



Reporting oppression: mapping racial prejudice in *Anti-Caste* and *Fraternity*, 1888–1895

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Abstract

This paper presents a close reading of the reports of racial oppression that appeared in issues of two periodicals, *Anti-Caste* and its successor *Fraternity*, between 1888 and 1895. Edited in Street, Somerset, these periodicals created an extensive political geographical imagination by mapping international cases of racial prejudice. Although critical of the British empire, neither *Anti-Caste* nor *Fraternity* demanded the destruction of the British empire. In a tactic similar to that used by early Pan-Africanists, the papers' narratives desired an end to the expansion of the British empire and an increase in the respect for and conditions of those who were ruled 'under the British Flag'. However, *Anti-Caste*'s focus upon racial inequality across the United States as well as the British empire enabled it to create a distinctive critique of racial prejudice across the English-speaking world. Its criticism of the imperial project combined with support for human brotherhood allowed the paper to develop a framework for debates on racial prejudice that drew together criticisms of labour laws in India, the removal of people from their lands in Southern Africa, the racial segregation of public transport in the United States and the restriction of Chinese labour in Australia.

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It is pitiful to see how by this system of *caste* the careers of many of our fellow creatures are straitened, their cultivation and growth in civilisation checked, their most honourable aspirations thwarted, their liberties in a thousand ways abridged.

Anti-Caste, 1888¹

It is as though the British Empire is not large enough; our conduct in Africa is one perpetual series of war and bloodshed. First West, then East and now South Africans fall prey to our insatiable greed.

Fraternity, 1893²

Anti-Caste was a small magazine first published in England in March 1888 by the English activist Catherine Impey. Appearing monthly, the periodical explored and debated geographies of racial prejudice in order to articulate an early form of the politics of anti-racism. With increasing support for *Anti-Caste*'s campaign work, stimulated by public tours of England and Scotland by the African-

American journalist Ida B. Wells in 1893, *Anti-Caste* changed its name and scope, becoming *Fraternity*. Both papers focused on the cruelties and violence of racial prejudice, what *Anti-Caste*'s editor described as 'colour caste', across the British Empire and in the United States. Debates on the 'right relations' between people divided by ideologies of race were not begun by *Anti-Caste*. Long preceding its publication, the abolition movement had debated ideas of 'brotherhood' from its inception in the eighteenth century. *Anti-Caste* sought to promote a new narrative on issues of equality. The magazine acknowledged its inheritance from the anti-slavery movement and intended to include notices and brief summaries of the proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Society. However, as Midgley has emphasised, the anti-slavery movement was not an anti-imperial movement.³ In any case, *Anti-Caste*'s primary concern was not with slavery nor 'legalised oppression', but with 'social oppression', a form of prejudice that could 'sanction cruelties and disabilities' beyond the reach of legal redress and was able to re-

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¹ *Anti-Caste* (March 1888) 1.

² *Fraternity* (December 1893) 1.

³ C. Midgley, Bringing the empire home: women activists in imperial Britain, 1790s–1930s, 230–250, in: C. Hall, S. Rose (Eds), *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, Cambridge, 2006.

establish and maintain 'legislative encroachments on the primary rights of citizenship'.⁴

Building on Porter's 1968 account of *Critics of Empire*, numerous historians have sought to examine the nature of imperial critiques and their authors' relationship to 'anti-imperialist' sentiment and movements.⁵ As both Burton and Claeys have noted, many authors mark the Anglo-Boer conflict between 1899 and 1902 as the moment reformers began to develop more systematic critical engagements with imperialism.⁶ Yet there is a 'back story about empire and progressive politics that remains to be told'.⁷ Although they may not strictly meet definitions of anti-imperialism applied to radicals of the twentieth century, a wide variety of Victorian liberals, socialists, positivists and nationalists engaged in critical discussions about the existence and expansion of the British empire from within the United Kingdom.⁸ These men and women wrestled with debates over 'race' and imperial expansion and their discussions reflected a variety of opinions and policies on how British imperial power might be curtailed. Many of these ideas came from collaborative politics, though not all sought to redefine social or political equality. For example, Lynch argues that between 1840 and 1875 anti-imperialism became an important theme within Irish nationalism, but admits this form of anti-imperialism had a complex relationship with anti-racism.⁹ While Thomas Davis argued that imperialists were driven by a lust for blood, power and plunder (arguments later to be stressed in *Anti-Caste* and *Fraternity*) and that justice and pity knew 'no distinctions of clime, or race' (for an article in his paper *The Nation* in 1842), his ideas were formed through ideas of nationhood.¹⁰ Although criticised for it by other Irish nationalists, John Mitchel was able to argue for Irish nationalism and against British imperialism, yet remain a staunch supporter of slavery in the United States.¹¹

