

## **CERS Working Paper 2016**

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### **Post-racial Barbados? Continuing narratives of white dominance**

#### **Introduction**

'Barbados did slavery the best' (Conway et al: 2009: p90)

Barbados is a country situated in the west of the North Atlantic and prides itself on its idyllic scenery, historical churches and being one of the top ranking tourist destinations in the world. Therefore with a population made up of over ninety per cent of black afro-Caribbean individuals it is easy to oversee the vast amount of racial discrimination and segregation visible in the rural and urban areas of the country which often goes ignored not only by the rest of the world, but also by individuals within Barbados. A socially constructed definition of racism, as identified by Dikoter would consist of

Population groups that are imagined to have boundaries based on biological characteristics, and can be contrasted to socially constructed 'ethnicities', which are groups thought to be based on culturally acquired features (Dikoter: 2008:1479).

It is clear that in the case of Barbados, Dikoter is a large influence in understanding the way in which racism has developed. It is evident that Barbados adheres largely to Dikoter's interactive model, whereby local contexts such as slavery and the powers of the white elite have shaped racism within its context. As little research has been conducted outside of the western world regarding racism on a local level, this essay attempts to understand racism in Barbados as a local issue. The importance of researching such issues becomes apparent when observing the lack of assimilation in Barbados and the effects that this has on the countries discourse. By highlighting the issues within these societies regarding racialization, the ways in which education and government policies tackle these issues can be scrutinised. In Barbados, it is apparent that racism has become an issue of the past, with both the state and the general population ignoring the on going discrimination within the country. As a result of the apparent lack of urgency in resolving racial discrimination, little research has conducted an in depth analysis into why Barbados has suffered from racial discrimination becoming so engrained in their culture, in comparison to post-emancipation countries such as Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago who are largely controlled and influenced by the British Government and therefore the western world.

This essay will identify the ways in which racial discourse has been ingrained within the history of Barbados, dating back centuries to the commencement of the slave trade in the seventeenth century and the history and establishment of the sugar trade. The ways in which the black majority of the population are racially discriminated against by the white minority, who account for less than five percent of the population, will be highlighted. Four key dimensions will be evaluated in order to scrutinise the ways in which the minority assert power over the majority of the population. Firstly, the colonial legacy of Barbados will be assessed in order to evaluate the origins of racial discourse in Barbados and the growth of the white minority.

Furthermore, this essay will assess the ways in which the educational systems in Barbados have been manipulated in order to preserve and maintain the appearance and domination of the white minorities. The development of a curriculum based almost entirely on white national figures will be identified in order to assess how the issue of racialization has become

ingrained in the lives of the black majority of the population. As a result, this essay will identify how the black population are then unable to achieve substantial employment. The continuation of racial discrimination into the workplace will be assessed, whilst identifying the lack of state intervention when tackling racism within Barbados.

In addition the lack of assimilation of slaves and their descendants into communities will be evaluated by creating an understanding of the rules, restrictions and general public attitudes towards the integration of the black majority as well as creating an understanding of the lack of knowledge about racism in the country and therefore the possible lack of motivation to create changes.

Lastly, the lack of understanding of racism in contemporary society will be discussed in order to evaluate the lack of urgency or need to assess the issue of racism in Barbados.

### **Assessing the colonial legacy**

'Present-day Barbadian society is built on a history of racism and class divisiveness' (fisher: 1985 as in Walters: 2012: p14)

Members of the saladoid culture who originated from Venezuela were the first to inhabit Barbados. Although little evidence remains, it is thought that they arrived as early as two thousand years ago and were originally farmers and fishermen. Around seven hundred years later, the Arawak's arrived, bringing with them their skills in the crafting and pottery industry. The Arawak's lived in Barbados until around the 1200s when the fiercer more dominant caribs were thought to have arrived. In 1625 the first English ship entered Barbados and the island became claimed by King James 1. (Pariser: 2000: p21). In 1627, eighty settlers and ten slaves were brought over and those who had any form of wealth were allocated plots of land. From the time that colonists began to settle in Barbados, the aim was to find cash crop in order to engage in the European market. Initially, attempts were made to farm tobacco but the quality was inferior and therefore when the price fell, they turned to sugar cane. Although initially the production of sugar cane was profitable, when other sugar colonies began to emerge the price fell sharply. As a result large volumes of African slaves were imported and the land became sugar plantations, owned by a very small volume of white wealthy men, the plantocracy (Molen: 1971:287-288)

