

African Americans
and
Black British Citizens:
a Comparison

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1. Introduction:

In 1776, when Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, the separation of Great Britain and The United States became final. Since then, the two nations have undergone developments that took them into different directions. Yet, they still share some common features today. They basically speak the same language, in each country, two major parties compete for political leadership, and their art, entertainment, and lifestyle are exported to and emulated by continental Europe and other nations¹, to name only a few examples.

But the two also share a bleak chapter in their history. Both of them have colonised parts of Africa and the West Indies and enslaved the countries' black inhabitants. At different times in history and under different circumstances, these slaves² have come to the United States and Great Britain. Today, their descendants make up 12.1 per cent of the American population³ and 1.6 per cent of the population of Great Britain⁴.

In this paper I want to examine the present social situation of the black minority in Great Britain and the United States and their place in society. Due to the limitation in scope I have to obey, I will concentrate on the subjects of education and crime.

2. History:

2.1. Immigration from the West Indies to the British Isles

Black British citizens came to live on the British Isles on their own free will after Great Britain had transformed its former colonies all over the world into independent states under the British Crown. 50 of these states form the Commonwealth⁵. All the citizens of Commonwealth countries used to have the right to British citizenship, but that was changed with the enactment of the Nationality Act in 1981⁶.

Using their legal status as British citizens, black people from the West Indies came to the British Isles after World War Two to find work. This was encouraged by the British government as there was a labour shortage in Britain. In the 1960s, when this shortage

¹ In the case of Britain this role is concentrated on the music industry.

² In the case of Britain: descendants of former slaves.

³ W. P. Adams et al., *Länderbericht USA*, Volume 1, p. 345

⁴ 1991 Census Factsheet No. 1: *Settlement Patterns of Ethnic Minorities in Britain*, Commission for Racial Equality, London

⁵ There used to be 52, but the Republic of Ireland left the Commonwealth in 1949 and South Africa did the same in 1961.

⁶ Kastendiek, Rohe, Volle (eds.), *Länderbericht Großbritannien*, pp. 336/337 and p.147

no longer existed, laws were passed to restrict immigration from Commonwealth countries.⁷ The legal equality of the immigrants and their families and descendants was secured under the Macmillan government in the 1960s, while social tensions between white and black Britons grew.⁸

There has never been an organised civil rights movement for the rights of black British citizens, as they already had the same rights as the white British people. However, black immigrants in Britain have not always been treated equally. Their anger over the suffered injustices has several times been cause for violent riots and fights with the police. For example, there was the Leeds Bonfire Night incident, the Carib Club incident, the riots in Brixton, and the violent eruptions at the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival.⁹

2.1. Origin of the African Americans and the Civil Rights Movement

Slaves were taken from Africa to North America from 1501 until 1808, and after April 9, 1865, when the Confederate Army surrendered in Virginia and the American Civil War was won by the North, slavery was abolished in the United States¹⁰. But the situation of the freed slaves had only improved slightly. They were still subject to discrimination. From 1890 until the beginning of World War One the white landowners in the South attempted to secure their politically and economically advantageous position by introducing new laws that made it harder for black people to gain the right to vote. Furthermore the so called "Jim Crow Laws" advanced the segregation of black Americans from white Americans even more. The radical whites of that period did not refrain from violence, either.

This situation resulted in large scale immigration of black citizens from the agricultural South to the industrial North, where they were treated slightly better. But they still suffered discrimination. For example, they were excluded from most labour unions and did not find work easily¹¹.

