

FROM THE EMPIRE WINDRUSH TO BLACK BRITAIN TOWARDS A MULTI-CULTURAL SOCIETY

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*De l'Empire Windrush à l'Angleterre noire
Vers une société multiculturelle*

Résumé

À la fin de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, bien que la Grande-Bretagne ait été parmi les gagnants du conflit, le nombre des morts pouvait sérieusement affecter la possibilité de restructuration économique du pays. Pour faire face à ce manque de travailleurs et stimuler l'arrivée de main-d'œuvre étrangère en 1948, le Premier ministre britannique Clement Attlee, promulgue une loi – British Nationality Act – qui permet aux résidents de la colonie d'avoir une citoyenneté britannique. Cette mesure provoque un important flux important d'immigrants, en particulier dans la colonie des Caraïbes, colonie qui a envoyé sur le front, pendant la guerre, la plupart des gens. La première manifestation de ce phénomène qui attire l'attention est l'apparition du navire Empire Windrush, le 22 juin 1948. Une fois avec l'arrivée de ces nouveaux citoyens, de nouveaux problèmes font surface: les immigrants sont victimes de discrimination, en particulier en ce qui concerne la possibilité de trouver une maison ou un emploi, qui, normalement, ne respecte ni les attentes, ni les capacités des migrants. L'insatisfaction de cette catégorie se développe, le Parlement approuve des lois contre la discrimination, mais, en même temps, les meilleurs sites des sus-laws attribuent plus de

force à la sécurité d'alimentation, ce qui a permis d'arrêter des suspects uniquement en fonction de la couleur de la peau. L'attitude du parlement contre la discrimination ne passe pas inaperçue: en Angleterre, se manifeste une série de rebellions conduites par les immigrants. Les révoltes sont répétées avec une constante fréquence, dans une période de temps qui prend plusieurs années jusqu'à l'apogée qui a eu lieu à Brixton. Après l'émeute, les sus-laws sont abolies et, en 1987, commence la lutte pour le progrès sur le chemin de la victoire des droits des immigrés, car l'élus est le premier député du parlement en provenance des Caraïbes. Après les années '90, les conditions des peuples immigrés en Angleterre se sont améliorées, même si les statistiques prouvent encore une discrimination sur le marché du travail. Cette situation défavorable a permis de créer un microcosme dans lequel les immigrés mélangent leurs culture et coutumes avec les traditions anglaises et, en particulier, avec les traditions des autres groupes d'immigrants.

Mots clés *colonie, migrants, immigrants, discrimination*

Rezumat *La sfârșitul celui de-al Doilea Război Mondial, chiar dacă Anglia a fost printre câștigătorii conflictului, numărul morților afecta grav posibilitatea de restructurare economică a țării. Pentru a face față acestei lipse de muncitori și a stimula sosirea forței de muncă străină, în 1948, primul ministru britanic, Clement Attlee, promulgă o lege – British Nationality Act-ul-care permite și locuitorilor coloniei să aibă cetățenie britanică. Această măsură provoacă un mare flux de imigranți, mai ales din Caraibe, colonie care trimis în timpul războiului cei mai mulți oameni pe front. Prima manifestare a acestui fenomen care atrage atenția opiniei public este ajungerea corabiei Empire Windrush, pe 22 iunie 1948. Odată cu sosirea acestor noi cetățeni, ies la suprafață noi probleme: imigranții sunt discriminați mai ales în ceea ce privește găsitul locuinței sau al locului de muncă, care de obicei nu respectă nici așteptările nici capacitățile migrantilor. Nemulțumirea acestei categorii crește, astfel parlamentul aprobă unele legi împotriva discriminării,*

dar, în același timp, prin sus laws-urile atribuie mai multă putere forței de securitate, care are voie de a opri suspectii doar pe baza culorii pielii. Atitudinea parlamentului față de discriminare nu trece neobservată: în Anglia începe o serie de revolte conduse de către imigranți. Rebeliunile se repetă cu o anumită frecvență într-o perioadă de timp care durează mulți ani, până ce în 1981 se atinge apogeul la Brixton. După această revoltă, sus laws-urile sunt abolite și, în 1987, lupta înaintea pe drumul câștigării drepturilor din partea imigranților, pentru că este ales primul deputat al parlamentului care provine din Caraibe. După anii 90, condițiile popoarelor imigrante în Anglia s-au îmbunătățit, chiar dacă statisticile dovedesc în continuare o discriminare pe piața muncii. Această situație nefavorabilă, mai degrabă decât o integrare, a permis să se creeze un microcosmos în care imigranții și-au amestecat cultura și obiceiurile cu tradițiile engleze, dar mai ales cu tradițiile celorlalte grupuri de imigranți.

