

COMMENTARY

The Monitoring Group: Forty Years on the Frontline

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And from there, what did we do? We just patrolled pigs.
—Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time* (1970)

DECEMBER 2021 MARKED FORTY YEARS SINCE THE FORMATION OF the Monitoring Group. Originating from Southall, west of London, and in one of the first postwar settlements of so-called New Commonwealth Asian workers, the Monitoring Group is now a leading national antiracist charity in Britain. It supports Black, Asian, migrant, and refugee communities at the sharp end of police misconduct, violence, and wider forms of state and street racism. As part of that commitment, the charity has coordinated numerous defense and family-led justice campaigns, including for the Bradford 12, Kuldip Sekhon, and, perhaps most notably, Stephen Lawrence, whose racist murder in April 1993 is a landmark case in Black British history. For any grassroots organization to remain active for forty years is a monumental achievement. But the fact that the Monitoring Group has long been at the forefront of community-led campaigning for racial justice while remaining grounded in a radical tradition of understanding and resisting the shifting politics of racism necessitates a special salute to its ongoing legacy.

That acknowledgement is important, not least because it prompts us to collectively consider the necessary strategies and methods for doing long-term antiracist work. As such, we are compelled to actively guard against being swept away with passing trends, fashions, and fads of this or any other

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political and historical moment. In other words, to recognize and think through the motivations and conditions behind the Monitoring Group's forty years of community-based antiracist campaign work is to recognize and think through the virtues of having a clear, committed, and enduring vision of what community empowerment, racial equality, and social justice more broadly look like. That vision is inevitably shaped by a proactive political culture with progressive principles and values from which sustainable, radical, and transformative antiracist strategies are forged to resist state violence, deliver racial justice, dismantle racist institutions, and rebuild a fundamentally different society (Bourne 2020, Owusu 2016).

In this piece, I argue that examining the emergence and ongoing significance of the Monitoring Group offers vital lessons for present and future fightbacks against state and street racism. This is because it teaches us about doing antiracist work that is historically specific, but always committed to political change, community empowerment, and collective resistance. The first part of the article considers the historical conditions and motivations that led to the birth of the Monitoring Group in December 1981. Recalling that history of institutional racism, overpolicing, and underprotection from far-right violence means recalling a unique political environment that has, nonetheless, transformed in shape, purpose, and function to continue conditioning racial injustice in contemporary Britain. With that shifting continuity in mind, I then discuss the Monitoring Group's strategic approach to coordinating defense and family-led justice campaigns over four decades, some of which have prompted significant political and legal changes. I do so to foreground a set of enduring principles and values that challenges dominant neoliberal ideals and that should invariably inspire and influence antiracist activism despite the historical character of institutional racism.

The Origins of the Monitoring Group

As this article's epigraph suggests, the idea of a monitoring group is rooted in a radical form of antiracism stemming from the community-centered activism of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Indeed, the birth of the Monitoring Group in Southall was directly inspired by the Black Panthers (see Nijjar 2021). Among the main activities that the Black Panthers undertook upon forming in 1966 were armed and unarmed citizen patrols to monitor the belligerent policing of predominantly Black, economically impoverished, and socially marginalized neighborhoods in Oakland, California. "We floated around the streets, and we patrolled pigs," recalls co-founder Bobby Seale

(1970, n.p.): “[w]e followed pigs. They wouldn’t even know we’d be following them.” The aim was to organize as a Black community to observe and hold to account a police force that was systematically overpolicing, violating, and denying the basic rights of Black Americans. However, these are hallmarks of virtually every society that is institutionally racist. Thus, in addition to serving as “conditions of being or living” (Goldberg 2004, 217) for Black Americans, overpolicing and underprotection were, and remain, the lived experiences of Black, Asian, migrant, and refugee people in Britain.

In Southall, Gurdip Singh Chaggar, an 18-year-old Sikh, was stabbed to death on June 4, 1976, by white youths outside the Dominion Cinema, “a symbol of Asian self-reliance and security” (Campaign Against Racism and Fascism & Southall Rights 1981, 51). Chaggar’s killing occurred in a popular and political climate inspired by Enoch Powell that regularly framed Asian migrants as welfare scrounging so-called illegals who were swamping Britain, African-Caribbean households as pathologically dysfunctional, and their children as idle and criminally inclined (see Gilroy 1982, Hall et al. 1978).¹ Referring to Chaggar’s death, John Kingsley Read, leader of the National Party (a group that had split from the fascist National Front and tasted electoral success), declared “one down, a million to go” (Higgs 2016).² The confidence of the far right to inflict such deadly violence on racialized communities was also fueled by a climate of policing that “afforded no protection against [fascist attacks], condoned them, even, by refusing to recognise them as racially motivated” (Sivanandan 1981, 141). Indeed, the Monitoring Group’s Suresh Grover recalls that when he saw Chaggar’s pool of blood on the pavement and asked a police officer what happened, the officer replied that “it was just an Asian” (Puri 2015).