The radical change of the African Americans' situation came in the 1950s, when the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum. In 1954, the case "Brown against the board

⁷ Abercrombie et al., *Contemporary British Society*, pp. 246-248

⁸ Microsoft *Encarta Enzyklopädie*, entry on "Großbritannien"

⁹ Cecil Gutzmore, *Carnival, the State and the Black Masses in the United Kingdom*, from: W. James, C. Harris, (eds.) *Inside Babylon* Chapter 9

¹⁰ Adams et al., Volume 1, pp.105-108

¹¹ Adams et al., Volume 1, pp. 130/131

of education" defied the "separate but equal" doctrine¹² and it was determined that black and white children should attend the same schools. This decision caused opposition that resulted in violent reactions by many white Americans. For example, in 1957 African American children could only enter the High School of Little Rock, Arkansas, under the protection of the National Guard¹³.

In 1955, the Montgomery Bus Boycott that lasted 381 days and was led by Dr. Martin Luther King junior¹⁴, resulted in the declaration that segregation in public transport was unconstitutional¹⁵.

In the 1960s, a more violent form of protest evolved. Influenced by Malcom X¹⁶ and the Black Panther Party¹⁷ there were eruptions of violence between African Americans and the police in almost all American cities (starting with Los Angeles in 1965). Until 1968, 220 people were killed and more than 8000 were injured, most of them African-Americans.

From the 1970s to the present, less radical, non-violent movements have gained more importance. Although there is no more legal segregation in the United States and African Americans have equal rights, at least in theory, there are still some difficult issues left that need to be dealt with.¹⁸

¹² a decree issued by the Supreme Court in 1886 which stated that segregation was not discriminative, when the facilities provided for black Americans were of equal quality as those for whites

¹³ Adams et al., Volume 1, pp. 197-199

¹⁴ 1929-1968; African American Civil Rights leader, Baptist priest, and Nobel peace prize laureate; inspired by Gandhi's principle of non-violent resistance; arrested several times in the course of his activities for the Civil Rights Movement; 28.8.1963 March on Washington and speech "I have a dream ..."; in 1967 joined the Anti Vietnam War Movement which was led by whites; shot by James Earl Ray, a white ex convict, on April 4 1968 (Source: Microsoft *Encarta Enzyklopädie*)

¹⁵ Microsoft *Encarta Enzyklopädie*, entry on "Afroamerikaner"

¹⁶ 1925-1965; born Malcom little; served a sentence for burglary in 1946; in prison he was introduced to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Black Muslims(also called Nation of Islam) who believe that all whites are devils, he joined the Nation of Islam when he was released from prison in 1952 and became their most prominent public figure, changed his name to Malcom X, because his family name was a symbol of his people's slavery; left the Nation of Islam in 1964 due to differences of opinion, found the Organisation of Afro-American Unity; in the same year, he went on a pilgrimage to Mecca; changed his attitude towards whites; on February 21 1965 he was shot(allegedly) by members of the Nation of Islam.(Source: Microsoft *Encarta Enzyklopädie*)

¹⁷ militant group of African Americans, founded in 1966; propagated armed self-defence, came under the suspicion of performing terrorist acts; constantly harassed by the police; some members were killed by the police under unclear circumstances; the group split up in 1972. (Source: Microsoft *Encarta Enzyklopädie*)

¹⁸ Microsoft *Encarta Enzyklopädie*

3. Specific Aspects of the Present Social Situation

3.1. Education

3.1.1. Great Britain

3.1.1. a) Primary and Secondary Education

Several studies, conducted between 1966 and 1991 draw the conclusion that children of Afro-Caribbean origin perform less well in school than white or Asian children (excluding Bangladeshis). Although, they suggest that the black children's performance improves proportionately to the years they spend in Britain. This improvement is, on average, higher than that achieved by other groups. By the time they leave school, only 7 per cent of black children do not have some kind of qualification. In 1987, 47 per cent of them gained grades A to C at O level or grade 1 at CSE.

However, they still range in the lower regions of scholastic achievement. Some of the studies tried to give reasons for this situation. They assume that, firstly, most children of Afro-Caribbean immigrants belong to lower social classes, where low scholastic achievement is generally more common than in the middle or upper classes. Secondly, it was suggested that the lack of positive role-models does not help in encouraging the children to study more. In 1988, only 2.6 per cent of all persons enrolling for teacher training classes were black. Once they completed their education, they had trouble finding employment and experienced discrimination in the workplace.

