The Vision of a Nation: Making Multiculturalism on British Television

Review Number: 1834  
Publish date: Thursday, 24 September, 2015  
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ISBN: 9780230292970  
Date of Publication: 2014  
Price: £65.00  
Pages: 312pp.  
Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan  
Publisher url: http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/the-vision-of-a-nation-gavin-schaffer/?K=9780230292970  
Place of Publication: London  
Reviewer: Stephen Brooke

Gavin Schaffer’s ambitious and important new book explores how British television dealt with and shaped multiracialism between 1960 and 1980. He sees television’s relationship to multiracialism, not primarily as a mirror to society, but rather as a ‘generator of social meaning’ and a ‘clear “site of struggle”’ (p. 2). This involved a wide range of social actors: institutions such as the BBC and ITV; white writers like Johnny Speight and Vince Powell (responsible, respectively, for the popular ‘racial sitcoms’ Till Death Us Do Part [BBC, 1965–8; 1972–5] and Love Thy Neighbour [1972–6]; black writers and directors such as Michael Abbensetts and Horace Ové; and various governmental and non-governmental bodies at the national and local level, like the National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants, the Bradford Committee to Stop Immigration and the Campaign Against Racism in the Media.

As Schaffer shows, television became the battleground for ideas about multiracial Britain and, perhaps more importantly, for ideas about the way multiracialism could be spoken of, or represented before the 1980s. The material Schaffer presents is rich and varied: comedy and drama programmes such as Curry and Chips (ITV, 1969), Gangsters (BBC, 1975–8) and Empire Road (BBC, 1978–9); news and current affairs; public access television; and educational programmes for new migrants like Apna Hi Ghar Samajhiye [Make Yourself at Home] (BBC, 1965-) and Nai Zinga Naya Jeevan [New Life] (BBC, 1968-). With The Vision of a Nation, Schaffer offers an important intervention in the history of 20th-century Britain, one that deepens our understanding of race and the influence of media.

The book addresses some important lacunae in the field of mid- to late-20th century British history. The first is the continuing need for historical examinations of the development of multicultural and multiracial society, particularly with respect to Afro-Caribbean and Asian migration after Windrush. As Schaffer points out, ‘the histories of black and Asian Britons, their integrations, challenges and achievements have been marginalized in most of the narratives of post-war Britain’ (p. 12). Culture and media are two important landscapes upon which such an exploration can be ventured and Schaffer’s work makes a welcome contribution in this regard, as do recent articles by Amanda Bidnall and Kieran Connell.(1) A 2014 conference at the University of Sussex and a major photographic exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, both inspired by the legacy of Peter Fryer’s Staying Power (1984), have also pointed ways
forward. But, given the critical place the development of multiracialism has as a political problem, a social issue and as a force changing national identity in the post-war period, much more work needs to be done. This is particularly true of the period following the initial waves of migration in the 1960s and 1970s, when black and Asian communities built a multiracial nation from the ground up and when race and race relations became a focus of local and national politics. (2)

Schaffer’s book also underlines the importance of television as an area of study for historians. Joe Moran’s recent popular history, *Armchair Nation* (2013) was a valuable contribution, but more of the work done in film and media studies needs to find its way into the mainstream of historical writing. (3) As a vehicle for cultural transmission, television was unmatched after the 1960s. By 1961, as Schaffer points out, 75 per cent of households possessed television sets; 14 years later, the figure was 91 per cent (p. 3). Before multiple channels appeared in the 1980s, the BBC and ITV also enjoyed a monopoly on viewers’ attention. In this period, therefore, ‘television as a social force’ was ‘at its most potent’ (p. 5).

Schaffer’s study of television is, in some ways, about whiteness, not blackness in multiracial Britain. What television conveyed, between 1960 and 1980, was really a reflection of, or a debate on, white British views of race: its empathies, obsessions, reductiveness, fears and prescriptions. What was missing in this period (with some notable exceptions, such as *Nai Zindagi*, some public access broadcasting and later drama such as *Empire Road*) was, first of all, something that presented the unmediated voices of black and Asian Britain. The representation of black and Asian people before the 1980s was firmly in the hands of white people. This power only shifted because of institutions such as Channel 4 and the greater presence at the point of cultural production of black and Asian Britons. In this way, Schaffer’s book is an eloquent testimony to the importance of agency in cultural production and to what is lost when national culture is not a gathering of heterogeneous perspectives.