Cuvinte cheie colonie, migranți, imigranți, discriminare

Great Britain won the Second World War, but the inheritance of the conflict was enormously heavy. England, like almost all the other countries of Europe, was in ruins and, above all, saw the erasure of an entire generation of youths. A lot of workforce was required and the Prime Minister Clement Attlee, first after-war labour minister, decided to open the doors for colonies' workers or, in general, for Commonwealth countries. In 1948 Attlee enacted the "British Nationality Act" which gave migrants the status of "citizen of the United Kingdom and colonies". From the beginnings of 1948, migration fluxes started, especially from poor zones like the Caribbean and India.

In the collective imagination, the date that changed the shape of Great Britain is 22nd June 1948, when the cruise boat "Empire Windrush", docked in Tilbury, London. The passengers

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were 492, they came from Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and other islands of the Caribbean. The different thing was that they were the first group to arrive in mass to settle in England. Many on the Empire Windrush were ex-servicemen; they were mainly Caribbean who had fought in the Second World War in the Royal Air Force. They were promised jobs for the services provided, and others tried to rejoin the RAF¹. The rest were men of other nationalities, principally Polish refugees who were trying to start a new life in Great Britain.

Since the arrival, the Jamaican passengers thought that it would be difficult to start a new life from nothing. The people who came wanted jobs, wanted to change their lives. The migrants came from varied kinds of backgrounds, education, but they were all united under the flag of hope. Some were professional people who migrated to England to improve their careers, but the majority were unskilled and semi-skilled workers without training. Migrants could hardly guess what problems they would face. Most of them thought they would go back to Jamaica in a few years with a lot of money in their pockets. They didn't know anything about the new place, except for the knowledge of Jamaicans who had already been in England, primarily the veterans of the Second World War. In the circumstances, the passengers of Empire Windrush were quite well lucky². The Ministry of Labour and the Colonial Office quickly intervened, classifying the arrivals, and transporting them to their pre-arranged destinations.

Almost at once, the immigrants faced the problem of racial discrimination, especially when the necessity to find an

¹ "Empire Windrush" (The AJN Transport British Collection, 2005): <http://www.oceanlinermuseum.co.uk> (accessed on 09. 08. 2013).

² Rory O'Connell, "Sam King, Full Interview", Museum of London.

accommodation, a home, became urgent. According to what emerges in many interviews, the biggest problem for immigrants was finding a house.

After 1948, Caribbean arrivals were numbered 700 a year. Between 1951 and 1953 they increased to between 1.750 and 2.200. In 1954 the number was 10.000 and, in 1955, it was 27.500. By the end of 1956, a little over 40.000 Caribbeans had joined their compatriots already living in Britain³. West Indies immigrants went to Britain in search of work, a higher standard of living and better prospects for their children. The expansion of British economy, thanks to USA economic loans, gave the propulsion to the factories to increase production and improve the technologies. Mechanization of the factories gave the motivation to stagnant sectors of industry, like metal manufacture and transport, where long work shifts and low wages made the jobs unattractive to British workers. Mainly, West Indies immigrants found “menial”, jobs, as porters, street cleaners and workers in factories and building sites. The few jobs that offered a decent paid work were that of transport, public transport (for example London transport or railways) and jobs in General Post Office. Principally women easily found work like nurses, seeing that in the re-build era, the Ministers of Health and Labour, in conjunction with the Colonial Office and the General Nursing College launched a campaign to find hospital staff directly from the colonies, in this case, the Caribbean. Maybe, the problem that most afflicted the great majority of immigrant doctors and nurses in the United Kingdom was the discrimination around training and career progression. Many health service workers expected to gain the internationally recognized State Register Nurse qualification, which would allow them to obtain a quick introduction in the working world, but they found the hostility of government. In fact, nursing authorities

³ Statistical data from “The National Archives”.

of that time thought that the racial characteristics of immigrants limited their intellectual capacities and made them impossible to reach the level of their white colleagues⁴.