With the emergence of sugar cane into the agricultural sector, servants or slaves were heavily relied upon and as a result, anyone who chose to emigrate into the country was obligated to sign an agreement to serve a planter for approximately five to seven years. This process quickly became known as the slave trade. The urgent need for labour resulted in colonists trading for slaves in return for goods needed by European countries such as textiles and agricultural products. Although the exportations of slaves were originally white, the cheap labour of the black population caused the slave trade to become predominantly based on race. Therefore with the emergence of racism dating back to the seventeenth century, it cannot be denied that Barbados is an anterior form of racism, with racism deeply rooted in history, culture, education and politics. Although many revolts took place, many slaves were in awe and fear of the powers of their owners and therefore any rebellion was near to impossible. Consequently, throughout the history of Barbados, the black African population have been persecuted at the hands of the white minority population. The country consists of around ninety per cent of descendants of African slaves, with the remaining ten per cent being made up of Asians and white Europeans. It is evident that the population of Barbados has always revolved around a white-black dichotomy and therefore the categorization system has always been based on race rather than ethnicity. (Degia: 2007)

As mentioned above, originally the importation of slaves started off as predominantly white but as the production of sugar to provide for Europe increased, the importation of black African slaves increased at a substantial rate. By 1680 there were 38,000 slaves on the island, a figure that increased to 50,000 by 1700. (Walvin: 2007) In the pre-transatlantic slave trade period the Africans placed great emphasis on their political groupings. However with the development of the trans-Atlantic slave trade these identities quickly disappeared and became insignificant by altering a man or woman's conception of themselves as belonging to their

ethnic groups. Political identities became unimportant and the concept of pan-Africanism began to take root. Although it has been stated that pan-Africanism has no definitive definition it could be interpreted that

Pan-Africanism began as a body of ideas that led to the formation of a political movement with the aim of accepting all African people and their descendants (Worrell: 2002: p4).

The Africans came to the realisation that they were now part of a community of black people who came from all different countries in Africa who shared a common experience of slavery and racial discrimination. They realised that to succeed in overturning racial discourse they would have to unite as a single unity. This became known as a form of proto-pan-Africanism, which manifested itself in the form of attempts to resist the white minority and an attempt to overthrow the slave system (Worrell: 2002:p6). As explained by Beckles

In Barbados, freedmen were connected by economic competition and their status as potential allies for the white plantocracy elite in defence of slavery (Beckles: 1998 as in Lambert: 2001: p336)

However, in 1807, the British parliament abolished the slave trade and a slave registry bill was introduced in 1815. This led to the slaves believing that they would become fully emancipated. The emancipation act passed in 1833 which was an act passed by the British parliament abolishing all forms of slavery throughout the British empire, however slaves were forced to serve their owners for at least six more years. Towards the end of the nineteenth century ex-slaves, black and coloured workers began to unite with the help and contribution of black activists including Marcus Garvey. Towards the beginning of the twentieth century, policies were introduced to provide insurance for any families of black or coloured workers who fell ill or subsequently died. Furthermore in addition landships were introduced in order to empower and support black and coloured workers (Jackson et al: Unknown)

However emancipation did little to dislodge the economic dominance of the minority and the impact on the black minority was minimal. Post-emancipation, the English and Scottish elite continued to control politics due to restrictions on voting based on income. Although in the 1930s descendants of African slaves set up trade unions which later became the Barbados Labour Party, few changes were made and emancipation simply altered the discourse of labour from slavery to agricultural free labour. The end of European colonialism brought home the hope that countries such as Barbados would thrive in democracy and development, however little such changes occurred. This is because although emancipation was achieved, the country still relied heavily on the importation and trade of commodity goods which were volatile and heavily susceptible to price fluctuations. With such a reliance on the prices of primary goods, development and improvements were slow.

