



# Sivanandan's Socialism

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An analysis of the politics of Ambalavaner Sivanandan's politics by Yasmin Khan and G. R. McColl

The name of Ambalavaner Sivanandan is not familiar to many on the British left. It should be. He has become the most influential black political thinker in Britain. His writings have shaped the outlook of a whole layer of black activists.

A revolutionary socialist critique of Sivanandan's ideas, and the strategy which flows from them, is therefore long overdue.

Sivanandan is a long time scourge of the British left on the question of black struggles against oppression. When Sivanandan derides the 'white left' for its tendency 'to view working class racism as an aberration' (*Race and Class* Vol 35, 1994) he hits the mark as far as the two largest far left organisations, Militant and the Socialist Workers Party, are concerned. They share the notion, typical of economism, that racism is simply a question of workers competing with each other over jobs and resources. Once 'black and white unite and fight' around economic questions, they believe racism will spontaneously disappear.

## Criticism

Another target of Sivanandan's criticism has been the declining and crisis-ridden Eurocommunist tradition, and its key black intellectual, Stuart Hall. Sivanandan's 'The Hokum of New Times' is a scathing polemic, in which he ridicules the ideological underpinnings of the Communist Party's collapse into liberalism:

'New Times is a mirror image of Thatcherism passing for socialism. New Times is Thatcherism in drag.'

A third distinctive feature of Sivanandan's politics is his opposition to the liberal 'race relations' industry and its left wing offshoots, the 'ethnic minorities' units set up by many Labour councils in the 1980s. According to Sivanandan this was simply:

'Government moneys for pluralist ploys?the development of a parallel power structure for black people, separate development, bantustans?a strategy to keep race issues from contaminating class issues.'

When we look at these targets of Sivanandan's criticism it is easy to understand his appeal. But, viewed critically, Sivanandan's work does not present a coherent strategy for black liberation or socialism.

## Imperialism

Like revolutionary socialists, Sivanandan sees an understanding of imperialism as crucial to understanding racism in Britain. But his understanding of imperialism is wrong, leading him to locate the 'Third World' as the centre of the struggle for socialism:

'I do not think it is our business to be sectarian, to take sides between liberation movements to tell them how to conduct their struggles. We try in *Race and Class* to guard against left cultural imperialism: the tendency to extrapolate from the western experience onto Third World societies.' (*Communities of Resistance*)

In practice this translates into an accommodation to a range of Stalinist-influenced and petit-bourgeois nationalist leaders. Sivanandan berates one left wing writer's 'inability to distinguish between reactionary (bourgeois) nationalism and the revolutionary nationalisms of Ho, Fidel and Cabral and Mao'. It is to Vietnam and Cuba that Sivanandan refers

when he talks about 'the workers and peasants having a bash at socialism'.

The Stalinist-led national liberation movements were 'fighting a just struggle against imperialism. But by reserving a place for the 'anti-imperialist' bourgeoisie in the struggle and limiting the revolution to a democratic stage, they systematically held back workers' struggles. Even in Vietnam and Cuba it was not socialism they introduced, but stagnant regimes modelled on the bureaucratic planning and dictatorship of the Stalinist USSR, often practising racism against minorities of their own. It is not 'Eurocentrism' to point out that 'Third World' Stalinism was essentially no different from the Stalinism of the European and US Communist Parties. Sivanandan's model of Third World 'socialism' has failed.

### **Eurocommunists**

This incomplete break with the Eurocommunists can even be seen in Sivanandan's savage attacks on New Times:

'The working class was decomposing under the impact of new forces of production and old forms of labour organisation were becoming frangible [fragile]' wrote Sivanandan. 'The old Marxists . . . had for so long been 'fighting for the emancipation of Labour from Capital that they could not bear to think that it was Capital that was now being emancipated from Labour.'

Sivanandan thus accepts the basic premise of Eurocommunism, that old forms of working class struggle have been rendered obsolete. But instead of accepting the neo-liberal, paci?st and cross-class conclusions of the Eurocommunists, Sivanandan called for a refocusing of both socialism and anti-racism towards 'that third of the nation which Thatcherism has dispossessed'.

According to Sivanandan the end of the traditional working class did not mean an end to class struggle, only that the terrain of battle has moved 'from the economic to the political, from the base to the superstructure'.

'The battle is the same as before', Sivanandan writes, 'only it needs to be taken on at the political/ideological level and not at the economic/political level'. (Communities of Resistance)

Before we examine the effect of this view on Sivanandan's anti-racist strategy, it is necessary to say that Sivanandan, along with the Eurocommunists, massively overestimated the effects of economic changes on the workers' movement. It is not British capitalism's 'emancipation from Labour' that is the problem, it is workers' consciousness, bureaucratic misleadership and the legacy of a decade of defeat.

### **Struggle**

That is not to deny that new forms of struggle and arenas of struggle have emerged. But socialists must reject the idea that the 'economic struggle' has simply been replaced by a combination of political, ideological and cultural struggles. The economic struggle is the practical resistance of workers to their employers. It continues to involve millions, including hundreds of thousands of unionised black workers. Revolutionary Marxism aims to prosecute the class struggle in each of its forms 'economic, political and theoretical' so as to organise the working class in the struggle for power. This means 'fighting to bring the trade unions under rank and 'le control and win them to revolutionary leadership' not writing off the economic struggle and the institutions it has created as somehow a thing of the past.