The social atmosphere in the schools as they present themselves to the children, is one of prejudice and disapproval. One study states that Afro-Caribbean pupils are four times more likely to be suspended from school than white children. In 1987, 33 per cent of children suspended from school were black, while they only constitute 14 per cent of all pupils. Reason for this overrepresentation in suspensions was given. The study suggests that most teachers misread the children's body language and overall behaviour as aggressive or challenging, because they are not informed about cultural differences.¹⁹

3.1.1. b) Higher Education

A study performed in 1987 showed that black students tended to enrol on courses with lower status. In 1990, students of black Caribbean and black African origin combined made up 2.6 per cent of all applicants to polytechnic schools. In proportion to this percentage, many of them were accepted. On the other hands, universities are less

¹⁹ Skellington, Richard. *Race in Britain Today*. pp. 176-185

likely to accept minority students. In 1991, black students constituted only one per cent of all students currently attaining university in Britain.

Not all black students who go into higher education complete their goal. In 1991, a study found that more than a quarter of all Afro-Caribbean students dropped out before their final exam. A major cause for these difficulties is seen in the governments ever changing attitude towards funding students of ethnic origin.²⁰

3.1.2. The United States

3.1.2. a) From Pre-school to High School and After School Activities

There is no single one image of the African American children's situation in a scholastic environment. Which grades they achieve and how well they are prepared for university and the challenge of finding a job depends very much on the individual school they go to. Inner-city schools tend to be more crowded and less well equipped with modern technology, therefore making it harder for black pupils to gain enough attention for their specific needs. Black children of less well to-do families are more likely to achieve lower grades. Most inner-city schools are not capable of dealing with all the problems these children might have. To cope with this issue, volunteer-programs have evolved over the last two decades. One of them is called big brothers/big sisters. This program assigns one adult to one child. The two spend time together and the adult is supposed to help the child in every way possible. Some of the program's achievements are: "...that those kids in the program (ages 10 to 16 in eight cities) were 46 percent less likely to start using drugs. African-American youths were a staggering 70 percent less likely to try drugs. Those with mentors also hit others less and skipped school less than the control group."²¹

One specific field where schools are trying to adapt to the African-American children's needs is language. Some elementary schools have been starting to teach children the difference between ebonics²² and standard English instead of merely correcting them. The aim of this tactic is not to encourage black children to use more ebonic expressions, which after all are, from a grammatically prescriptive point of view,

²⁰ Skellington, pp. 187-193

²¹ Alter, Jonathan. "Powell's New War". From: *Newsweek*. April 28, 1997 (This is not only the source of the quotation but of the entire preceding paragraph.)

²² Ebonics is a variety of English spoken by African Americans. Some of its main features are not to conjugate the verb to be and dropping final consonants from words. Whether ebonics is a language of its own or an English dialect is still under discussion.

wrong, but to make them aware of the differences. So that, eventually, they will use standard English at least in school and later in a professional environment.²³

3.1.2. b) Universities and Affirmative Action

The current situation of African-American university-students is characterised by an educational dilemma. Every American University desperately wants to attract more African-American students in order not to appear racially biased and because to praise the minority presence eases a lot of academic guilt.²⁴ But on the other hand, especially the "good" universities demand certain qualifications from their applicants that most African-American high school graduates simply do not meet. So the universities let them enter on lower standards. This is called affirmative action. Up to now, affirmative action has been in favour of black students, but not all minorities have been that fortunate. Asians, for example, score higher on their SATs²⁵ than their white fellow students. But due to affirmative action, only a certain percentage of them receive admission to the universities they want to go to. Had they been judged simply by their scholastic results, more Asians would have gained admission. Therefore, Asians tend to demand a policy of equal opportunity rather than affirmative action.²⁶

3.2. Violence and Crime

3.2.1. Great Britain

Starting in the late 1960s, the public grew concerned about black youths who became more and more alienated from British society. It was feared that these youths would turn to crime and violence to compensate for their unsatisfactory life. The main problems facing the youths at that time were unemployment, homelessness, and bad scholastic results.