### **Construction of racism as historical**

‘The visible structures of racial segregation were so pervasive, and of such long duration, that they appeared natural’. (Chamberlain: 2006: p4)

In 1919 the first branch of the Barbadian UNIA was formed, with the majority of the branch being centred in urban areas of Bridgetown, with the objectives of teaching negroes to respect themselves, to bring about the unity of negroes and to keep them out of law courts (Worrell: 2002). The aim of the organisation was to bring the black population in direct confrontation with the white elite. However little documentation is provided into the success and the content of such an organisation. Nevertheless what can be concluded is that due to the on going racial discrimination within Barbados, the UNIA was unsuccessful in uniting the black majority with the white minority. This may explain why in recent years, racism has simply become invisible and therefore descendants of slaves, be it young children or grown adults, simply are not aware of the discrimination in which they face and the history of their ancestors attempts to gain freedom and equality within Barbados. This may also be due to peoples insecure feelings of the white minority group, but mainly because due to its background of slavery, racist practices have been so engrained in the Barbadian population

that they have been taken for granted and even when they are overt, hardly anyone complains against them. (Walter: 2012). Meeks points out that for the majority of the black population, the distinction between the two races has been internalised in order to secure at least a small percentage of the advantages experienced by the white people. In the eyes of the black population, rebellion would simply push them further into a world of social seclusion. (Meeks: 2001)

This is ironic because the black majority does not suffer from the same kind of fear which racism has engendered in other countries like the USA in terms of racial violence. Within Barbados, the black majority are not under threat of mass violence and death and do not seem to receive discrimination in relation to violence as was seen during the slave trade. As a result of a lack of direct discrimination, blacks in Barbados due to their socialisation seem to be unable to detect the subtle forms of racism because it is covert and is overlooked without objection as it is considered the natural order of things to do. The problem is that these racial views become engrained in individuals as normal and therefore little can be done to resolve the issue. (Walters: 2012). As stated by Chamberlain 'the visible structures of racial segregation were so pervasive, and of such long duration, that they appeared natural'. (Chamberlain: 2006: p4)

In Bridgetown for example, due to the dense population, assimilation was near to impossible. The black majority population were strategically placed, such as near to prisons in order to retain power. As suggested by Foucault, placing these individuals close to prisons was a constant reminder of 'panoptic power' whereby the daily sounds of the gallows reminded them of the consequences of any disobedience to the white elite. This political power is made clearer by the rejection of the Barbadian government to accept the British governments offer to purchase a silent rubber trap door, in order to keep the executions silent. (Foucault as in Chamberlain: 2006)

As stated by an American visiting Barbados, one could fully enjoy Barbados if they were fully prepared to 'ignore the frightful misery of the black workers' and to shut their eyes to anything unpleasant or discriminatory that they were to witness' (Richardson: 1985: p24). With individuals such as this, the white middle class, present at all stages of occupations it is of no surprise that the black population were simply forced to ignore the discrimination they faced.

The documentation of a women, the daughter of a village schoolmaster who recalls that further support this view as she states

growing up, I did not know of discrimination, except that I read of it and I heard of it, but growing up we never had to suffer it because we were the people in charge  
(Chamberlain: 2006: p4)

Therefore it is important to understand why the black Barbadian population were, and still are, so unaware of the racial discrimination that they are subjected to. Are Barbadian people, in particularly the black population, 'simply unaware of the racism surrounding them or do they simply chose to ignore it? It could be suggested that one of the main causes of this lack of knowledge is the lack of education provided by the white elite to educate the black population of their history.

