents from the colonised periphery in the colonial core has changed significantly. In the immediate post-Second World War period, while they would have preferred white European migrants, the British and French accepted, and sometimes encouraged, migrants from their colonies as a way to supply their countries' labour needs during the period of post-war industrial reconstruction that lasted until the early 1970s. Kathleen Paul writes:

From the very beginning colonial migrants posed a conflict of interest for (some) UK policy makers and (some) UK employers. ... government officials disliked the notion of migrating colonials and tried to prevent further arrivals. Yet, at a time when ‘you couldn’t get an armless, legless man, never mind an able-bodied one,’ the colonial workers proved a necessary stopgap. (Paul, 1997, p. 119)

These colonial migrants whose arrival in Britain is usually dated to the docking of the *MV Empire Windrush* at Tilbury on June 22nd, 1948, with 492 mostly Jamaicans on board, were viewed as economically beneficial but a threat to British society.

Ashley Dawson writes about Britain that, ‘despite the powerful fiction of British subjecthood, which suggested that all the members of the empire were equal in the eyes of the reigning king or queen, imperial power was based on a firm distinction between colonial metropolis and colonised periphery’ (Dawson, 2007, p. 4). He goes on to explain that: ‘Driven by this history of uneven development, the migration of colonial subjects to Britain brought the economic subordination integral to the colonial system home to the metropolis, sparking correspondingly intense political struggles’ (2007, p. 5). As Dawson signals, the migrants to Britain were channelled into the jobs that white Britons found least desirable, from garbage collecting to working on the London underground rail network.

In France the situation was very similar. Before 1962, when Algeria became independent, it was governed as a part of France. Consequently, there was free travel between Algeria and the French mainland. As the Algerian war started in 1954 so

increasing numbers of Algerians, at first Kabyles and then Arabs, moved from Algeria to the mainland for work. By 1954 there were about 300,000 Algerians in France and increasingly the men were bringing over their families. This was the time of *Les Trentes Glorieuses*, the thirty glorious years from 1945 to 1975 of post-war reconstruction when the French economy expanded and industrialised requiring increasing numbers of workers. Even after Algerian independence Algerians continued to move to France. In 1968 a quota was set at 35,000 per year.

In 1973 no more Algerians were allowed to migrate. By this year the global economy was in crisis. Alejandro Reuss explains:

In the 1970s, the United States' position as the unchallenged colossus of the capitalist world was suddenly threatened from multiple directions: rising international competition, spiking energy prices, declining productivity and profitability, and soaring inflation and unemployment. The United States' trade deficit crept up in the course of the 1960s, and government deficits emerged late in the decade and persisted through the 1970s. Declining international confidence in the dollar led to the depletion of U.S. government gold reserves, as international holders of dollars demanded redemption of their dollars for gold. (The Nixon administration responded by ending the fixed-rate convertibility of the dollar for gold.) Inflation picked up in the late 1960s, ratcheting up from about 3% in 1966 to nearly 6% in 1971. (Reuss, 2009)

The end of the automatic convertability of dollars for gold, that is the end of the gold standard, marked the abandoning of the Bretton Woods consensus which had organised the global economy since 1944. One of the most critical signs of the crisis was the stock market crash which began in January 1973 and continued until December, 1974. During this time the American share market lost 45% of its value and the British stock market lost 73%. At this time of major economic disruption, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), in October 1973, placed an oil embargo on sales of petroleum to the United States and Western Europe. This lasted until March, 1974. In 1974 the United Kingdom went into recession with the added problem, by 1975, of 25% inflation.

Britain had started restricting colonial migration in the early 1960s:

Open borders to the Commonwealth came to an end in 1962; quotas for work permits were halved in 1962 and primary migration was definitively halted in 1971. The following two decades contained further restrictions, formal and in implementation, that made British migration policy about as restrictive as it can possibly be. (Hansen, 2000, p. 222)

As Randall Hansen also notes, the 1981 British Nationality Act, brought in by Thatcher's government, 'decoupled nationality law and immigration. Immigration and citizenship are now governed by distinct legal regimes' (Hansen, 2000, p. 207). From the 1970s onwards, 'issues that would have been defined in terms of immigration in the 1960s—the 1981 Brixton riots, the 1985 Toxteth riots, the 1989 Rushdie affair—have been understood as issues of 'race relations' (2000, p. 212). As we shall see, one

element in this shift related to the policing of areas with high numbers of migrants and their descendants. Although not as badly affected as Britain, France too moved into recession by the end of the decade and, in 1974, had an inflation rate of approaching 15%. In 1974, France stopped all immigration from outside the European Economic Community except for family reunions.

