

Black History and Contemporary issues

Two photographs

Let me tell you a story, the man in photograph number one is the great Johnny Weissmuller who for many was the definite Tarzan. As a young boy I loved watching these Tarzan, but it always troubled me the way the Africans were presented. Tarzan, who was not born in the Jungle, could speak to the animals; the Africans who had been there for centuries were unable to do this. Africa and its people were always presented as savages and uncivilised and for many people, especially young ones, this was the perception of the continent.

Before Weissmuller became Tarzan in Hollywood, he won five Olympic gold medals for the USA. When I was younger and a lot thinner, I fancied myself as a swimmer. I was OK. When I was 13, I tried out for the swimming team only to be told that my bones were too heavy and I would never make a swimmer. When I showed my consternation, the swimming coach asked me point out a famous black swimmer. I racked my brains, but couldn't think of one. I forgot about swimming and concentrated my sporting pursuits on cricket and football.

Imagine my surprise when I learned that the man in photograph number two, Robert Nesty, won the gold medal at the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984. He was born in Suriname and became the first black man to win a Gold medal in swimming. I thought back to my schools days and reflected on the differences between relative truth and absolute truth. My teacher told me the relative truth in regards to what I knew at that time. I did not know a black swimmer and all his evidence appeared to suggest that Black people could not excel at swimming. The absolute truth proved otherwise.

In regards to Africa, the absolute truth is that all life and civilisation began on that continent. It was not an 'area of darkness' but one where science, the arts and technology thrived'.

Black History Month

I've just come back from the United States where February is celebrated as Black History Month. For some people, this month is regarded as pandering to the whims and peculiarities of African Americans. For me it is vital part of the calendar which everyone should be aware of. Black history month writes vack into history the great contributions of Black people to the development of the world that have been ignored or overlooked. The man in the photograph is Carter G. Woodson, who 'invented' Negro History Week in 1926. This week became Black History Month several decades later.

As the project director of **set all free** I am very interested in making connections between the past and the present and assessing how those things in history continue to impact our society today. The bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade act, which we mark this year, is one such opportunity to assess how the events of the past inform the present.

Prior to my current post I was an education policy officer for a London-based social policy think tank. My main role in this post was to devise ways in which I could improve the academic performance of school pupils – Black students in particular. Before devising any programmes, my first task was to find out more about the students, what motivated or enthused them. What they wanted to be in their lives.

Thierry Henry and Beyonce

It was amazing how many young Black people I spoke to wanted to be footballers or singers just like Thierry Henry and Beyonce. Perhaps this was a common response in our celebrity-riddled society, where being famous or even infamous is so important. However, when asked about being a lawyer, a doctor or a scientist some respond by saying that these careers are not cool, while some had never considered such professions. (This last response could be interpreted in many ways, but the underlying feeling among some was that those careers were not for Black people.) For me these issues are ones of expectations, aspirations, stereotyping and self esteem. Society has a tendency to promote Black braun rather than brains. Far too often the only famous black people we can name or hold-up to others as ‘role models’ are sports people or entertainers which appears to perpetuate this stereotype of Black people only being capable of doing certain things. These theories are nonsense, but they have their roots in history, especially slavery.

Race Science

History shows that by the late 18th century, the height of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, so called European scientists such as this man Johan Friedrich Blumenbach promoted ideas of separating human beings into races and arguing that there were inherent differences between the races. Men like Blumenbach compared the cranial or skull sizes of the various races and argued that Black people were somehow inherently inferior to other races. These pseudo scientific nonsensical ideas became ‘science fact’ during the Victorian era especially when people began to travel to Africa during the scramble to ‘civilise’ or exploit the continent – depending on how you see it.

The Regius Professor of Modern History at the Oxford University, Hugh Trevor Roper famously argued that African had no history until the arrival of Europeans. This appeared to reinforce the notion of African backwardness and a lack of creativity.

Just bring these spurious theories up-to-date, Frank Ellis, a lecturer from the University of Leeds, last year argued that his Black students were not as intelligent as his white ones. He was subsequently suspended for his views.

Slide 5: Black Boys Can

Over the recent weeks there has been a spate of shootings in London. This is labelled as Black on Black violence – a term I find unhelpful. However, those involved in these shootings have certain things in common. Many were failed by our education system and were either excluded from school or left school

without making the academic grade. There are many other socio-economic factors that these folk experience, such as poverty, social exclusion and marginalisation. However, many of these young people will tell you that their lives have no value – that they are cheap and dispensable. In their depressing rationale, if their lives have no value, nor do the lives of anyone else! Where do many of these young people get the idea that their lives have no value? History shows that during slavery many Black people had similar attitudes. Slavery dehumanised Africans and made them dispensable. They were used and abused for their labour.

Black people in slavery

The Transatlantic Slave Trade was one of the darkest episodes in human history. It took men and women, made in the image of God and sought to reduce them to the level of animals. The chattel enslavement of this phenomenon forced generations of people to renounce their names, languages, culture and religion. In such an environment all Black life had no value – enslaved Africans were commodities or cargo to be used and discarded when surplus to requirements. Moreover, laws were passed to ensure that Africans were dehumanised and made to believe that because of their colour, they were less than human.

The racism which took root during this era also perpetuated these beliefs of inferiority and negativity in regards to Black people and the colour black.

Black History Month in Britain

I think that Black history Month is a very important phenomenon in Britain and can provide some of the answers to the problems plaguing youth today. It reinforces positive images of Black people as well as a sense of identity. It tells us all that Black people have been making a positive contribution to this country for centuries.

Moreover, it shows us that the relative freedoms which we experience today cost people their lives, time and energy. If more young people were aware of these sacrifices they would perhaps value their lives. Likewise, figures such as Olaudah Equiano, who was enslaved as a teenager, but used his ingenuity, brains and aptitude to buy his freedom out of slavery, serve as an inspiration. He came to Britain, which was far from the society it is today, became a famous author as well as leading figure in the antislavery movement. Figures such as Equiano can be used as role models today in regards to the fact that if given the opportunity, and a level playing field, Black pupils – indeed all pupils, can become somebodies if given the chance.

The challenge for us is to create an equitable society where all get a chance to thrive. There is a lot of talk about 'Rights' and 'Responsibilities' in regards to young people – that they always bang on about their rights – for respect etc - but never recognise their duty or requirement to behave in a responsible manner.

We have a duty to ensure that young people receive a rounded education as well as the responsibility to provide the environment where all can thrive. If we do less, we are letting down young people and not creating the world envisaged by the heroes and 'she'-roes of the past.