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The Notting Hill Carnival

On the final weekend of August 1982 some hundreds of thousands of people will take part in the 16th annual Notting Hill Carnival. Before the urban and largely black uprisings of 1980 (St Pauls, Bristol) and 1981 (first in Brixton and then in at least 25 other centres), the Carnival had been the setting for the major street disturbances in Britain since World War II. At the same time, the claim that it is one of Western Europe's premier cultural events proved difficult to dispute with attendances of up to half a million people in the mid-1970s.

The connection between popular culture and challenges to constituted orders is by no means unique to the Notting Hill Carnival. Simply to say 'football hooliganism' is to indicate the truth of this in the United Kingdom context. It is not, though, to tell the whole story. Carnivals and festivals far and wide have displayed this connection. The observation of these by anthropologists in Africa has given us the notion of 'rituals of rebellion'. Similar observations exist for South America. Indeed, 'rituals of rebellion' have been detected as far back as the Ancient Orient where an instance is given from Babylon. There they celebrated an annual religious festival called Sacees. This required the king to give a slave the chance to enact the role of king to the extent of . . . issuing orders and abandoning himself to luxury and debauchery with the king's concubine. At the end of this the slave was hanged or crucified. In Sumer in a similar religious festival in 2050 BC the elevated slave-gardener usurped the throne, disposed of the king's son and reigned for twenty five years. The pattern recurs in Europe in modern times in the cities of Italy and Germany.

It has led to the conclusion that:

'Carnival is a cultural institution which regularises and ritualises the permanent social conflict. It is a . . . form of class struggle. It enables the underprivileged class to make revolution without really performing it, and to improve its social position again and again for a short period of time without even touching the society's existing power structure!'

But this is not the whole story. Class struggle cannot always be ritualised. There are situations in which the existing structures of power, class or wealth are unstable;



are the object of quests for fundamental change. One such is the colonial situation. For example under British colonialism in Trinidad in the Caribbean the Carnival broke the bounds of ritual. This was certainly so after slavery. The colonial order was too nervous to allow itself to be mocked. The danger that the masses (African and later African and Asian) might shift from mock to real rebellion was perceived as 'a clear and present danger'. In the face of this

fear suppression was attempted and this brought forth vigorous resistance from the people in defence of what they knew to be legitimate culture and against illegitimate (white, colonial) authority.² And within the United Kingdom itself, well before football became a main focus of working class cultural expression, well before the sway of the music hall, there were what have come to be called the metropolitan fairs.

The growth of the Carnival

The Notting Hill Carnival is still with us. Alive, and on the streets of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, London. It made its first appearance there in 1966. It is largely agreed that its founding spirit was a white social worker, Mrs Lashette. The aim was to create a 'West Indian' carnival in this area of major black settlement in the UK. The model was the Eastern Caribbean and Trinidad in particular. But this was not the only model available. English people were not, after all, unfamiliar with the notion of 'carnival'. Even in terms of the local history of North Kensington there appears to have existed an idea of carnival as an 'olde' English celebration.

Thus the main local newspaper of the period, the *Kensington News and West London Times*, contains references to 'carnivals' in the area before 1966. The model was last dusted off and used as recently as the present Queen's silver jubilee. In any event elements of this 'English' idea of carnival were paraded at the first carnival in 1966.

In the first eight years of its existence the Notting Hill carnival grew very slowly. Essentially it was small and run largely by people from the West Indies. The conflicts which appeared in those years were between West Indian individuals for control of the management of the event. Culturally its main contents were the music of the Trinidad originated steel band, costume bands from that same part of the world and African music from the band of the late West African player Ginger Johnson. Black and white people attended. The Caribbean people

¹ *Cultures* Vol III no.1 p 44, The Unesco Press (1976).