Bill Edgar, Joe Doherty and Hank Meert sum up these changes:

Commonly four phases of post-Second World War immigration are identified in Europe. The first period, from the end of the war to the early 1960s, was a period of migrant absorption following the disruptions of the war and rapid decolonisation. The second period, which lasted until the oil crisis of the early 1970s, was a period of economic expansion and labour recruitment. Net migration during these periods averaged 2.6 per 1,000. The third period, characterised by stagnation, the end of full employment and general economic uncertainty, stretched through the 1970s and into the 1980s, net migration dropped back to 1.7 per 1,000 during these years. The fourth period, dating from the end of the 1980s and continuing to the present, saw a revival of net migration to 4.7 per 1,000 and coincides with selective economic recovery. (Edgar, Doherty, & Meert, 2004, p. 17)

Thus, we can say that, by the time of the Clash's version of 'Police On My Back', the dominant discursive understanding of the colonial presence in Britain, and France, had

altered from questions associated with migration to the ways this non-white presence was managed.

The Equals, 'Police On My Back' and Rude Boys

We should now return to the Equals' version of 'Police On My Back'. Eddy Grant was born in Guyana in 1948. His family migrated to Kentish Town in London in 1960, six years before Guyana became independent. The Equals were formed in 1965, with three Caribbean migrants, Grant, and the twin brothers Derv and Lincoln Gordon, whose parents had migrated from Jamaica, and two white Londoners, John Hall and Pat Lloyd. Grant has always emphasised the diversity of his musical influences. For example, on his website we are told that, 'Eddy was exposed during his childhood to the distinctive sounds of African and Indian music which is indigenous to Guyana along with the music of the surrounding countries such as Surinam and in particular Trinidad and Tobago' (Eddy Grant biography, 2011) and that, in England, 'he was exposed to the rock and roll of Chuck Berry and the nascent pop music scene' (2011). As he began writing songs, Grant was conscious of his audiences. His work for the Equals, such as 'Baby Come Back', was recorded in the beat group genre pioneered by groups such as the Dave Clark Five and was aimed at the same white young people.

In 1967 Grant had recommended a ska group called the Bees, whom he renamed the Pyramids, to Ed Kassner who owned President, the label to which the Equals were signed. For this group, Grant reworked the Prince Buster song 'Train To Girls Town' into 'Train Tour To Rainbow City' which got to number 35 on the singles chart. Grant

was learning to write in a Jamaican musical genre. It is in this context that we can understand the development of 'Police On My Back'.

The Equals version of 'Police On My Back' is grounded in a hard and regular drum beat which was typical of Dave Clark Five hits such as 'Bits And Pieces' which had reached number 2 on the singles chart in 1964. However, the lyrics are given a Jamaican slant by the strong accent of Derv Gordon who was the group's lead singer. What, then, are the lyrics? The lyrics immediately throw us into a drama. In the first person, we are told that the singer is running and that the police are chasing him. We are then told, 'They were shooting, police on my back/And the victim, well, he won't come back.' Someone has been shot and the police are chasing the singer's character down a railway track. The singer has been running 'Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday'. The police are relentless. The singer asks for help: 'Could you help me; police on my back/They will catch me if I dare drop back'. He is clearly terrified of being caught. Then, the second time we have the days of the week refrain, we have the phrase which, from the Clash's version onwards, will get a radical reinterpretation: 'What have I done?' This question returns near the end of the song when it is expanded: 'What have I done? Tell me, please somebody.' Throughout the song the lead guitar plays notes that imitate a police car siren lending urgency to the singer's running, an urgency reinforced by the pounding drum beat which could be the pounding of the runner's heart in exertion and anxiety. The track fades out with the wailing guitar siren and the drums riffing around the beat. The singer is still running from the police.

