

“Police On My Back” and the Postcolonial Experience in Britain

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One song that can be read as a marker of the changing experience of migrants in Britain and Europe is “Police On My Back”. 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.

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. Later that year the track appeared on the group’s album *Explosion*. Of the later reworkings of this song, there are four of significance for my argument here. In 1980 the Clash offered a rockier revision 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 recognition of the influence on her of both the Clash’s music and their political philosophy. 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.

For reasons of space, in this paper I concentrate on the British versions of “Police On My Back”, those by the Equals, the Clash and, finally, Lethal Bizzle. Bizzle, an artist who works in the genre of grime, released his version as a single in 2007. It samples the Clash’s version and while over the top, Bizzle uses it to recount a story of an organised car-theft that he claims featured in own life. The Equals’ original version failed to make the charts, however Bizzle’s version gained significant interest.¹ 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. We are told, as Bizzle laughs ironically: “You know what happened to him, init.” We do not know, but we can surmise, in that silence lies a history of the maltreatment of black migrants to Britain.²

Postcolonial Migration to Britain and France

Over the forty years between the Equals’ and Bizzle’s versions of “Police On My Back”, the situation for migrants and their descendents has changed significantly. In the immediate post-

¹ See, for example, reports of the track’s ascension on Radio 1 Charts via *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2007/oct/05/urban>, accessed 1/11/12.

² Throughout this paper I have used lower case ‘b’ for black where it is a racial designation to signal that ‘blackness’ is a constructed category.

Second World War period, the British and French accepted, and sometimes encouraged, migrants from their colonies as a way to supply their countries' labour needs. While they would have preferred white European migrants, during the period of post-war industrial reconstruction that lasted until the early 1970s, these colonial migrants became notable additions to the landscapes of their new homes.

For example, the migrants, whose arrival in Britain is usually dated to the docking of the *MV Empire Windrush* at Tilbury on 22 June 1948 (with 492 mostly Jamaicans on board), were viewed as economically beneficial, but a threat to British society. Dawson writes about Britain's migration and its broader cultural and social effect, noting that:

Driven by [the] 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: 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. Such rapid changes inspired music with the passion, rebellion and (at times) relative fear that can be observed in "Police On My Back".

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, and 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 ... [and that, in England] ... he was exposed to the rock and roll of Chuck Berry and the nascent pop music scene (Grant, <http://www.eddygrant.com/site/main.html>, accessed 1/11/11).

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. Kassner 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.³ 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". However, the lyrics are given a Jamaican slant by the strong accent of Derv Gordon who was the group's lead singer.

³ For this history, see Stratton, 2010.

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 White in 1967. Writing from a Marxian perspective, White saw rude boys as the dispossessed, young men aged between 14 and 25, "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" (1967: 39). Although these commentaries emerged in the mid and 1960s, rude boys had begun 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. 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 (1991: 73).

This was the early days of the culture, and as the rude boys became increasingly violent, they carried ratchet knives, machetes and, subsequently, guns. As White tells us, the boys soon grouped 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, with the rude boy genre taking off around 1964 (1967). Further, King (2007: 36) 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 (2007: 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

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 (on early British police television series, see Sydney-Smith, 2002). In spite of its rhythmic urgency and pounding beat the track, as I have mentioned, did not enter the singles chart. With its lyrics located in the Jamaican rude boy genre and its rhythmic form drawn from the English beat group style, Grant’s song can be read as 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 revised 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. However the Sex Pistols were fundamentally nihilistic, the Clash had a more defined political position.

This grass-roots politics of oppression combined with their manager Bernie Rhodes’ Marxism made the Clash the most politicised of the popular groups to come out of the British punk movement. 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.” (1991: 519), while evidence of the activism present in the music can also 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” (ibid). 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.

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”. The Clash’s version of “Police On My Back” appears on their fourth album, *Sandinista!*, named for the Nicaraguan socialist freedom

⁴ For more on the rude boy genre, see Hebdige, 1987, Chapter 8.

fighters who, the year previously, in 1979, had overthrown the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle. 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. Deming (n.d.) 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 (n.d.) 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?’

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 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’ (quoted in Dawson, 2007: 92). 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 version 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 Racialised Oppression as a Way of Life

In 2007, Lethal Bizzle released his version of “Police On My Back”, consisting of a monologue over a sample of the Clash track. Bizzle was born Maxwell Ansah in 1982, a year after riots had erupted across a Britain being transformed by Margaret Thatcher’s neoliberal-dominated government. This 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. As 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 (2007: 14).

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. 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 choppy 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: 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.

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.

Conclusion

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 colonised Others in the colonial metropolis. Richard Osborne (2009) notes that: “Each time this song has re-appeared the police-siren guitar has risen in prominence” 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. However, in its revision by Lethal Bizzle, including the sampling of the Clash’s version and the addition of a monologue about petty crime and over-policing in suburban decay, now the song presents something new again for a generation on. Specifically, with Bizzle’s version is the loss of the hope expressed in the Clash’s political philosophy. Four years after Bizzle’s version made its place in UK scene, London, Manchester, Liverpool and other cities again erupted in riots. This time, with a police shooting and killing Mark Duggan in Tottenham, a black man suspected of carrying an illegal gun.

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