### **The state and the educational system**

'It is the institutionalization of race and class relations on the slave plantation, and the perpetuation of these relations that has allowed issues of race, class, and ethnicity to endure' (Degia: 2007: p45)

It cannot be disputed that education is vital as a tool for influencing the minds of many young individuals on many political issues, including racism. In Barbados, the white contemporary individuals who constitute less than five per cent of the islands population enjoy a life of privilege, ease and comfort based upon their dominant control of the corporate economy. Therefore the black community failed to receive the education they so desperately needed. In the seventeenth century, no provisions were made for education to be provided for slaves and their children, most of whom did not speak much, if any, English. This was due to the view that by providing them with education they would have the ability to gain employment, subsequently leaving the life of slavery at the hands of the plantocracy.

It was not until the nineteenth century that the first school for coloured boys was opened, followed in the upcoming years with a school for coloured girls. However, those who were fortunate enough to go to school in the post-emancipation neo-colonial Caribbean were taught that the heroes of their society were predominantly, if not exclusively, white. (Beckles: 1993: p528)

In addition, until the educational acts of the 1950 and 60s, very few secondary schools existed, and those that did often refused entry for black children due to their lack of elementary education. (Chamberlain: 2006:p12).

Although apprenticeships were given to ex slaves, their job description was simply an indentured slave. Indentured slaves were refused education and were paid the lowest wages in Barbados. Many slaves worked over fifty hours a week with no pay in exchange for limited housing.

In more recent times, changes have been made to the educational system in order to reduce racial discrimination. The official policy of Barbados firmly opposes any policy based on racial discrimination. As a former colonial country there should be zero tolerance for racial and other forms of discrimination. The Barbados community college act forbids the selection of students on the basis of race colour or creed (Walters: 2012:p21), a fairly obvious strategy for a country riddled with such a history of racial discrimination. Furthermore, throughout the educational system, a greater emphasis has been played on the role of slavery and the formation of Barbadian history in order to raise awareness of the majority's heritage. As stated by Thomas, in 1728 'all endeavours must be used to teach the Negroes to read and write...' (Thomas: 1997: p245)

However race still remains a sensitive area and although small changes have been made, few political changes have become legislation and it is clear that throughout the educational system, it was viewed that racism was a tool in which to justify slavery and was far more encompassing than that used against the Amerindians. The colour of their skin and the texture of their hair were used as symbols of inferiority and were used in order to ensure that however successful they may become in overturning racism they would always be viewed biologically a negro and by definition a slave. (Worrell: 2002). This is because unlike many other British post-emancipation territories within the Caribbean who benefitted from a British government, all legislation within Barbados regarding tax, education etc. was decided locally. Therefore, only a minority of the population, the white and wealthy elite known as the plantocracy, became eligible to vote. These individuals were renowned for their racist tendencies, and with little intervention or guidance from the British government, the Barbadian elite had full control over any political or social reform. As a result, many descendants of slaves working on the land suffered severe malnutrition and exhaustion, preventing them from completing more than five hours of work a day. With access to healthcare and further education being provided by the white elite, the majority of the black population who were forced to work on the land, had little choice but to continue surviving on the small income they could accumulate. In the early twentieth century the educational system came under intense criticism due to few changes being made to improve the quality and efficiency of the educational system. Schools were vastly overcrowded and students, both of white and black descent, were not receiving the education and the skills that they vitally needed

Furthermore although racial discrimination can be seen in the early stages of education, it certainly is not disregarded when individuals leave the educational system. In the workplace, for those who are able to find a job, crypto-racism prevents the assimilation of races whereby whites are managers and blacks are wage earners.