Where do these lyrics come from? They are generic. The lyrics for 'Police On My Back' are typical of the rude boy genre that peaked in Jamaica between 1964 and 1967. This genre emerged in tandem with the increasing visibility of rude boys. The first significant, critical appraisal of rude boys was published by Garth White in 1965. Writing from a Marxian perspective, White saw rude boys as the dispossessed, as being young men aged between 14 and 25 and 'coming from the lower 60% of the population that shows [shares] approximately 19% of the National Income [and are] angry. Angry to the point of violence' (White, 1967, p. 39). Rude boys began to make an appearance around 1961. In the first instance they were rural youth who had moved to the city but were unable to find work and lived in the slums that were spreading outside Kingston. Obika Gray writes that:

Beginning about 1961 and blossoming fully three years later, a rebellious youth movement erupted as a distinct force among the unemployed. Self-consciously identifying themselves as 'rude boys' or 'rudies,' this contingent of young men adopted exhibitionistic forms of behavior which made them the bane of those charged with summoning the subordinate classes to the dominant ideology. (Gray, 1991, p. 73)

As the rude boys became increasingly violent, they carried ratchet knives, machetes and, subsequently, guns. By 1965, White tells us, they were grouping into gangs. These territorially-based gangs were soon coopted onto the payroll of one or other of the two main Jamaican political parties and contributed to the new levels of violence during elections from 1967 onwards.

White suggests that the first ska song to acknowledge the rude boys was by Roland Alphonso in late 1962. The rude boy genre took off around 1964. As Stephen King writes:

Many rocksteady and ska musicians were united in representing the frustrations of the lower classes in Jamaica. Many of these musicians were poor, lower-class blacks who lived in the impoverished areas of West Kingston and struggled daily to overcome the lack of shelter, food, and steady employment. (King, Bays, Barry, & Foster, 2002, p. 36)

While it might be stretching things to describe the rude boy genre in the terms of social realism, nevertheless the songs did indentify a Jamaican social phenomenon. Songs supported the rude boys, or criticised their behaviour, or, often, were ambivalent especially in the face of police attempts to curb the violence.⁴

In Britain, little of rude boy culture was transferred other than the dress style and the songs. As Dick Hebdige has pointed out, both made important contributions to the skinhead style (Hebdige, 1991, pp. 55-57). In 1967 Desmond Dekker and the Aces had a number 14 hit with a song the lyrics of which would have been almost incomprehensible to the average white, British teenager, '007 (Shanty Town)'. Had that teenager been able to understand the lyrics embedded in the strong Jamaican accent, they would have known that the song described what happens when rude boys get out of gaol: 'Dem a loot, dem a shoot, dem a wail/A shanty town'. In the same year Dandy Livingstone, who had migrated to England when he was fifteen, released 'Rudy, A Message To You' with a rocksteady rhythm. Rude boy songs could be written in England, and could be

successful in the charts in England, though as it happens no song had both these attributes. Grant's 'Police On My Back' hedged its bets. It has a rude boy narrative married to a beat group beat and rhythm. Nevertheless, as I have noted, the single failed to make the charts. Skinheads, who listened to ska, helped make '007' a hit. Mainstream white teenagers who bought beat group songs were used to lyrics about girls, and love and its complexities—'Bits And Pieces', for example, is about how the singer feels now that his girl has left him. In 1967 they were not used to songs about killing and being chased by the police.

Which brings us back to the meaning of the lyrics. As a rude boy song, it is most likely that 'Police On My Back' would have been heard as a song in which the violent rude boy is being chased by the police because he has killed someone. The 'What have I done?' is, then, an expression of regret at the murderous act which will shape the rest of the singer/rude boy's life. One can imagine that Grant was hopeful that such a sentiment, signalling that the song is on the side of the law, as is Livingstone's 'Rudy, A Message To You' which asks rude boys to stop their violent behaviour and settle down, would help ingratiate the track with the record-buying youth. At the same time, though, it should be added, the rude boy is not caught by the end of the song suggesting, at the least, some sympathy with his experience of the oppressive circumstances that have contributed to his becoming a murderer. However, for those unfamiliar with the genre, which would have been most British young people, the lyrics simply presented an image of violence with which they were totally unfamiliar. After all, British police do not carry guns and, on television, in spite of the popularity of the grittier *Z-Cars* which had begun in 1962, the long-running *Dixon of Dock Green*, in

which the affable George Dixon mostly engaged in community police work, remained the image of policing that Britons preferred.⁵ In spite of its rhythmic urgency and pounding beat the track, as I have mentioned, did not enter the singles chart. Grant's song is the product of a migrant trying to synthesise the differences between Caribbean musical cultures and indigenous, British popular music.