But what was also absent before the 1980s was any sense of hope or optimism about multiracialism. This was reflected in television production. Multiracialism was largely represented as a problem to be solved and a threat to be met. Immigrants, even when viewed sympathetically, were constructed, across various television genres, in terms of ‘primitivism’, with ‘a blend of condescension and concern’ (p. 54) or as ‘absurdly comic and amusingly different’ (p. 184). When breaks in the cloud cover did appear, as in the book of *Empire Road*, they afforded a view of multiracial Britain that was bracing and rich in its ordinariness:

‘A white woman walked by, hand in hand with a black man. Somewhere in the distance an Asian called to her child in Urdu and the child answered in broad Brummy. ‘Just another night in Empire Road’, said Marcus, grinning.’ (p. 259)

Importantly, this was written by a black writer, Michael Abbensetts. Television between the 1960s and 1980s rarely provided such moments representing the quotidian pleasures of multiracial Britain. There is an interesting point in the book when Schaffer discusses early (white) attempts to articulate, dramatically, a critique of racism, seen in the BBC’s *Fable* (1965), *Drums Along the Avon* (BBC, 1967), and Johnny Speight’s *If There Weren’t Any Blacks, You’d Have to Invent Them* (LWT, 1968). But the anti-racist message in these programmes was rendered in such a wilfully obscure way as to undercut any coherent critique of racism (and that obscurity was quite in contrast to the racism of the racial sitcoms). Speight’s contribution was, in this regard, what Schaffer calls a ‘bizarre moral lesson’ (p. 241). Anti-racism or even mild multiracialism seems here to be the creed that dare not speak its name clearly. And, when it did, particularly in the 1980s, it was often dismissed as radical and un-British, as Anne Marie Smith’s *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality* (1994) has suggested.

One of the ways in which television represented multiracialism as a problem or a threat and one of the most interesting themes in Schaffer’s book is that it was a threat to the ways in which white Britons wished to speak about race. The great enemy, it seems, was not racism or racial violence, but political correctness. This is perhaps most obvious in the chapter on the racial sitcom, of which more below, but it also comes through
in the discussion of news and current affairs coverage and public access television. With regard to the first, for example, after ‘a tranche of determinedly anti-racist documentaries’ in the 1960s which ‘worked to integrate black and Asian stories into the white British imagination, to nudge the British public into recognizing the realities of multicultural Britain’ (p. 77), there was an increasing concern about ‘bias’ in favour of anti-racism and an attempt to shore up, at least for the BBC, its reputation as a ‘neutral arbiter’ which meant, in the case of documentaries such as Race: The Way We Live Now (1977) and The Question of Immigration (1978) that ‘racist views’ were aired ‘without any direct challenge’ (p. 85). As for public access broadcasting, a programme such as the BBC’s Open Door gave a great deal of attention to racial issues. This meant airing programmes such as the Campaign Against Racism in the Media’s 1979 It Ain’t Half Racist Mum, but it also meant airing one by the Bradford British Campaign to Stop Immigration, which had decidedly racist views. The aim of neutrality meant that there was a ‘moral equivalence’ between ‘racism and anti-racism’; both sides were perceived, at least by the BBC, as ‘extremists’ (p. 169). Thus, even to evoke an anti-racist perspective was perceived as a challenge to received notions of national identity.