The callous indifference of police toward Southall’s Black and Asian working-class community reached new levels on April 23, 1979, during a peaceful protest against the National Front, which planned to hold an election meeting at Southall Town Hall that evening. Despite that provocative move, it was the community that was at the sharp end of militarized policing and punishment, as 2,756 officers with dogs, horses, shields, vans, and a helicopter trapped thousands of protesters in three double cordons before going “berserk” by driving vans into crowds and then hitting them with truncheons (Campaign Against Racism and Fascism & Southall Rights 1981). Blair Peach, an antifascist teacher from East London who had come to Southall in solidarity with the local community, was killed after suffering a police blow to the head. While no officer was prosecuted for Peach’s death, 342 mainly Asian people were charged with various offenses relating

to the protest (Bourne 2009). Then, in July 1981, Asian youths rose up and razed the Hambrough Tavern pub after police failed to protect locals from skinheads in town for a concert.

This is just a brief snapshot of the political context behind the formation of the Monitoring Group in Southall in December 1981 by local community campaigners. Let me add that such disregard for Black and Asian life also materialized daily beyond Southall. The racist murder of Akhtar Ali Baig by white youths in Newham, East London in 1980, alongside the police's lack of interest, led to the birth of the Newham Monitoring Project, a community organization that challenged the twin injustices of racial violence and institutionalized inaction (Victor 2002). Furthermore, April 2021 marked forty years since the notorious Swamp 81 police operation (notice the overlap with Thatcher's terminology) in Brixton, South London. Brixton has a large Black community, and for a week beginning on April 6, 1981, more than a hundred officers stopped and questioned over a thousand people to combat muggings (a racialized trope); they raided homes and cafes, and, according to local press, beat up a Black man outside a school (Campaign Against Racism and Fascism & *Race & Class* 1981). The police were akin to a colonial-style occupation force, where "every black [was] treated as *a priori* suspect" (Bridges & Gilroy 1982, 35), prompting a local uprising, followed by nationwide unrest later that year.

It was in this national climate of popular and political indifference toward the basic rights of Black and Asian communities that the Monitoring Group began actively and independently supporting those suffering racial injustice. Among the first landmark campaigns that the Monitoring Group was involved in coordinating was for the Bradford 12, who, in self-defense of community against a fascist incursion, were accused of conspiracy to make explosives and cause explosions. Activists across Britain mobilized to generate national momentum for the campaign and the work of the Monitoring Group was critical to developing strong support in London. The Bradford 12 defense campaign was significant for challenging "the state's direct attack on political activists with the attempt to represent them as aggressors and agitators, rather than as individuals who had been central to the struggle in defense of their communities" (Ramamurthy 2013, 120). Equally important was the family-led justice campaign for Kuldip Sekhon, a taxi driver in Southall who was stabbed to death in November 1988 in a racist attack, but the police refused to acknowledge this. As Grover mentions, "numerous campaigns took place in the following years which were

just as powerful, but the Sekhon campaign enabled us to consolidate our support in the community” (Nijjar 2021, 94).

I want to suggest that forty years of work by the Monitoring Group has been grounded in certain conditions and motivations. It represents an active and explicit refusal to submit to “indignity, harassment, brutalisation and even murder” (Sivanandan & Bourne 2016, 61). That refusal corresponds to an enduring commitment to defend the basic rights of Black and Asian groups to mobilize against the far right in order to live free of fear, intimidation, and violence. To monitor the police for four decades is to also continuously challenge dominant media and political discourses that portray Black and Asian communities as criminals, aggressors, rioters, and perpetrators deserving of robust policing. The enduring effort to confront such portrayal is pivotal, since it establishes grounds for progressive public debate that recognizes racialized communities not as the problem but as under attack from street and state racism. Furthermore, the Monitoring Group’s work reveals that justice is not guaranteed for Black and Asian families who have suffered loss through racist violence; rather justice is something that has to be fought for tirelessly in the face of concerted denial about the murderous potential of racism.

