



The State of Black Europe

BY CLARENCE LUSANE

Europe has never been all white. The historic and contemporary presence of people of color throughout the region challenges any notion of Europe as simply the evolution of white experiences, white contributions and white legitimacy.

White European dominance has always been contested space. That is not to minimize the impact of racism or the hegemonic authority of European whites, but mainly to underscore that resistance to racism, white supremacy and a white Euro-centrism has been constant. Such resistance continues in the form of struggles against racist immigration policies, police violence and murders, assaults by right-wing extremists, and other social, cultural and economic problems faced by people of color.

In most European nations, people of color are categorized under the generic label "black," a term that includes people from Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, Asia and the Middle East. While the term is being contested and undergoing change, it is still used to capture a broad array of peoples of color who have either historically resided in the region or recently immigrated, and who share the historic experience of colonialism. At the same time, the notion of specific black identities is different in each country. To be a black in Germany, for instance, does not necessarily mean the same thing as being a black in England, France, Hungary or Italy.

The differences come from both official state definitions, popular notions about who is in what group and self-definitions.

As historian Ivan Van Sertima and others note, the African presence in Europe dates back to antiquity.¹ The oldest skull ever found in Europe, in Dusseldorf, Germany, is that of an African. The black Moorish invasion and occupation in parts of Europe, particularly in Spain and southern Europe, from 715 through the 16th century is generally well known.² While the Moors were eventually driven out, Africans remained in the region and settled in many places.

That presence continues today. In every nation in Europe, people of African descent can be found. Though for the most part the number of blacks is relatively small, the prominence of Afro-Europeans in a wide range of areas is growing. Due largely to the popularity of sports and music personalities, there is an awareness of people of African descent in England and France. But generally speaking, the experiences and situations of Afro-Caribbeans, Africans and even African Americans in the Scandinavian countries, Germany, Southern Europe and Central-Eastern Europe are unknown. There are significant numbers of people of African descent in the region, and they suffer from specific forms of racism aimed at dark-skinned people.

Some authors have noted the phenomena of "multiple racisms," that is, in a given society, different ethno-racial groups may experience racism in dissimilar and distinct ways, although all may suffer from a general form of racial prejudice and discrimination.³ In Europe, it can be argued that those of African descent experience expressions of racism distinct from Asians, the Roma (Gypsies) or people from the Middle East. For example, the invective "nigger" is still hurled almost exclusively at people of African descent across the region.⁴ The identification of specific forms of anti-dark-skinned, anti-African racism is by no means meant to diminish racism and other forms of intolerance visited upon other

groups. The difference lies not in one form being better or worse than another, but in the specific historical-social contexts out of which particular groups emerged.

Other groups suffering from racial and ethnic discrimination include the Roma, Turks, Kurds, southern Asians and Middle Easterners. The Roma, whom King Henry VIII called "Europe's most unwanted race," continue to endure unbridled discrimination and oppression throughout Europe.⁵ In Central and Eastern Europe, in particular, the Roma experience physical attacks, nearly universal unemployment, and widespread attitudes that view them as less than human.

The variety of peoples of color in Europe complicates our understanding of different racial views embraced by Europeans. There is no one European view of race or racial differences. While blacks from Africa and the Caribbean in France are seen (and see themselves) as French in every sense of the term, Afro-Germans rarely obtain German citizenship despite several generations of residency. In most instances, nationalism and ethnic differences among white Europeans, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, lead to more conflicts than differences between whites and blacks. Although people of color play increasingly visible roles, from entertainment and sports stars to elected officials and human rights leaders, their small numbers are no threat to the lifestyles, employment or general opportunities available to whites. In other words, resistance to blacks is based more on ideological and politically-derived notions and motives rather than any concrete data that whites are losing ground.

Who's Black?