In answer, English Parliament issued in 1965 the Race Relations Act, which aimed to prevent racial discrimination and making it illegal in public places. The act forbade the discrimination on “the ground of colour, race, or national or ethnic origins”⁵. The controversial point of the Act was that it was limited just in public places (not everywhere). The Race Relations Act was revised in 1968 and was intended to strengthen the previous act. It made unlawful the discriminations above mentioned not only in public places, but also in the housing, employment and commercial services⁶. Furthermore was instituted the Community Relations Committee, whose aim was to fight discrimination and prejudice through education.

In order to prevent public disorders caused by the increasing tension of the end of sixties, the British government decided to reintroduce police powers to stop and search people, basing on just reasonable suspicion (so called *sus laws*). The use of *sus laws* created unhappiness in the black community, who felt that it was used by the police to target black youths. At the begin, police used to stop black youths who were known to act in illegal way, but in a short time police began to stop also people who were doing their business, with the justification that “Black people are generally predisposed to be criminal, and it's their culture

⁴ Jones, Emma and Snow, Stephanie: *Immigration and the National Health Service: putting history to the forefront*: <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-118.html>, 2011 (accessed on 16. 08. 2013).

⁵ *** *BBC News*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>. (accessed on 08. 08. 2013).

⁶ *** *The Race Relations Amendment Bill*, The Parliament of United Kingdom, 8 March, 2000.

which produces this criminality. We, British people, are at a loss to know how to intervene in that cycle of criminal pathology"⁷. Everybody in the Caribbean community faced the problem.

18th January 1981 is a date that has been impressed in the memories of Caribbean immigrants, and changed in a certain sense the way of living of immigrants in the United Kingdom. On that day 13 black youths were burned to death while they were celebrating a birthday at the house of a family, the Ruddocks, in New Cross Road, Deptford. From the reports of Police⁸ resulted that the fire started on the ground floor and quickly spread through the house; furthermore it was found liquid substance which probably raised the power of fire⁹. The investigation never gave results and nobody was ever accused of the fire. The opinion of the black community was that the blaze was a racial attack and literally shocked not only the Caribbean community, but also the entire nation. The human loss was enormous, and volunteers tried to help parents of victims. But another reason that made explode Caribbean's anger was the silence of mass media. Local immigrant's community made the best to inform the other communities scattered in the nation. The week after the fire the parents of victims organized a meeting to make clear the dynamics of blaze. Incensed by the slow police progresses, they planned a huge mass march for the 2nd March. It brought together activists from all over the country and consequently was set up The New Cross Massacre Action Committee. The attendees of the

⁷ Phillips Mike, Phillips Trevor (2009), *Windrush, the Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain*, Harper Collins, New York, p. 305.

⁸ *** 1981: *Nine die in New Cross house fire*, BBC News: <http://news.bbc.co.uk>. (accessed on 18. 08. 2013).

⁹ *** 1981: *Nine die in New Cross house fire*, BBC News: <http://news.bbc.co.uk>. (accessed on 18. 08. 2013).

march were about 15.000¹⁰ and they marched with the slogan “Thirteen Dead and Nothing Said”. The marchers walked from Deptford to Hyde Park, passing the House of Parliament. The march ended without problems, except for a minority of marchers, who had confrontation with the police. The day after, national newspapers reported about the march, giving emphasis, above all, to the disorders. Les Back, one of the organizers of the march, declared: “While the local press reported the march respectfully, the national papers unloaded the full weight of racial stereotyping”¹¹. Days after the march, Les Back and other organizers were arrested, accused to inciting to riots, but they were freed afterwards.

The situation in Britain, especially in London, was delicate. The Deptford Fire sharpened the discontent in the black community, and in particular in the Brixton area were registered increasing inconveniences. Brixton is an area of London where 25% of residents were from an ethnic minority group¹². *Sus laws* were refreshed and so started again the period of tension and fear.