'Police On My Back' Becomes a Song About Oppression

I have already signalled that the Clash radically revise the meaning of 'Police On My Back'. In order to understand how this happened we need to look at the way the Clash, themselves, were perceived. Along with the Sex Pistols, the Clash are considered to be one of the most successful of the British groups that came out of the punk moment. Where they differed from the Sex Pistols is that where the Sex Pistols were fundamentally nihilistic, the Clash had a more defined political position. In part these differences resulted from the divergent philosophies of the groups' two managers, Malcolm McLaren and Bernie Rhodes. However, the Clash's generalised support for those who experienced the oppression of the system also came from the views of their lead singer, rhythm guitarist and spokesperson, Joe Strummer. In his performing years before the Clash was formed Strummer even called himself "Woody" Mellor, Mellor being his family name. 'Woody' came from the American folk-singer and political activist, champion of the poor and dispossessed, Woody Guthrie.

This grass-roots politics of oppression combined with Rhodes' Marxism to make the Clash the most politicised of the popular groups to come out of the British punk movement. Jon Savage explains that: 'The Clash had been set up to organise a Punk

community which [by the late 1970s] had largely disappeared, except in the enthusiasm of their young audiences' (Savage, 1991, p. 519). The activism and the theory can be found in Savage's description of the group's first two albums: '*The Clash* had been a concept album of trial and tribulation in Ladbroke Grove, but *Give 'Em Enough Rope* was about global oppression' (1991, p. 519). One of the ways that the group resolved the contradictions between these two aspects of their politics was to develop the persona of the outlaw and rebel, an image embodied in Strummer himself. In his biography of Strummer, Chris Salewicz gives an example of the development of the image:

One night in February [1977], after an evening at the Roxy, Joe moved on to the Speakeasy ... In the tiled men's room [a ted] gave Joe a sound thumping, rendering even greater destruction to the Strummer dental bomb-site by knocking out part of a front tooth. In an interview that the Clash did with NME writer Tony Parsons the next month, Joe mythologized the incident, claiming that he'd had a knife with him but realized that if he'd "stuck it in him" he'd have gone to jail. (Salewicz, 2006, p. 179)

As Salewicz comments: 'The outlaw gang image of the Clash was quickly being cemented into place' (2006, p. 180). However, the Clash's outlaw image always included a sense of political purpose. As Stephen Thomas Erlewine puts it: 'The Clash copped heavily from classic outlaw imagery, positioning themselves as rebels with a cause' (2013).

The image of the rebel came through strongly in the group's choice of cover songs. One of the first to be recorded was 'I Fought The Law'. Written by Sonny Curtis and recorded originally in 1959 by his group the Crickets, who had been Buddy Holly's backing group, the single went nowhere. It was recorded again by the Bobby Fuller Four in 1965 and climbed to number 9 on the American singles chart. Strummer and Mick Jones heard this version in San Francisco in 1978. The Clash's version was first released on a British EP in 1979 and was also put on the American release of the group's eponymously titled first album. The song, sung in the first person like 'Police On My Back', is about a man who robs people with a six-gun because he needs money. Now he has been caught and is 'Breaking rocks in the hot sun'. The song's lyrics express well the sense of oppression that was fundamental to the Clash's worldview. As Dean G. Falvy remarks: 'For The Clash, the typical introduction to the law begins with a slap of handcuffs on the wrist and ends with a stiff sentence in Brixton' (2003).

With this image of the rebel oppressed by the law it is no wonder that the Clash liked rude boy songs. The only cover on the British version of the group's first album was their version of Junior Murvin's 'Police And Thieves'. Recorded in 1976, Murvin's track is not in the rude boy genre as such. However, it is a commentary on the violence that was overtaking Kingston as a consequence of the rude boy gangs becoming linked to political parties. Later, on their third album, *London Calling*, the Clash would record their version of the Rulers' 1967 rude boy reworking of the Stagger Lee story, 'Wrong 'Em Boyo.' On the same double album was the Clash's own rude boy song, a celebration of those who can't fit into mainstream society, written by Strummer and Jones, 'Rudie Can't Fail'.