In the capital city of Bridgetown for example, Broad street was consumed by banks and large shops owned by the white population, whereby the black population were refused employment, and although allowed to shop in such areas, were often questioned or refused entry. (Chamberlain: 2006: p6). As documented by a young Bajan-Brit migrant when referring to racism in Barbados ' you see all the businesses are owned by white Bajans. Most people in high places are white-Bajans. You know, that is the result of plantocracy' (Chamberlain: 2006:p6). Therefore whether receiving education or not, it is clear that the barriers surrounding the black population escalate far beyond education. It is evident that 'what people say is true... the lighter your skin, the more opportunities you would get' (Conway et al: 2009:p90). In addition, for black individuals who do hold qualifications, their achievements are often overlooked by any white immigrants regardless of qualifications due to the belief that the white immigrants possess a far stronger work ethic than the black population. As supported by a black native Barbadian he states ' I think that there is a lot of black racism... whites come over here who were shop assistants and become hotel managers. They think that whites are so special and great (Potter et al: 2006:p923)

Nevertheless it is important to consider the role of the state, if any, in challenging these ingrained restrictions on the black population. It has been ten years since the Barbadian government congregated in Durban for the World Conference against Racism, whereby Barbados were fully supportive of one of the main aims of the Durban conference, to erect a permanent memorial in order to honour the victims of the slave trade. The government of Barbados state that they are keen on expressing that 'the right of our citizens to live free from discrimination on the basis of race, colour, class, creed and religion has been entrenched in our constitution' (Lashley: 2011: no pagination). Furthermore programmes in schools have been intended to increase the self-worth of black African descendants by providing information based on their history and the efforts, bravery and struggles of their black descendants.

Therefore although the issue of racism in Barbados has been understood when confronted, the lack of urgency has pushed the issue to the back of the political agenda. A Bajan- Brit who identifies that when confronted with the issue of race, politicians' sweep things under the carpet supports this. 'People are frightened to talk about it. The politicians don't want to talk about it. Everything is very conservative' (Potter et al: 2008: p138). It is evident from these extracts that the illusion of social harmony is a vital tool in order to encourage tourism and investment and therefore it is simply not in the interest of the state to intervene in an issue which appears to cause no immediate harm to individuals. Barbados has become a country with neo-liberalism firmly embedded in its constitution, with the private sector defined as 'white' and the public sector as 'black'. 'The social relations promoted by capitalist practices under neoliberalism pose a profound threat for understand and contesting racism and transforming racial inequalities' (Robbins: 2014: p245).

### **Changing dynamics of historical and contemporary racial boundaries**

'In some areas, the white's living there don't want the blacks to pass through.... Even now' (Pearl as in Chamberlain: 2006: p12).

Unlike many other Caribbean countries emancipated from slavery, Barbadian society has continued to suffer at the extent of a lack of assimilation of the black population and ex slaves into mainstream society, predominately dominated by the white elite. This is because although emancipation was achieved, anyone over the age of six were freed but were forced to serve their former owners as unpaid apprentices for six years resulting in very little education if any during the most critical phase in their learning. As a result, workers became unproductive and therefore were abandoned by their planters. Fisher describes their situation when he states that 'the emancipated Barbadian slave has little option but to remain in agricultural labour on the same plantation of his former enslavement' (Fisher: 1985 as in Walters: 2012: p15). Subsequently workers struggled to provide for their children and many of the 14,000 children who had been freed in 1834 had to re-join the ranks. (Elias: 2000:p26).

Furthermore, in 1897 the Vagrancy Act called for punishment of these individuals who 'willingly refuse or neglect' to work and as a result became a burden to public services and the plantocracy. Even for those fully emancipated and freed from slavery, their prospects were minimal, as planters still owned all of the land. Therefore they were unable to create any form of business or occupation free from the ownership of the plantocracy, and with little or no education, had no alternative forms of employment. There were no prospects for the black population to assimilate into the white community, as it was ensured that the black population would not be able to receive the education needed to enter the mainstream workforce by which the white elite occupied. In an attempt to describe the harsh reality of the slaves after emancipation, Bonham describes them as a 'turned loose pack of wild goats on a barren mountain, and they had to return to the house whence they came to work for a mere crust of bread' (Richardson: 1985: 17).