Later in the nineteenth century Indian nationalists were often sympathetic to Irish Home Rule and O'Malley illustrates moments of collaboration between the two groups during this and subsequent periods.¹² The work undertaken by activists Alfred Webb and Dadabhai Naoroji who formed a close friendship and maintained political ties of 'cosmopolitan nationalism' illustrates how effective these connections proved in the 1890s.¹³ It is within this context of early progressive politics that *Anti-Caste* was established. In the same year that *Anti-Caste* began publication, William Digby founded the Indian and Political General Agency in London in

collaboration with the Indian National Congress in order to raise grievances from India in the British press and Parliament.¹⁴ Through *Anti-Caste* Impey sought to challenge the 'Colour Line' that was being drawn out in both the United States and the 'settler colonies'. However, though critical of imperial expansion, neither *Anti-Caste* nor *Fraternity* demanded the immediate dismantling of the British empire. In a tactic similar to that used by early Pan-Africanists, the papers' narrative desired an end to the expansion of the British empire, and an increase in the respect for and conditions of those who were unfortunate enough to be ruled 'Under the British Flag'.¹⁵

The politics of *Anti-Caste* were created and maintained through its monthly publication, and like the periodicals of the Anti-Slavery Society and the Aborigines' Protection Society (APS), *Anti-Caste* was the main vehicle used to disseminate Impey's distinctive contribution to what Mitcham identifies as a 'humanitarian complex'.¹⁶ Mitcham presents the Anti-Slavery society and the APS as two nodes within a larger network of organisations formed in the course of the nineteenth century to 'protect' or speak for particular social groups. Organisations within the 'humanitarian complex' were linked through overlapping memberships, flows of people and correspondence. *Anti-Caste* was linked to both the Anti-Slavery Society and the APS, but differed in one key respect: it did not seek to 'protect' or 'speak for' a particular social group. Impey aimed for *Anti-Caste* not to act as a space of mediation between 'native' people and imperial power, but to be a place where a conversation 'with the Negro rather than talking about the Negro' could take place.¹⁷

However, as Mitcham argues, emphasising the overlapping connections between social movements can illuminate interconnections between black and white activists. Impey insisted, as outlined below, that an international 'anti-caste' or 'emancipation' movement that united Indian, African, European and American activists across national and 'racial' boundaries was required to combat rising racism. Examining interconnections can also reveal where theoretical and practical politics between groups within the 'humanitarian complex' diverged. Impey took a keen interest in the work of the APS and her family were committed subscribers of an organisation whose members placed themselves at odds with mainstream opinion.¹⁸ Over time, however, Impey did not find the kind of political reflection she thought was needed in the *Aborigines' Friend*. She established *Anti-Caste* because 'no one else was

⁴ *Appeal Concerning the Treatment of Coloured Races*, MSS Brit Emp S. 20 E5/8, Bodleian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies at Rhodes House, University of Oxford (hereafter RHO).

⁵ B. Porter, *Critics of Empire: British Radicals and the Imperial Challenge*, London, 2008 (first published 1968). An overview of contributions to the field can be found in S. Howe (Ed.), *New Imperial History Reader*, London, 2008.

⁶ A. Burton, New narratives of imperial politics in the nineteenth century, in: C. Hall, S. Rose (Eds), *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, Cambridge, 2006, 212–229; G. Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics: British Critics of Empire 1850–1920*, Cambridge, 2010.

⁷ Burton, New narratives of imperial politics in the nineteenth century (note 6), 120.

⁸ For an examination of this historiography and examples of actors from the Peace Society and Irish nationalists see Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics* (note 6).

⁹ N. Lynch, Defining Irish nationalist anti-imperialism: Thomas Davis and John Mitchel, *Éire-Ireland* 42:1 & 2 (2007) 82–107.

¹⁰ Lynch, Defining Irish nationalist anti-imperialism (note 9), 91.

¹¹ Lynch, Defining Irish nationalist anti-imperialism (note 9).

¹² K. O'Malley, Metropolitan resistance: Indo-Irish connections in the Inter-war period, in: R. Ahmed, S. Mukherjee (Eds), *South Asian Resistances in Britain 1858–1947*, London, 2012, 125–139.

¹³ J. Regan-Lefebvre, *Cosmopolitan nationalism in the Victorian Empire: Ireland, India and the Politics of Alfred Webb*, Basingstoke, 2009.

¹⁴ N. Owen, *The British Left in India: Metropolitan Anti-Imperialism 1885–1947*, Oxford, 2007.

¹⁵ For example, the African Association, formed by members of the African diaspora living in London in 1897 sought to promote and protect the interests of subjects of African descent who lived 'in British colonies and other places' through 'appeals to British and the colonial governments to redress their wrongs': quoted in O. Mathurin, *Henry Sylvester Williams and the Origins of the Pan-African Movement, 1869–1911*, London, 45. This narrow focus on British imperial rule was broadened out for the Pan-African conference hosted by the association in London, 1900 see J. Schmeer, *London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis*, London, 1999.

¹⁶ R. Mitcham, *Geographies of Global Humanitarianism: The Anti-Slavery Society and the Aborigines Protection Society, 1884–1933*, PhD, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2001.

¹⁷ *Anti-Caste Supplement to Anti-Caste* (January 1891) 1.

¹⁸ J. Heartfield, *The Aborigines' Protection Society: Humanitarian Imperialism in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Canada, South Africa, and the Congo, 1836–1909*, London, 2011; Impey to Chesson, March 1885, Brit Empire s18 C138, RHO.

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