The Clash's version of 'Police On My Back' appears on their fourth album, *Sandinista!*, named for the Nicaraguan socialist freedom fighters who, the year previously, in 1979, had overthrown the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Tony Fletcher tells us that the Equals' version 'was a Clash tour bus favourite, and the group used it to ease into recording sessions at New York's Power Station' (2005). It is faster and louder than the Equals version with the police siren guitar, played by Mick Jones, at a higher pitch helping to increase the experience of urgency. Mark Deming describes how, 'with Mick Jones taking the lead (both in his vocals and his slashing guitar parts), the song became a hard charging, high velocity rock & roll onslaught.' Where the Equals used a beat group rhythm, the Clash's version reworked this into a rock backing. Rock here was not being positioned as the music of a dominant, white culture but, as it had often been identified, the music of rebellion—but that rebellion was white.

Deming comments on the Clash's interpretation of the lyrics: 'Jones' skittery guitar line effectively translated the song's lyrical confusion into music, and his delivery was a striking blend of rage, fear, and puzzlement as he cried out in the chorus, 'What have I done? What have I done?'" (2013). The ideological point of view of the Clash restructures the lyrics. Now, the singer's character has done nothing. This is why he sounds puzzled. If he has done nothing then it must be the police who have just killed someone. This makes sense given that the Clash think of the police as an instrument of oppression. Why, then, is this man being chased? He doesn't know and neither do we. We can, though, surmise that he might be about to be framed for the murder. It is the ambiguities in Grant's lyrics that allow for this change of meaning. This running man is

no longer only a rude boy, he has become a symbol of all those unjustly targeted by the police working as an instrument of state oppression. By 1980 in Britain, this interpretation had a racial element.

As we have seen, from the early 1970s onwards Britain, along with other countries, was undergoing an increasingly complex capitalist crisis involving high unemployment along with high inflation. The people who suffered most were those at the lower end of the job market, and this was where the West Indian migrants and their children had been positioned. Through the 1970s there developed a media-fuelled anxiety about mugging which was linked to unemployed black youth. Police started to use the so-called 'sus' law, a part of the 1824 Vagrancy Act, which allowed them to stop and search anyone who was suspected of the intent to commit an indictable offence. Young black people were particularly targeted. In 1987 the authors of *Policing Against Black People* wrote,

throughout the 1970s a consistent pattern had developed of police overmanning of black events, police raids on black clubs and meeting-places, and police concentration in predominantly black localities. Since then this pattern of overpolicing appears to have continued and intensified through a variety of measures: mass 'stop and search' operations in black areas; large-scale and coordinated raids on black homes and meeting places; routine patrolling of the inner-city with riot squads. (1987, p. vii)

In 1978 Stuart Hall, Chas Crichton, Tony Jefferson, John N. Clarke and Brian Roberts published *Policing the Crisis*, an account of the ways that mugging had become characterised as a black crime and how black Britons were being used as scapegoats for Britain's economic problems. As Dawson has written: '*Policing the Crisis* elaborates a theory of Britain's Black communities as part of an international surplus labor population whose outsider status allowed them to be demonized by British authorities in order to explain away their inability to establish a socially and economically just society' (2011). In April, 1981, the police started Operation Swamp 81 which was designed to decrease crime in Lambeth. The name came from Thatcher's notorious 1978 comment in a television interview that British people feared the country 'might be rather swamped by people with a different culture'. In five days around 1000 predominantly black people were stopped and searched. The result was the Brixton riot which was the first of many riots in black areas across Britain's cities. The Clash's revisioning of 'Police On My Back' may have been the expression of a general attitude but, by the turn of the decade, it had a direct relevance to the circumstances of black Britons.

'Police On My Back' and the Colonial Experience in France

As I have indicated, through the late 1980s and 1990s the situation in the *banlieues* worsened. There were numerous riots, often precipitated by police killings:

The riots that followed the death of a young man killed by police at a roadblock in La Courneuve in July 1988 were accompanied by a silent march "to contain the anger," with the victim's family in attendance. In

November 1995, the death of a young man at the hands of an officer at a police station unleashed a riot in Laval. It was followed by protests for “justice” in the city streets. In December 1997, a silent march was held during a wave of rioting, after a seventeen-year-old boy was killed by police. (Lapeyronnie, 2009, p. 32)

Death caused by police actions began to seem normal.

One reason for the number of deaths, and for the ensuing riots, was the increase in the policing of the *banlieues*. Paul A. Silverstein explains that,

the French government has responded to the ‘crisis’ of the *cités* with increased police intervention, predicating urban renewal on social and political quiescence. Reacting to the growth of ‘lawless zones in which the law of the Republic is totally absent’, the 1995-1996 plans added 200 plainclothes inspectors to the already expanded suburban security forces to ‘penetrate the milieux of delinquency’. In 1999, Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin took these surveillance methods one step further, mobilizing 13,000 additional riot police (CRS) and 17,000 military gendarmes to patrol these same ‘sensitive urban zones,’ and thus effectively completing the militarization of the French suburbs [*banlieues*]. (2002, p. 52)

Here we see well the uneven development of the colonial periphery brought home to the colonial core, along with the militarised policing methods used in the colonies to subjugate the colonised.