On 10 April 1981 a policeman was patrolling a principal street in Brixton and stopped a young black youth who was running over him¹³. The boy was bleeding and tried to run away from the policeman. A rumour quickly went around that the

¹⁰ Akwagyiram, Alexis, *Did the New Cross Fire create a black British identity?*, BBC News: <http://www.bbc.co.uk>. (accessed on 19. 08. 2013).

¹¹ Back, Les, *Written in Stone: Black British Writing and Goldsmith College*, London, Goldsmiths University of London, 2011.

¹² Cindi, John, *The Legacy of Brixton Riots*. BBC News: <http://news.bbc.co.uk>. (accessed on 21. 08. 2013).

¹³ Reid, Sue, *Heroes or Anarchists? The 1981 Brixton riots are now being hailed by the Left as a heroic uprising. The truth is rather different*. *Daily Mail*: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk>. (accessed on 22. 08. 2013).

policeman was trying to arrest an injured man, rather than taking him to the hospital. Within an hour, the riots started.¹⁴ Residents began to throw petrol bombs towards the police and barricades were erected in the streets. Darcus Howe¹⁵, a local resident, declared that “It was asponaneous social explosion transformed itself into an organized revolt”¹⁶. Police didn’t have the equipment and the experience to face that kind of situation and, at the end of riot, 300 policemen were injured and 82 arrests were made¹⁷.

The riot in Brixton hangs over for one day, but in the July of the same year, exploded other riots in other cities of Britain. In consequence of rioting, the Home Secretary commissioned a public enquiry to Lord Scarman. The judge Scarman declared that the riot was caused by “complex social and economic factors”¹⁸ and, after the report; the *Sus laws* were abolished. By the end of the eighties the transformation of Caribbeans was complete. Diane Abbott, first black Member of Parliament of modern times, entered in the House of Commons in 1987. This was an important sign of change. Seen from all these perspectives, the history of Caribbean migrants is very hard, and a continually evolving process.

At the start of the nineties and in contemporary history it could seem that things have completely changed from the time of the *Windrush generation*. But a closer look could show that some problems of the past are remained unchanged. Black male school

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ Darcus Howe was the organizer of the New Cross March and later, the editor of *Race Today*.

¹⁶ *Brixton and the Riots in 1981*, BBC News: [http://www. Nickelinthemachie.com](http://www.Nickelinthemachie.com). (accessed on 23. 08. 2013).

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *** Q&A, *The Scarman Report*, BBC News: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/bbc_parliament/3631579.stm. (accessed on 26. 08. 2013).

leavers have few possibilities to gain a job in comparison with their white colleagues¹⁹. Also disorders are not a solved problem if we consider the rioting of London boroughs in the summer of 2011. The disturbances began on 4 August, when Mark Duggan, a black guy, was shot to death by the police²⁰. The dynamics of the shooting are not clear, because policemen who killed the boy reported a previous attack of Duggan, but the situation has never been resolved. On 6 August a peaceful protest was held, but the situation quickly degenerated and disorders exploded in Brixton, Islington and Tottenham. Shops in the area were looted; buses and police cars were blazed²¹. The disturbances in London ended three days later, but they continued in other cities like Birmingham and Nottingham and saw, on the whole, the arrest of 1.100²² people.

The situation for black community in Britain, in this case focusing on Caribbean community, is still far from being stable and solid. Prejudice and racism are not just words, are concept entrenched in human being and the contents of this thesis underline the burden that these had in the growth of the Caribbean immigrants. Immigrants have created a microcosm, recreating, in the limit of possibilities, institutions of their mother countries, or that of their parents. Immigrants have transplanted their values, mixing them with the values of English people and even, with the beliefs and qualities of immigrants of other

¹⁹ Mike Phillips and Trevor Phillips, *Windrush: the Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain*, Harper Collins, London 1998.

²⁰ *** *BBC News*: <http://www.bbc.co.uk>. (accessed on 12. 08. 2013).

²¹ *** *Riots in Tottenham after Mark Duggan shooting protest*, *BBC News*: <http://www.bbc.co.uk>. (accessed on 11. 08. 2013).

²² *** *Hundreds join Manchester clean-up after riots*, *BBC News*: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-14478902>. (accessed on 26. 08. 2013).

countries, making Britain a melting-pot of races, cultures and colours.

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