² *Cultures* Vol III no.1 pp 67-70.

enjoyed the recreation of a little bit of 'home' in the brutal slums of Northern Kensington: the whites, it may be presumed, enjoyed the exotica of it all. It seemed in every respect unchallenging to the state, both national and local. The former, in the guise of its police force, made propaganda as its officers embraced booze, the odd 'spliff' (Indian hemp/weed) and black women. They got themselves photographed doing some of these things and that was said by many to be good for race relations. The latter, the local state, was only worried about expense and the feeling of its 'residents' and 'ratepayers' (all white for these purposes). Complaints

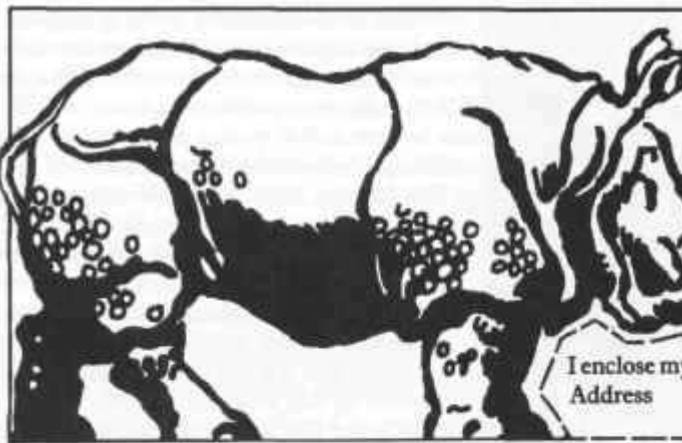
were few.

After Carnival 1973, certain important developments took place. A partly-owned agency of the local state called the North Kensington Amenity Trust had an ex-film director at its head. Understanding matters cultural, he took a benevolent interest in the Carnival intervening to secure or to help secure the directorship of the Carnival for an able and energetic young Trinidadian by the name of Lesley Palmer and to drum up good will for the event in the right quarters.

Carnival 75

In 1975 Palmer succeeded in organising the

biggest Carnival ever in Notting Hill. He altered or broadened the cultural base of the event to include what was effectively the music of the black popular masses in the UK, namely the Jamaican originated reggae. It was brought via the agency of the best Sound Systems (black mobile discos of the sort treated in the film *Babylon*). Capital Radio, one of London's two commercial stations, attended and broadcast live from the event encouraging attendance. It is estimated that about half a million people came. Black attendance was on a country-wide basis. Suddenly the Carnival was the place to go to meet people one had not seen for



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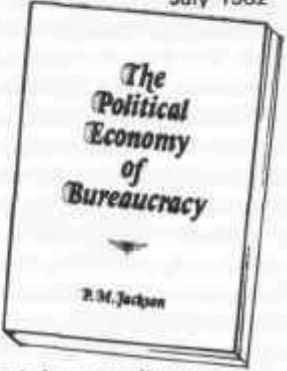
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years. It was also an important commercial venue for the sale of Afro-Caribbean foods as well as drinks at prices from which frankly massive profits could be made. Also, and not unimportantly, a single car driven by a white man tried to speed through the crowd and was wrecked at the centre of things at the junction of Portobello and Acklam Roads.

Following Carnival 1975 things were never again the same. It may, in the words of the Deputy Council Leader — another Tory businessman — have '... proved to be a colourful and happy event enjoyed by a lot of people and a good influence for race relations in the area.' Nevertheless it had to go. The document just quoted was nothing less than his Memorandum of April 1976 to the Home Secretary in effect requesting a ban on the event. By then the Carnival was under wholesale attack from 'local residents', the local police commander and a local 'community action group', the Golborne 100, led by the well known activist and theorist of 'community participation' George Clarke. The Carnival was said to have become 'the victim of its own success'; to have become a 'field day for every wide-boy and huckster'; to be disruptive of local community life. Incredible pressure was put on the carnival. The Royal Borough's position was that the event had to leave its streets for either the nearby open space called Wormwood Scrubs or go to the Chelsea football ground. Its proposals involving the latter space amounted to nothing less than a municipal take-over of fundamental aspects of the Carnival. The Borough said additionally, that should the event remain on the street and should funds not be forthcoming from the national exchequer, its own financial support would be limited to the provision of additional public toilets and cleaning up the streets after the event. The Metropolitan Police through its Divisional Commander Patterson supported the Borough's proposals. If they were not accepted the Carnival would be ruthlessly policed right there on the streets. Each band would be encircled by a 'serial' of 25 police officers: all previously permitted 'illegal' activity (from street selling to the vending of booze without a license, weed smoking etc) would be stamped out: the police would determine the routes of the Carnival procession and barricades would be used to prevent free flow within the terrain of the event which was to be 'sectored'. More comically, one 'white resident' observed that the West Indians already had a Carnival in Trinidad, what did they want another for?