Zebda formed in 1995. While all the members of Zebda were born in France, three were of Kabyle background and the other four had Spanish, Italian and French origins. As Danielle Marx-Scouras writes: ‘Zebda considers itself a colored (*coloré*) or *métissé* rock group’ (2004, p. 54). That is, Zebda see themselves as being hybrid. Politically, they placed hybridity against the racist preoccupations of the dominant political groups in France who continue to consider migrants and their descendents from the old African colonies to be not properly French and who continue to push for a unitary French culture. Beur is backwards slang (*verlan*) for Arab. Zebda is the Arab word for ‘beur’ meaning ‘butter’. Playing a syncretic mix of musical genres, the group’s politics were similar to those of the world-rock groups such as Mano Negra, and Zebda, too, as it happens, were influenced by the Clash. As Jonathan Ervine notes, ‘Zebda’s music highlights the importance of issues such as difference, discrimination and exclusion in contemporary French society’ (2008). On their 1996 album, *Le Bruit et L’Odeur*, the title track includes a sample of the notorious speech made by Jacques Chirac in 1991 when he was mayor of Paris in which he railed about French workers living next door to ‘*des musulmans et des Noirs*’ (Muslims and blacks) and having to put up with, among other things, ‘*le bruit et l’odeur*’, the noise and the smell.

Similar to the members of Zebda, the members of Asian Dub Foundation are all British-born and of South Asian descent. Like Zebda, their music is a mix of diverse

elements. Where Marx-Scouras identifies Zebda's music as an 'eclectic blend of ragamuffin, rock, rap, ska, raï, Arab-Andalousian, and French musette sounds,' (2004, p. 53) Asian Dub Foundation, on their website, describe their sound as 'a combination of hard ragga-jungle rhythms, indo-dub basslines, searing sitar- inspired guitars and 'traditional' sounds gleaned from their parents' record collections, shot through with fast-chat conscious lyrics' (2013). The two groups have similar histories. Many of Zebda's members worked for community organisations helping youth in Toulouse; the members of Asian Dub Foundation met at London's Community Music where their bassist, Dr Das, taught music technology.

Zebda and Asian Dub Foundation recorded their live version of 'Police On My Back' on the French television show *Music Planet 2Nite* on February 4th, 2003. It has appeared as a track on the bonus CD of Asian Dub Foundation's *Enemy of the Enemy* album released later in 2003. It was also included on the *Another World Is Possible* collection issued as a fundraiser for the anti-globalisation collective called Attac in 2005. This time, performed by two groups, one including the children of French North African migrants and the other consisting of the children of English South Asian migrants, the meaning is clear. After the 1980s riots, and related deaths, in Britain and the deaths and riots in France this is now a song for those still regarded as migrants in both countries, people whose colour has them marked by the history of colonialism even though they have been born in the home of the coloniser.

Zebda and Asian Dub Foundation's 'Police On My Back' starts not with the guitar police siren but with a statement of difference, first a regular drum beat then

Asian Dub Foundation's dohl beating out an insistent rhythm. Only after this assertion of the presence of the Asian Other do we hear what is now a recording of an actual police siren. Then, after more from both sets of drums, we have the guitar siren. The lyrics that follow are returned to those of the Equals and the Clash. Now they make full sense for these racialised Others. Now, 'What have I done?' is alternated with an accusatory 'What have you done?' and is answered with 'We don't know!!' Using profiling, the police will chase you and stop you simply for what you look like. Right through the track there is DJ scratching, increasing yet again the song's sense of disruption and urgency. By the middle of the song it has turned from rock into ragga returning it, in an updated form, to its Jamaican generic origin and asserting, again, a productive cultural hybridity, or what the French call *métissage*.