This becomes particularly clear in the fascinating chapter on the racial sitcom and Schaffer’s analysis in this chapter is admirably measured and nuanced. The racial sitcom is a largely (and perhaps laudably) abandoned genre of television comedy, but it is worth remembering how popular shows like Till Death Do Us Part and Love Thy Neighbour were in the 1960s and 1970s. Both enjoyed substantial runs on television – Till Death Us Do Part was on BBC between 1965 and 1975 and Love Thy Neighbour on Thames Television between 1972 and 1976 – and enjoyed viewing figures in the millions. Other programmes joined this genre: the Spike Milligan vehicle Curry and Chips, Never Mind the Quality, Feel the Width (Thames, 1967–71), It Ain’t Half Hot Mum (BBC, 1974–81), and Mind Your Language (LWT, 1977–9). Most of these programmes were single-minded in their use of racial difference as the foundation of their comedy, and pursued this relentlessly and, to a contemporary viewer, tiresomely through the use of racist epithets and racist characterization (non-whites were represented as primitive, hyper-sexualized, and peculiar in their language, eating habits and culture). At the heart of the two most famous examples, Till Death Us Do Part and Love Thy Neighbour, were two white characters, Warren Mitchell’s Alf Garnett and Jack Smethurst’s Eddie Booth, and two white writers, Johnny Speight and Vince Powell. Garnett and Booth were, to mix my metaphorical national stereotypes, a Greek chorus to the drama of multiracialism in Britain, constantly noting and often lamenting the difference and threat posed by this new narrative. They were also figures that invited satire. As Schaffer points out, for example, Eddie Booth always lost in his struggles with his black neighbours Bill and Barbie Reynolds; Garnett was almost always portrayed as a ridiculous reactionary figure. Yet both characters also produced a particular reaction in audiences: ‘it was possible both to laugh at anti-hero bigotry and, at the same time, “rehearse the latent assumptions” which arguably lay behind the material’ (pp187-8), in other words, to accept the racist humour as a description of contemporary Britain reinforcing the ‘boundaries of race and nationality, presenting black and Asian people as foreign and inassimilable’ (p. 203). A concerned BBC conducted audience surveys of reaction to Till Death Us Do Part that suggested the programme ‘may have reinforced illiberal and anti-trade union attitudes’ (p. 209). For Speight and Powell, any criticism of their work on racial grounds was taken as a fundamental challenge to freedom of expression. In their opinion, the ability to laugh at racial difference and the acceptance of such humour by the targets of racial jokes was ‘a test of Britishness’ (p. 183). Vince Powell explained the ‘ability to “take a joke”’ as a ‘key part of British culture’:

We are now talking about the early 1970s when it was common for British workers to address each other by using nicknames. Thus, a Welshman was Taffy, a Scotsman a Jock, an Irishman a Paddy, an Italian an Eyetie, a Chinaman a Chink, a German a Kraut and a black man a Sambo. These names were used not as insults but as a matter of course and were said and received with good humour. (p. 183)

I would think that evidence for the truth of that last sentence is as elusive as a pejorative term for the English, the one group Powell exempts from ‘humorous’ treatment. Both Powell and Speight saw themselves in the role of ‘social outsider’ (p. 184), but this entailed speaking for ‘mainstream’, ‘ordinary’, white Britons, not the actual social outsiders they used as the butt of their jokes. For them, the real threat of multiracialism was the potential constraints it would put on white language: ‘the key issue was not so much
racism/anti-racism as the right of ordinary people (including themselves) to express anxieties about immigration’ (p. 212). And of course, this is exactly the fear that continues to animate some social and political actors in contemporary Britain, such as UKIP.

It was in the 1980s that television changed in its treatment of race. One way forward had been seen tentatively in early dramas such as Rainbow City (BBC, 1967), A Touch of Eastern Promise (BBC, 1973) and Gangsters and more forcefully in later work such as Empire Road and Wolcott (ATV, 1981). In all of these programmes, multiracial Britain was increasingly seen not as exotic or threatening, but part of the fabric of everyday, normal life. The stories of black and Asian Britons were increasingly told in complex, rather than reductive ways. Not least, black and Asian Britons were increasingly involved in the production of television. Schaffer ends his study just as this sea change is gathering force. What diminished the racial sitcom was, for example, ‘changing sensibilities about race’ (p. 216) and the growing agency of black and Asian people in television production.

This book is a major achievement and I have few, if any criticisms of it. It would have been interesting, however, to see greater coverage of the 1980s, when many of the structures and outlooks which had characterized British television between 1960 and 1980 were dismantled and when ‘television output (especially drama and comedy) improved its use of black and Asian personnel, and began, more consistently and comfortably, to project visions of a multicultural nation’ (p. 274). This worked against the grain of a hostile political culture, that of Thatcherism, so it is all the more important to understand more clearly why television was able to serve as a bridgehead for the new, multiracial society. I would also have liked to have read more about how black and Asian communities perceived television, particularly in a political sense: how exceptional or representative was the Campaign Against Racism in the Media? How funny did other black and Asian groups find racial sitcoms, for instance? In the same vein, it would have been helpful to know whether the broader campaigns for anti-racism, on the political left, for example, included television as a target. What links were there between television and broader anti-racist campaigns? Within London in the 1980s, a key aspect of the Greater London Council’s anti-racist strategy was to focus upon the media and television in particular. But these comments should not take away from Schaffer’s achievement: he has produced a superb book which scholars of race and culture in Britain will find indispensable.

Notes


3. See, for example, Lez Cooke, British Television Drama (Houndmills, 2015). Back to (3)

The author would like to thank Stephen Brooke for his thought-provoking and generous review.

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