While there were those within the black community who were prepared to accept the proposals of the Royal Borough and the dic-

that the masses might shift from mock to real rebellion was perceived as a real and present danger

tates of the police for reasons either of idiocy, backwardness or self-seeking, others resisted. Those who resisted pointed out to the authorities including, by letter, the then Police Commissioner Sir Robert Mark that attempted state repression of the Carnival entailed an attack on a cultural form which



had become important to the black community. These warnings were, indeed, heard but the response of the Metropolitan Police was arrogantly to hold to its line and to prepare for a battle in which it contemplated neither defeat nor serious losses. An event which in 1975 had been policed with some 80 officers saw the appearance in 1976 of hundreds of police persons on the streets. The Metropolitan Police staged a series of raids on all centres of entertainment on day one of the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival 'stallholders were arrested for obstructing the highway; the sellers of booze were arrested or reported. This, and more, made for an atmosphere of palpable oppression and not a 'carnival' atmosphere. Not a carnival atmosphere certainly if that is taken to mean solely one of 'jollity' and yet in so far as it is also of the essence of carnivals as occasions of mass cultural expression that they are pregnant with rebellion, the police had succeeded in deepening the reality of this particular Carnival.

A turning point

Towards the end of day two of Carnival 1976 the resistance took on physical form. The police, who felt they had large enough forces to withstand anything, moved with-

out restraint. They claimed to be making arrests of pickpockets. In reality they were laying into black youths with their truncheons with a certain abandon. The youths fought back. The battle spread to envelop large areas of the part of Notting Hill known locally as The Grove. Hundreds of youths joined battle against blatantly misused police power which is in reality part of the daily experience of the black community as a whole. It was on a terrain brimming over with missiles, with bricks, half bricks, bottles and canned soft drinks. More than 300 of over 1600 officers deployed (officially) were injured. Pictures of these battles went round the world once more giving Notting Hill the notoriety it had not experienced since 1958, the year of its historic race riots. The battle of the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival gave world-wide confirmation to the fact that the culture of the black communities in the UK is inescapably one of resistance.

The feeling that things have gone downhill all the way since 1976 for the Notting Hill Carnival must be resisted. The event has remained under internal and external attack in the last six years. The central source of internal attack has been an externally fostered disunity. Whereas up to 1976 there had never been any question of more than one organising committee for the event, afterwards a second was created with the active support of the Borough Council, the Commission for Racial Equality, Trinidad High Commission and West Indian Standing Conference. These agencies exploited the feelings of some 'carnival people' (steel and costume band devotees) that the 'trouble' at the Carnival was caused by youth and reggae-based culture. The solution they felt was to suppress this element — or at least abandon it to its fate. The police were a key external source of pressure. They reached for the myth that their attitude in 1976 had been determined by the need to fight street crime within the Carnival. Mark had spoken of his opposition to 'no go areas'. Later still in his autobiography he was to compare the black community's Carnival to the ancient crowds at Tyburn Field. But most importantly they mounted pressure for better protective gear for police officers. They were issued with riot shields before Carnival 1977. And by 1978 they had learnt a whole series of lessons about crowd control, space control and street clearance operations which were applied with absolute ruthlessness in Southall in 1979 in defence of the National Front and against the Asian community. It was in this assault upon black people and the Left that Blair Peach was murdered. Blood red is one of the colours of Carnival.