Racist attacks and the overpolicing and underprotection of racialized communities are not problems of the past. Rather, the historical conditions from which the Monitoring Group emerged are alive today and have been compounded by the racial politics of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consider, for instance, the spatialization of COVID-19 as a virus from China, which has dehumanized and hypervisibilized Chinese people as embodiments of the pandemic. Under such conditions, COVID-19 has been racialized, making Chinese people (and those misidentified as Chinese) the targets of public anger and frustration over lockdown measures (Lai 2020). This is evidenced by the rise of racially motivated abuse and violence directed at East Asian communities in Britain that have seen individuals being spat on, physically assaulted, verbally harassed, and referred to as “a fucking virus” (Grierson 2020a, Murphy 2020).

Furthermore, while Minneapolis cop Derek Chauvin was choking the life out of George Floyd, London’s Metropolitan Police were increasing their use of stop and search powers, which they performed 43,000 times in May 2020 (during a national lockdown) compared to 21,000 one year earlier. In fact, young Black men were stopped and searched, and in most cases inconvenienced, by police 21,950 times between March and May 2020, with over 80 percent of stop and search incidents resulting in no further

action. To put it into context, that is equivalent to 30 percent of all Black 15 to 24-year-olds in London being stopped and searched by police in a few weeks (Grierson 2020b) in what resembles the belligerence of Swamp 81 discussed above (see also Harris et al. 2021).

My point, then, is that the conditions and motivations necessitating the birth of the Monitoring Group in 1981 are generally the conditions and motivations that make its work necessary today. To claim as much is not to reduce contemporary forms of state, police, and street racism to their past terms of expression. Nor is it to make the lazy and unproductive suggestion that strategies for challenging racism are totally transferable from one spatial and temporal context to another. Rather, it is to recall the racisms of the past in order to relate them to present circumstances, and, thus, to make a case not only about continuing but exacerbated conditions of formal and informal racial degradation, disregard, and devaluation under COVID-19 and post-racial downplaying and denial. It is also to recognize that as certain hallmarks of racism persist over time in shifting fashion, so do certain antiracist values and principles. With that said, the next part of this essay discusses the Monitoring Group's enduring strategies and overarching frameworks for engaging in sustained community-based antiracist struggle.

Institutional Racism, Community Empowerment, and Collective Struggle

Over the course of its forty-year history, the Monitoring Group has coordinated various defense and family-led justice campaigns through an abiding set of principles and values. These principles and values include a resolute commitment to understanding and challenging the politics of racism, empowering racialized communities to hold state institutions to account, and forging ties between various groups to build collective momentum in the struggle for racial justice and freedom. Unpacking the Monitoring Group's strategy for supporting families and communities in the fight against racism is important for numerous reasons. First, it has shaped landmark campaigns that have prompted significant political and legal developments in Britain in terms of recognizing and reckoning with institutional racism in policing and other agencies. Second, it has a certain consistency and durability despite the mutability of racism. For within the Monitoring Group's campaign work lies a set of proactive propositions that have not only fueled past antiracist fightbacks, but also continued to guide and galvanize contemporary radical resistance.

At the heart of what the Monitoring Group has long done is antiracist advocacy work, but such advocacy is not individualized. Rather, the Monitoring Group has always sought to understand, foreground, scrutinize, and dismantle the structural conditions that underpin formal and informal racial harassment, abuse, and violence. This method of recognizing the politics of racism in individual cases of racist violence and state misconduct, while simultaneously acknowledging those cases of family and community suffering and injustice as specific expressions of institutional racism, is critical. It means that the Monitoring Group treats such cases with particular attention, care, and compassion and not as isolated and separate affairs. It means that the campaigns for Stephen Lawrence, Ricky Reel, the Bradford 12, and many others are considered related acts of resistance against a sociopolitical infrastructure that routinely treats certain groups differently than others. As Grover states, “we do not see these cases as exceptional. The rule is that we live in a racist society and the families we work with are the victims of a systematic form of racism” (Nijjar 2021, 95).