In 2005, two years after this live version was recorded, members of the *brigade anti-criminalité*, a notorious plainclothes police group formed in 1994 who focus on stop and search policing and other street-level anti-crime measures mostly in the *banlieues*, were carrying out identity card checks in Clichy-sous-Bois, a *banlieue* on the edge of Paris. They tried to stop a group of teenage boys who had been playing football. One of them, it seems, did not have his identity card with him. Because of this, and in a ghastly echo of the revisioned lyrics of 'Police On My Back', three of the boys ran away and were chased by the police. The youths hid in an electricity substation where two of them, the 'Arab-looking' Zyed Benna of Tunisian background and the 'black' Bouna Traore from a Malian background, died from electrocution and the third, Muhittin Altun, the son of Kurdish migrants, was seriously injured. Zyed was seventeen and Bouna just fifteen; Muhittin was seventeen. What followed were some of France's

worst ever riots culminating in the declaration of a national State of Emergency by the now President Jacques Chirac.

'Police On My Back' and Racialised Oppression as a Way of Life

In 2007, and back in Britain, Lethal Bizzle released his version of 'Police On My Back', a monologue over a sample of the Clash track. Bizzle, born Maxwell Ansah in 1982, a year after riots had erupted across a Britain being transformed by Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal-dominated government, provides a narrative of life in the black economy (such an apt term!) typical for many, and especially the descendents of migrants from Britain's colonies, who remain socially disenfranchised in Britain's racialised class structure. Dawson explains:

Given the internationalization of capital after 1970 and the uneven impact of Britain's decline, the tendency of what Bob Jessop calls a two-nation project was to expand privileges for those perceived as good citizens in areas such as transport and housing where private property entrenched privilege. At the same time, the 'bad citizens,' who suffered the brunt of widening differentials within the wage-earning classes and the shift of public wealth to private hands through neoliberal privatization, were increasingly stigmatized. Of course, black and Asian Britons suffered disproportionately from the blighting economic and social impact of post-Fordism. (2009, p. 14)

Jessop describes how, “two nations” projects aim at a more limited hegemony [than one nation projects] concerned to mobilise the support of strategically significant sectors of the population and to pass the costs of the project to other sectors (as in fascism and Thatcherism)’ (1991, p. 156). Because the majority of the colonial migrants had been confined to the lower reaches of the working class, they and their children were the ones who were most disadvantaged in this construction of two nations. Bizzle has spent his entire life in this social order.

Bizzle was one of the founders of the genre known as grime, a black British form of music. Nabeel Zuberi describes it like this: ‘Where garage was more R&B-influenced in its lyrics and music, and shared the consumerist ethos of blinged-up US hip-hop and R&B, grime tended towards choppiest beats and synth stabs, MC rhythms rather than singing voices, and localized shout-outs in its east and south London ‘street’ commentaries and beefs about rival MCs’ (2010, p. 184). The edginess of the early grime tracks, their tendency to disrupt the smooth flow of the listening experience, can be read as an expression of the deracinated lives of those that made them.

One part of grime’s evolution through the 1990s was a new tendency to sample the one white British subculture that grime artists considered retained some credibility, punk, and, as Ruth Adams writes, ‘Lethal Bizzle mines those elements of punk most evidently influenced by black music, performing versions of songs by the Ruts with hardcore band the Gallows and sampling the Clash’s cover of Eddy Grant’s “Police on my Back”’ (2008, p. 482). These uses by grime artists of punk songs, which themselves had been heavily critical of life in a Britain that was beginning its neoliberal restructure,

tended to emphasise by comparison how much worse life had become a generation on for those left behind in the redistribution of wealth to the already moneyed classes.

Bizzle's monologue, like the lyrics of 'Police On My Back', is cast in the first person. He begins by telling us 'True stories.' He tells us how, 'I used to be a criminal, top car dealer.' He gives us details on the reselling process of the cars he would steal. He explains that the best sellers were the humble Fiat Punto and he tells us that, in the end, he stopped this practice because of his shift of focus to music. He then offers a story about being in a stolen Punto and getting chased by the police. He escapes but, as he tells us in an anti-climactic coda, his friend got caught.

The Clash's version and Bizzle's monologue link at the moment when, hiding from the police helicopter, Bizzle tells us that he thinks 'shit' and the sample gives us the Clash singing 'What have I done?' This time the Bizzle character has done something, not murder but the much more mundane crime of car theft, property crime, and of a cheap run-about at that. Bizzle's monologue works as a commentary on the Clash's romanticisation of the experience of oppression and dispossession here expressed in the redirecting of the meaning of the lyrics of 'Police On My Back.' In 'Career Opportunities' the Clash, back in 1977, had described them as 'the ones that never knock.' The song is resentful. For Bizzle and his generation lack of work opportunities is everyday life, not something they have missed out on. In his monologue, Bizzle's character's 'work' is in the black economy. He survives on the money he makes stealing and selling cars. Where the Clash utilised the image of rebellion to campaign for an end to oppression, Bizzle's character accepts his

circumstances and does what he can to make a living—which, when there is no legal work available, involves petty crime. In the end, Bizzle’s character survives and becomes successful in the music business. His mate, though, is not so lucky.