Furthermore in 1801 the manumission fees were increased drastically. A manumission fee was required to be paid by all slaves in order for their owners to release them from slavery. Due to the fact that the status of freedom was passed on from mother to child, the increase in fees presents a clear attempt to halt and limit the reproduction of the freed black population as women were prevented from reproducing due to their inability to afford manumission fees. With slaves being unable to afford freedom, assimilation between races was put on hold for many years. This was ironic as the British government provided around £20,000,000 to slave-owners upon emancipation, whilst slaves received no form of compensation, highlighting the clear profitability of the slave trade (Brophy: 2013:166). If this didn't restrict assimilation enough, in 1802 a bill was passed to restrict any Negroes and descendants of Negroes from accumulating property. Land access was limited to a maximum of ten acres, and a limit was placed on the volume of 'slaves' a Negro could employ. Although the black population rejected the changes and subsequently the bills were refused, the bills demonstrated a clear attempt to limit the success of ex-slaves and therefore prevent the assimilation of the black race within the society run by the white elites. (Lambert: 2001) Therefore it could be suggested that the Negroes in Barbados simply moved from one form of domination to another and therefore are yet to come into a full form of freedom. With constant barriers being presented during emancipation, education and employment it is of no surprise that the issue of racism has gradually become ingrained in the population as an issue with simply no means to an end.

This is evident in current Barbadian life due to the quintessential white Barbadian strategy of simple withdrawal. Until the 1930s blacks were relegated to the back of the Anglican Church. White only clubs offering cricket, soccer, tennis and bridge openly existed until 1970 (Pariser: 1990: p43). Therefore with a history of racial segregation and discrimination dating back hundreds of years, a mere 40 years of improvements to integrate races within Barbados has done little to dislodge the racial tensions still present.

As pointed out by Pearl, 'I think you still find a lot of this in some areas, it's not as prevalent as it used to be but it still goes on in some areas'. She continues to explain how in 'some areas, the white's living there don't want the blacks to pass through.... Even now' (Pearl as in Chamberlain: 2006: p12).

Consequently it is unsurprising that 'social reform was very difficult because the nature of the problem is not openly admitted in an effort to maintain 'the myth of racial harmony'' (Potter et al: 2009:no pagination)

## **Conclusion**

'The past is a living presence' (Lowenthal: 1972 as in Degia: 2007: p42)

The aim of this research was to identify issues surrounding racial discrimination in Barbados by highlighting four key dimensions of discussion. The colonial history of the country was identified in order to highlight the origins of racial discourse and to discuss the black populations struggle to obtain land, education, employment and status within the country. The

barriers to education and the lack or urgency or need to create an educational system available to all races was discussed in order to evaluate how the post emancipation period gave little leeway for ex-slaves and descendants of slaves to gain vital employment needed to survive and prosper in a society ruled by the minority white elite. As a result of lack of opportunity and the on going superiority of a small group of individuals, the lack of assimilation of the black population was examined whilst considering whether the issue of race is an issue of past or present ideology or whether racial discrimination has simply been ignored as a political, social or economic concern. Whilst situations have gradually began to improve for the black population in relation to changes in education it is clear that due to the lack of knowledge and understanding of racism; Barbadian society has lacked the narrative of resistance from the black population. It is clear that colonialism set the tone for racism to become engrained in society, with emancipation doing little to alter racial discourse.

Almost forty two years after the international convention of the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination and ten years since the world conference against racial discrimination it is clear that attempts to change racial discrimination worldwide are in place, in a drastic effort to change the lives of those most discriminated against. With Barbados being fully engaged in conferences around the world, with a memorial being set in place to commemorate the victims of the slave trade, it is hopefully that over the next decade, further changes will be made within Barbados to assimilate all members of society and to engrain within the black society the legitimacy of their culture. The aim of this research therefore has been to analysis and potentially contribute to the wider task of producing a systematic account of global racism. With Barbados receiving independence in 1966, this research aims to prompt further research into countries that were once part of the British Empire with localised governments whereby racial practices are entirely constricted to within the country and therefore lack the vital guidance needed to combat racial discrimination.

It is clear that 'until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned, everywhere is war' (Lashley: 2011: no pagination)

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