That continuous effort to challenge politically produced racial injustice was a critical factor in the British establishment finally admitting the issue of institutional racism in 1999. Supported by the Monitoring Group, vigorous campaigning by the Lawrence family exposed a range of shortcomings in the Metropolitan Police’s initial response to and subsequent handling of the murder of Stephen Lawrence. These included police failure to provide adequate first aid and take proper investigative steps at the scene where Stephen was killed, to recognize the stabbing as racially motivated, and to oversee early arrests of suspects and searches of their premises, despite the availability of sufficient evidence to do so (Bridges 1999). The police did, however, compound the trauma of Stephen’s friend, Duwayne Brooks, who, having witnessed the attack, was “stereotyped as a protagonist in the violence” because of his ethnicity (Burnett 2012, 92).

The ensuing government-commissioned Macpherson Report (1999) concluded that police disregard for Stephen’s life and indifference toward his family were outcomes of institutional racism and the callousness that racialized communities had long endured, documented, and resisted. That landmark acknowledgement prompted significant changes in policy and law concerning how police record and handle racist incidents, including the creation of what is now named the Independent Office for Police Conduct and reforms to the double jeopardy law, which prevents someone from facing a retrial for the same offense after being acquitted. Such reforms established legislated grounds for a retrial that led to the eventual conviction of two of

Stephen's killers in January 2012, with one of them having been initially acquitted in 1996 (see Rozenberg 2012). My point is that Macpherson's recognition of institutional racism, which was vigorously fought for by the Lawrence family, the Monitoring Group, and those across Britain facing systematic state violence, is as vital today as it was in 1999. For while institutional racism persists, the concerted push to personalize the political, to divorce hate from power, and thus to delegitimize legitimate conversations about systematic discrimination and structural transformation has perhaps never been as powerful as in today's neoliberal epoch.³

The Monitoring Group's longstanding commitment to understanding and mobilizing against the politics of racism corresponds to its abiding recognition of communities as the main protagonists of political transformation. While acknowledging that institutional racism has shifted over the last forty years according to broader sociopolitical circumstances, the Monitoring Group has always retained the principle of empowering communities. The charity views those who have suffered state and street racism as possessing the power to change the broader sociopolitical conditions around them. This is perhaps most obvious in the Lawrence family campaign, where tireless agitation by Stephen's parents, Doreen and Neville, and their supporters led to the state's overdue and damning acknowledgment of institutional racism. Holding state agencies to account is, of course, pivotal to that process of building a movement to reimagine and remake an antiracist world. However, for the Monitoring Group, such structural change always stems from working together with families who, as Grover maintains, "have the capacity to analyse, take part in decision-making, and generate momentum for not only addressing the injustices they have faced, but also understanding the wider political causes of them" (Nijjar 2021, 96).

Under neoliberal conditions, antiracist community empowerment is belittled by patronizing claims of self-pity and victimhood in a bid to deny the existence of systematic racism in Britain. A recent example of this particular form of post-race politics concerns the British government's announcement of a Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (CRED) following global antiracist demonstrations against police brutality in the summer of 2020. CRED has no credibility, however, after publishing a much-maligned report that Jenny Bourne (2021, n.p.) calls "the report for neoliberal times." CRED (2021, 8) suggests that the term institutional racism is misapplied, that Britain is "a successful multi-cultural community—a beacon to the rest of Europe and the world," and that, where evident, racism materializes as online abuse, graffiti, and other individual expressions. The terms of the CRED

report were established by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who wanted to “change the narrative” on race, highlighting the “story of success” among racialized communities, and “stop the sense of victimisation and discrimination” (Walker 2020). Such insensitive statements aim to undermine the enduring principles of antiracist organizations like the Monitoring Group that, far from promoting a sense of victimization, have always sought to empower communities to resist institutional racism.

For the Monitoring Group, campaign work that foregrounds the politics of racism and ensures community empowerment makes it possible to build alliances between different families, communities, and organizations. Indeed, for Grover, such alliances “are a vital step towards dismantling the structures that perpetuate racism” (Nijjar 2021, 96). This lasting commitment to a unified antiracist fightback against institutional racism is especially critical in today’s neoliberal context. For neoliberalism seeks to suppress solidarity and undo comm/unity, as evidenced recently by the CRED’s (2021) recommendation to abolish data collection and analysis based on the term BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic).⁴ Since such moves try to obscure, undermine, and dismiss the common political and historical experiences of racism that unite racialized communities, to resist them is to recognize racial denial, disregard, and degradation as systematic, multifaceted, and related, rather than sporadic, marginal, and isolated. That recognition makes it impossible to disconnect the belligerent policing of Black youth under the war on gangs from the hyperintrusive and hostile regulation of Muslims under the war on terror or to detach the war on terror from the brutal treatment of Palestinians.