The term black as a category for all people of color is losing favor somewhat, due to the increasingly different positions that various groups find themselves in regarding their socioeconomic status. In England, for instance, third-generation Afro-Caribbeans tend to be,

on average, much more integrated and economically and socially secure than first-generation Pakistanis. Some argue, in fact, that the category "black" really doesn't represent different social locations, and that it is more important to see each group in its own particular light. Also, a rising black nationalist ideology among some people of African descent in England, France and Germany advocates a "blacks only" or "blacks first" perspective that undermines collective action among people of color. It is seen in the growth of nationalist groups such as the U.S.-based Nation of Islam. Similar calls of nationalism or ethnocentrism come from other groups as well.

One difficulty in assessing the impact of racism on people of color is that few countries collect data that is racially useful. Census counts don't include racial categories, for instance, and researchers are left to calculate in most instances from immigration data and respondents' information on nation of origin. Needless to say, calculating racial counts by nation of origin is highly problematic, particularly given that racial categories themselves are social constructs that are fluid and elastic. It is no more correct to conclude that an immigrant from Jamaica is "black" than to believe that one from the United States or Canada is "white."

Given such caveats, immigrant and census data, and some independent studies, provide a clue to the general numbers of racial minorities, particularly those of African descent, in Europe. According to research by the European Union, out of a total population of about 320 million, there are about 17.6 million immigrants in the 15 member states of the European Community. It is roughly estimated that about six million are from the developing world, the bulk of whom are distributed in Germany, France and the United Kingdom.⁶ Other research shows there are about 300,000 Afro-Germans, with some estimates as high as 500,000.⁷ In France, out of a population of 56.5 million, people of African descent constitute about one million.⁸ And, in the UK, the African-Caribbean population is about 1.6 percent (880,000) out of 52 million.⁹

Perhaps the most significant factor is the relatively small number of non-whites in the region. In the United Kingdom, for example, blacks constitute only about 5 percent of the population—with people of African descent totaling less than half of that number—and are disproportionately concentrated in London, Bristol, Liverpool and a few other major cities. In Central and Eastern Europe, there are small numbers of people of African descent, many of whom are former students who never left or could not leave after the Cold War. Finally, there are a number of African-American expatriates living in many states across Europe.¹⁰

Europe United (and Divided)

A pan-European consciousness has emerged in recent years in a number of ways: the development of the Euro, the NAFTA-like Maastricht Treaty, the increasing importance of the European Union, the elimination of borders, and NATO expansion. More than ever, a European identity is being promoted and developed among citizens of the region, with a concerted and calculated effort to minimize economic and political differences among states being coordinated by political leaders and policy-makers. Those occurrences, however, coincide with a significant growth in racism, xenophobia and anti-immigrant passions. Both in rhetoric and in political and policy actions, a backlash against “blacks” is evident in Western, Central, Southern and Eastern Europe, with minorities of all colors under attack and on the defensive.

In the political arena, there has been a disturbing success on the part of racist and extremist political parties to win elected office. While small in number, extremists have discovered the politics (and the rhetoric) of anti-government, pro-working-class populism. They have gained mass audiences, media exposure and quasi-legitimacy by winning elections and engaging conservative, liberal and radical politicians on relatively equal electoral grounds. Outside mainstream political systems, racist and fascist organiza-

tions have experienced a growth spurt in recent years, becoming bolder (and often deadly) in their physical attacks on racial minorities and immigrants, making many areas of Europe unsafe for travel. Assaults also emerge in a context of virulent anti-immigration legislation put in place to discourage and reverse long-standing liberal immigration laws.

Finally, it should be noted that racism and discrimination against blacks are present in the criminal justice systems of the region. While disproportionate numbers of blacks are being incarcerated or deported, police brutality against racial minorities—including murder—has skyrocketed.

At the regional, state and community levels, albeit for different reasons and with a different sense of urgency, resistance to racism has been steady and resolute. Governments and even the European Parliament have been forced to address the issues of racism, xenophobia and fascism. National and regional anti-racism organizations exist in virtually every country, particularly in Western Europe, but also in Central and Eastern Europe, and have been effective in important ways. There also has been a tremendous fight back against racism on the part of ethnic and racial minorities. Critically, links are being made among communities of color and ethnic and national minorities, across Europe and in the United States.