In the post-Second World War period, part of the colonial periphery relocated to the colonial metropolises. In the first instance this was because the European heartland required labour to rebuild the national economies devastated by the tribulations of the war. The Caribbean migrants in Britain and the North African migrants to France were in the main confined to the lowest-paid, and most menial jobs. Through processes of discrimination the migrants also found themselves increasingly confined to particular areas, a development more extreme in France than Britain. When the recession of the early 1970s increased unemployment and governments began a neoliberal restructuring of national economies, the colonial migrants were the first to be laid off and they, and their children, lacked the skills needed to access the new economic order. The result was increasing petty crime and the increased policing of the areas where migrants lived.

The changing meanings of ‘Police On My Back’ speak of these developments. From being a genre song about Jamaican rude boys being chased by the police, the song has become an anthem of the experience of the oppression of the colonialisised Others in the colonial metropolis. Richard Osborne notes that: ‘Each time this song has re-appeared the police-siren guitar has risen in prominence’ (2007) which has given each subsequent recording a greater urgency and sense of confrontation until, on both Zebda and Asian Dub Foundation’s, and Bizzle’s, versions there are snatches of actual police

sirens. At the same time, the song also has a history of mixing genres, an indication of hope, of multicultural hybridity and *métissage*, that runs through all the versions I have discussed. However, in its revisioning by Lethal Bizzle the sampling of the Clash's version against Bizzle's monologue of petty crime and over-policing in suburban decay suggests also, a generation on, the loss of the hope expressed in the Clash's political philosophy.

Four years after Bizzle's version of 'Police On My Back' made the UK singles chart, in August 2011 rioting again broke out:

'Over the Saturday of the 6th and throughout the following day, the disorder spread from Tottenham to other areas of North London, such as Wood Green and Enfield, then to other parts of the capital, including Hackney, Waltham Forest and Brixton. By Monday the 8th, most areas of London had experienced public unrest, with the "worst" experienced in Croydon, but major disturbances also occurred in Birmingham, Nottingham, Liverpool, as well as minor ones in Thames Valley, Bristol, Leeds and Huddersfield. On the fourth day, the riots had calmed down in London, but were still happening in Nottingham, Gloucester, Birmingham and Liverpool, and causing significant disorder in the Greater Manchester area, particularly Salford.' (Smith)

Four deaths were linked to the riots and in one estimate: 'The riots in England will cost the taxpayer more than £133m in policing and compensation for businesses hit

by the violence' (2011). The majority of the rioters were from Britain's non-white, marginalised and impoverished communities.⁶ The immediate trigger was the police shooting death in Tottenham of Mark Duggan, a twenty-nine year old man of Afro-Caribbean descent suspected of carrying an illegal gun. It turned out that Duggan did have a modified handgun. However, in spite of police claims at the time, Duggan had not fired at them. The ensuing riots might be seen as the uprising of Britain's disadvantaged and disillusioned, the generation without hope exemplified in Bizzle's narrative.

NOTES

¹ The debate is now too large to be fully referenced here. Key texts concerned with theorizing hybridity include Homi Bhabha *The Location of Culture*; Robert Young *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*; Joel Kuortti and Jopi Nyman eds. *Reconstructing Hybridity: Post-Colonial Studies in Transition*.

² I discuss the Equals in more detail in 'Skin Deep: Ska, and Reggae, on the Racial Faultline in Britain, 1968-1981'.

³ Unfortunately, because of the problem of word length I am unable to discuss this version here in the detail it deserves.

⁴ Dick Hebdige has discussed the rude boy genre in Chapter 8 of *Cut'n'Mix*.

⁵ On early British police television series see Susan Sydney-Smith's *Beyond Dixon of Dock Green: early British police series*.

⁶ One discussion of the riots is Karim Murji and Sarah Neal 'Riot: Race and Politics in the 2011 Disorders' in *Sociological Research Online*.

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