Ultimately, an antiracism that connects the dots between numerous expressions of institutional racism and empowers communities to act upon that common experience collectively offers remarkable promise. It means, as A. Sivanandan (1983) argues, that individual cases can become issues and that issues can develop into full-scale movements for racial justice. In other words, repeated cases of racial harassment and violence raise the issue of a lack of safety and security for Black, Asian, migrant, and refugee communities. That issue of a lack of safety and security is part of a broader political context in which racialized populations are routinely subject to the oppressive powers of police, prison systems, border agencies, and other state institutions. An antiracism that is underpinned by an enduring commitment to make such connections has the power to “bring together the various aspects of our struggle and the different groups involved in them” (Sivanandan 1983, 10). Accordingly, the principle of a unified antiracist fightback is pivotal to developing a movement based not on self-betterment,

individual gain, and personal ambition, but on structural change, collective liberation, and political transformation.

Conclusion

The forty-year history of the Monitoring Group is the forty-year history of a radical form of antiracist praxis that rests on an enduring set of progressive principles and values, while acknowledging the historical specificity of racial degradation, denial, exclusion, and terror. The Monitoring Group's work has long marked the manifestation of antiracist resistance that situates the belligerent policing and racist street attacks faced by racialized communities in their political and historical context. That forty-year commitment to foregrounding the dire consequences of institutional racism has been the basis for continuously representing and empowering the rights of those communities who are systematically mistreated, misrepresented, and marginalized by the state as if they have no rights. It has also meant never losing sight of the common political context that binds Black, Asian, migrant, and refugee groups in Britain, a recognition that fuels an unabating drive to imagine and build a collective form of antiracism through grassroots community alliances and solidarities.

These antiracist principles and values are as necessary for strategizing and mobilizing in the present political context as they were forty years ago. For today that context involves the hypernationalism behind Britain's exit from the European Union, the fascism of a globally networked far right, the neoliberalism that denies institutional racism even as it intensifies, the authoritarianism of a newly proposed Police, Crime, Sentencing, and Courts Bill,⁵ and the neocolonialism of enduring legacies. The Monitoring Group's forty-year history, in this sense, is the much needed mark of hope and possibility in what can seem like an endless stream of despair and dejection. It is thus incumbent upon us to hold onto such precious "shards of hope" (Gilroy et al. 2019, 184) when moving forward in collective and committed fashion toward an alternative future, one that seeks to dismantle a racist social structure and rebuild an actively antiracist social structure.

NOTES

1. Such terminology signified the racist discourse of British political power. In a 1978 television interview on immigration, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher stated that "if we went on as we are then by the end of the century there would be four million people of the new Commonwealth or Pakistan here. Now, that is an awful lot and I think it means that

people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture.” As Jenny Bourne (2013, 88) summarizes, Thatcher had “taken on the clothes of the far-right National Front and given a fillip to racial violence which was, in the 1970s, along with racist policing, the principal problem of the inner-city.”

2. Read went on trial for incitement to racial hatred. However, the judge not only encouraged a verdict of not guilty, which the jury delivered, but also “repeated Read’s lie that Chaggar was stabbed by an Asian youth, then wished him well after he had been acquitted” (Higgs 2016, 69).

3. This comment is inspired by David Theo Goldberg’s essay “Hate, or Power?” (see Goldberg 1997).

4. Liz Fekete (2021, n.p.) writes that BAME or BME “are far from perfect categories.” Nonetheless, for Fekete, “such disaggregated, ethnic-specific data will be used to create a kind of league table of good and bad, successful and failing groups.” This undergirds the neoliberal suggestion that success and progression for racially defined groups is possible and evident and that such communities are not united by the politics of racism, but rather separated by a commitment (or lack of commitment) to self-enterprise.

5. The bill proposes numerous new measures that have serious implications for racially marginalized communities in Britain. In terms of policing protests, it would allow the home secretary to define the term serious disruption to businesses and people. That definition would enable police to impose restrictions on where and how protests occur, thus expanding the scope of police intervention and criminalization. The legislation also marks a direct attack on the way of life of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities by creating a new offense of “residing on land without consent in or with a vehicle,” including the intention to reside or have a vehicle on land. Furthermore, the bill proposes Serious Violence Reduction Orders (SVROs), which would be imposed on individuals not only convicted for an offensive weapons offense, but also people who have not handled an offensive weapon. Police would be authorized to stop and search anyone under an SVRO without reasonable suspicion (see Liberty 2021).

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