Sivanandan spells out clearly what the rise of Thatcherism meant for the struggle against racism:

'The nature and function of racism was beginning to change. The recession and the movement of capital to the labour reserves of the Third World, I pointed out before, had stopped the importation of labour. The point now was to get rid of it. Hence the rationale of racism was no longer exploitation but repatriation, not oppression but repression 'forged at the ideological level through the media (directly) and the schools (indirectly and in the long term) and effected on the political level through the forces of law and order.'

The black struggle, Sivanandan wrote, was no longer one between 'employers and workers but the state and the workless'.

Of course there is a large measure of truth in the tendencies Sivanandan outlines, but his analysis is schematic and wooden. It was not the 1979 recession which introduced the politics of repatriation to the political mainstream but the end of a specific period of cheap labour expansion in the early 1960s. Even now the bourgeois consensus remains at the level of formal 'equal opportunities' in return for strict racist immigration laws, not overt repatriation.

Certainly the street level resistance of 'second generation' unemployed and youth has become a vital arena of black politics and resistance. But the idea that the struggle between bosses and workers is no longer a concern of anti-racists is nonsense and leads directly to Sivanandan's confused political strategy.

Sivanandan stood firm throughout the 1980s and 1990s against the rise of 'identity politics' amongst the oppressed and against the fragmentation of 'black as a political colour' into a variety of competing ethnic hues.

Since offering a cautious welcome to the launch of the Anti-Racist Alliance (ARA), he has given short shrift to its largely self-appointed black leaders, who 'tend to use [community struggles] as a means of gaining legitimacy and publicity for their own organisation' instead of putting themselves at the service of the community?. (Race and Class Vol 35)

While he is a critic of the black bourgeois leadership and continues to advocate class politics, the concept of 'community' is central to Sivanandan's strategy. At times 'community' seems to have an almost mystical significance in his writings, yet there is never a clear definition of the concept. Sivanandan repeatedly documents the class stratification that has taken place within Britain's black population.

But by avoiding aligning himself with any political tendency, and by downplaying the role of the organised working class, black and white, Sivanandan avoids the responsibility of charting a path that can transform 'dynamic, organic' local struggles.

### **Grunwick**

In his analysis of the Grunwick strike of the mid-1970s, despite documenting the way in which the trade union bureaucracy used and then discarded the Asian women strikers, Sivanandan draws the wrong conclusions.

He contrasts Grunwick negatively to earlier black strikes, such as Mansfield Hosiery and Imperial Typewriters:

'The lessons of earlier strikes' that black workers needed to rally the community behind them and from that base force the unions to their side' had been temporarily unlearned by workers who had not had the benefit of that tradition?.

But this was not the lesson of Grunwick. Tens of thousands of white workers and youth rallied to the Grunwick pickets. It was the inability of rank and file workers to overcome the legalism and pacifism of their leaders and turn sympathy into solidarity strike action which led to defeat.

Certainly the vanguard layer of rank and file trade union militants that developed in the 1960s and 1970s was defeated and largely dispersed in the 1980s, creating new problems for linking community struggles against racism with the organised power of the working class. Nevertheless this remains the key to victory, a key which Sivanandan consistently discards.

### **Community**

Sivanandan has always been open in his support for organised self-defence by black communities under attack. So are we. The difference lies in the fact that revolutionary socialists aim to transform the isolated acts of resistance into a political movement which can challenge capitalism, whether on the street or in the factory.

Sivanandan is clearly opposed to black nationalism and to the passivity that pure cultural politics prescribes. He writes:

'... whilst the struggle against racism could not be subsumed to the class struggle it could not in the name of that autonomy, become separatist, inward looking or nationalist.' (Race and Class Vol 35)

But Sivanandan's politics of community resistance do imply a form of separatism?not the small world of separatist sectarian grouplets but a kind of separatist stageism: organise the black community first and then worry about the working class organisations.

This is self defeating. Revolutionary socialists fight for black workers' self-organisation, but within and as part of the whole workers' movement. We seek to place black struggles on the agenda of the whole working class and focus the workers' most powerful weapons in support of these struggles. Even within the community itself a class line has to be drawn, between the working class, the middle class and the bosses. Class politics within the black community can draw in sections of the middle class, around both the fight against racism and to a limited extent economic questions like strikes. But this must never be done at the expense of dropping working class independence and the right to carry out militant, illegal direct action.

### **Politics**

Like Sivanandan, revolutionary socialists reject reformist multi- culturalism, middle class careerism and overt separatism. But we remain revolutionary integrationists. Our aim is to integrate the struggles of black working class communities into the struggles of the organised working class, revolutionising both in the process.

To do that we need the weapon of a political party?something which Sivanandan's whole existence as an independent 'tribune of the people' rebels against. Paradoxically, for all Sivanandan's praise for politics, ideology and 'subjectivity?', he fails to see that only an organised force can change the politics and subjective ideas of the working class.

Those who want a coherent practical alternative to Euro-Stalinism, middle class careerism and centrist economism will not find it in the writings of Sivanandan. They will find it in the politics and practice of revolutionary Trotskyism.

A Sivanandan: *A Different Hunger*, Pluto Press 1991, *Communities of Resistance*, Verso 1990.

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