

Book Review**Catching History on the Wing**

A. Sivanandan
Pluto Press 2008

The overthrow of the Institute of Race Relations in 1972; transforming it in the process from a capital serving research unit into a radical think-tank is a pivotal moment in Britain's history of race relations. It was an overthrow from below. And as the IRR's then librarian, A. Sivanandan observed; at its core was a battle over the definition of the British 'race problem'. The victorious staff may have been left with no money; with no premises; but they had emerged with a way of seeing. The problem, as it were, was not 'race' – but racism.

The publication of *Catching History on the Wing* then has come at a moment when its messages, accounts, and discussions are sorely needed. At a time where the government appears adamant on reversing any gains made through the acknowledgement of institutional racism nearly 10 years ago; a time of anti-Muslim racism, control orders, multiple foreign occupations, increased racist violence, surveillance, biometrics, increasing inequality, and targeted campaigns against asylum seekers, this collection of Sivanandan's works over more than the last 40 years – most of which have been written as IRR Director (a role he took on in 1973) – gives us an insight into the very heart of British anti-racist struggle. One only has to look at

the bibliography of writings at the back of this book to understand – for those who don't already know – just how integral Sivanandan has been, and is, to this struggle. The titles of the speeches, books, articles, and pamphlets give an indication. 'Prison', 'immigration', 'repatriation', 'imperialism', 'capitalism', 'resistance', 'poverty', 'assimilation': key words leap off the page, emphasising the breadth of the battle and telling their own story. Whilst his list of obituaries give a poignant reminder of some of the friends, comrades, and even enemies that he has encountered, in one way or another, along the way. This is not a book of theorising from a vantage point above and beyond the vanguard.

Writing and fighting are synonymous, as Sivanandan famously asserted, and the 11 pieces that make up this book bear testament to these words. On one level they take us on a journey through the history of ideas about race theorising. *La Trahison Des Clercs* (1995) admonishes the postmodernist ideologies and ideologues that offered a retreat from anti-racism as racism itself gathered pace. The 'intellectual playboys of the western world', as he bluntly puts it, are exposed as intellectual cowards; servitors to capital and unable (or unwilling) to offer their knowledge to greater struggles against injustice. Whilst *The hokum of New Times* (1990) is written with what, at one point at least, appears to be a twinge of sadness. 'Dedicated to those friends with whom,

out of a different loyalty, I must now openly disagree' he offers at its beginning; before going on to dismantle the claims of those intellectuals and activists who distorted Marxism in the journal 'Marxism Today'. 'New Times', the hook around which they were based, was 'Thatcherism in drag'.

But if this was a battle of ideas which Sivanandan put so much effort into, it was only so much so in the sense that these ideas had, and have, relevance for the lived experience of racism and injustice. *Race, class and the state* (1976) expertly analyses Britain's post Second World War shifts in immigration control, explaining how racism changed, changes, to suit different times. Its investigation of the legislative framework through which exploitable migrant labour was 'managed', and the role in this framework in marrying capital dictates with the mediation of class conflict, reveals as much about today's immigration controls as it does about those at its time of writing. Whilst the struggles against the institutional racism that this framework consolidated are described from the perspective of one who was there. *From resistance to rebellion* (1981) tells us not only about how anti-racist struggle was 'fought on the factory floor and in the community, as a people and a class, and as a people for a class'. It tells us about the context within which such resistance took place: Surveillance, harassment, racist violence, stop and search, detention and

deportation are, of course, by no means unique to today's political structures.

These essays do not just provide a historical account of shifts in state racism though. Nor do they end at providing a detailed account of black resistance in the UK – although both of these things are achieved. What these essays do is provide a way of understanding local realities in a global context; and the realities of today within a historical framework. *Imperialism and disorganic development in a silicon age* (1979) outlines the exploitation and poverty that was consolidated through the (then) shifting basis of global capitalism. Whereas the *New circuits of imperialism*, written ten years later, details the creation of new 'hierarchies of labour', new forms of global order, and new forms of racism that these circuits embedded. The ways in which imperialism and racism are linked is explained, in one way or another, in each of the essays in this collection – but *A black perspective on the gulf war*, written in 1991, makes this explicitly clear. And in doing so sets out a meticulous analysis of why anti-racism is anti-imperialism. His discussion of an emerging anti-Muslim racism in this same essay is nothing short of prophetic.

As Colin Prescod writes in the foreword to this collection Sivanandan has influenced a generation of Black British community activists; and the essays in this volume have been written in the thick of struggles – taking their strengths

from those who fight against injustice whilst informing and inspiring those very same battles. If, as Sivanandan argued at the launch of this collection, 'history tells us where we came from and where we are at. But it also should tell us where we should be going', then *Catching History on the Wing* adds weight to these words. It is Sivanandan who has so clearly dismantled the contemporary attack on multiculturalism and its shift to the assimilatory policy programme of community cohesion. And in *Race, terror and civil society* (2005), it is Sivanandan that has so coherently unravelled the ways in which those who espouse democracy and values are themselves betraying these ideals through the combined 'war' on asylum and terror.

In the final analysis *Catching history on the wing* illuminates as much as it inspires. It teaches as much as it enthuses. And perhaps most of all it emphasises how Sivanandan has, and continues, to steer the IRR in his own goals, as a 'servicing station for oppressed peoples on their way to liberation'.

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