However, nothing was done to improve the black youths' lives. Every report about a criminal incident involving somebody black as the perpetrator even hardened the public's opposition against black youths. Especially the police held the opinion that members of the black community were disproportionately often involved in criminal activities. A study conducted in 1972 refuted this point, but it found evidence for a

²³ Leland, John. Joseph, Nadine. 滴ooked on Ebonics“. From: *Newsweek* January 13, 1997

²⁴ Hacker, Andrew. *Two Nations*. P.140

²⁵ Scholastic Aptitude Test. A test taken by high school seniors to determine their qualification status for university.

²⁶ Hacker, Andrew. *Two Nations*. Chapter eight.

particularly severe conflict between the police and youths whose parents had come from the West Indies. These teenagers were frustrated for three major reasons. Firstly because of the pressure they were facing in finding a job and a place to live, secondly because they felt their parents were treating them with a dated understanding of morale, and thirdly, because they experienced conflicts with the older West Indians in general. In order to rid themselves of their frustrations, black youths turned against the police as an ever-present representative of a society they felt oppressed them.²⁷

On the other hand, evidence for the view that black British citizens are treated unfairly by and are underrepresented in the justice system exists. A study conducted in 1990 showed that black people "...were more likely to be stopped and searched by police, to be prosecuted and to receive a prison sentence than their white counterparts."²⁸

Once in contact with the justice system, black offenders have little chance of meeting black people working in law-enforcement or being otherwise involved with finding justice. In 1979, only 0.7 per cent of the jurors selected in 326 trials in Birmingham were of West Indian origin and in 1990, 1.9 per cent of all probation officers were black as were 0.9 per cent of people in the police-force, 1.3 per cent of solicitors, 1.9 per cent of magistrates, and 0.6 per cent of the people working in prisons.

3.2.1. The United States

African Americans are both more likely to be the victims or the assailants of crime in the United States. 35 per cent of all African-Americans have been the victim of a violent crime at least once in their life, 25 per cent have been violently robbed, and 10 per cent of African-American women have been raped.²⁹

However, these three crimes, namely armed robbery, rape, and murder are also the ones African-Americans are most likely to be arrested for. Whether this is a result of conscious or unconscious racism in the victims of crime (i.e.: they are not sure what the assailant looked like and just assume he or she was black) or whether this proves that African-Americans commit more crimes than whites or members of other minorities, is doubtful. It is a fact that most people associate violence with the term "black crime" and

²⁷ Solomos, John. *Race and Racism in Britain*. pp. 120-146

²⁸ Solomons. P.156

²⁹ Adams et al. P. 381

might therefore be more inclined to assume that African-Americans commit violent crimes.

A reason why crimes committed by African-Americans are featured more prominently in the public awareness is that blacks account for a high proportion of America's poor people. Being poor in itself does not mean one commits crimes, but if one chooses to do so, the options which crime to commit are much more limited. For example, somebody who is out of a job will never be able to commit so called "white collar" crimes such as stealing money from one's clients via a computer. The less well to-do a person is, the more likely the crime he or she might commit will be committed out in the open, i.e. on the street. Therefore, poor perpetrators of crime are much more likely to be caught than rich ones.³⁰

4. Conclusion

This is hardly all that could be said about the situation of the black minority in Great Britain and the United States. Only a few points were examined, but, going into more detail would be beyond the scope of this paper. I hope this brief insight has made it clear that there is still much left to be done to really establish a society without prejudice and discrimination.

³⁰ Hacker. pp. 179-198

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