Rise of Racist and Neo-Fascist Parties

One of the most disturbing trends in recent years has been a growing support for racist and right-wing extremist political parties. In some instances, the groups are split-offs from more violent fascist and even neo-Nazi organizations. In others, political leaders have advocated rigidly conservative and racist views to explain dislocations associated with such factors as economic globalization. Broad, post-Communist political transformations in the area have created destabilized societies that have found it easy to blame immigrants

and "others" for their internal problems.¹¹

According to the Minister to the European Parliament (MEP) Glyn Ford, Special Rappatour for the European Parliament, since the 1983 by-elections in France, when the French National Front won a surprising number of victories, more than 10 million people have voted for extreme right and neo-Nazi parties.¹² The National Front, headed by rightist Jean-Marie Le Pen, is in complete political control of four towns in France, and has at least 275 regional councilors.¹³

France is far from alone in confronting electoral challenges from the extreme right. In Belgium, the Vlaams Blok party, whose slogan is "Our own people first," has won recent electoral victories. Similarly in Denmark, the Danish Peoples Party is increasing its share of the vote, in part, based on rhetoric against Muslims and immigrants of color. Other examples include the Centrumdemokraten (CD) in the Netherlands, the Freedom Party in Austria, and the MSI in Italy, which has been losing support but remains a political force. They are not only having an impact within their own states, but are seeking power regionally. In 1999, there were 32 MEPs from six different extreme right parties, organized into a number of blocs including the Group of the European Right.¹⁴ Their role in the EP has been to resist anti-racism efforts by liberals and progressives.

All indications are that the political right will continue to grow in Europe. Economic and political upheavals sweeping most states in the Central and Eastern regions, and unstable economies in the West do not bode well. Increasingly, there is popular support for blaming "others" for the woes facing all Europeans, rather than focusing on other causes. Politicians take advantage of the anxieties to build support for more conservative policies, and the parliamentary system of proportional representation facilitates inroads made by extremist forces. With as little as 5 percent of the vote, parties gain political seats and a popular forum in which to spew

their venom. In some small towns in France, for instance, extremist politicians have passed laws banning rap music and removed books on multiculturalism from the shelves of local public libraries.

Growth of Racist Violence

Racist violence also remains a major problem. In recent years, there has been an increase in group and individual attacks on people of color and ethnic minorities—particularly Africans, Arabs, South Asians and the Roma. The European Union reports that more than 12,000 racist incidents were recorded in Europe in 1996.

Across Europe, according to the *European Race Audit*, physical violence is rampant against immigrants and racial minorities. In Bulgaria, five white teenagers were convicted in 1998 of the racial murder of a 19-year-old Roma. In Italy and Spain, homeless Africans have been killed by racists in a series of attacks that have escalated since the mid-1990s. One case that received international coverage in early 1999 was the racially motivated murder of Steven Lawrence in England. On April 22, 1993, Lawrence was stabbed to death by a group of five or six white youths while waiting for a bus. Not only were the police late in responding as he lay dying on the street, they botched the investigation, slandered Lawrence's family and lost or hid evidence. After years of protest, a national inquiry and a stunning 1,000-page report, the British government admitted its complicity in the injustice. The family received an apology from Prime Minister Tony Blair and the head of Scotland Yard, and Blair confessed on the floor of the House of Commons that England had not gotten rid of racism.

It was organized resistance by the Afro-Caribbean community and vast support from other communities of color and many white Britains that forced the issue into the popular domain. Just as the Rodney King beating in Los Angeles was a catalyst for national mobilization around police brutality, the Lawrence case fired up hundreds of thousands across the UK to speak out against racist violence and state indifference.

Immigration Policy

On June 21, 1948, right after World War II, the *SS Empire Winbush* landed at Tilbury Docks in East London carrying 492 Jamaicans.¹⁵ It was the beginning of a massive wave of blacks from the Caribbean to England that would profoundly shape and racialize the nation's immigration policies. To address its labor shortage in the post-war period, England not only embraced a liberal immigration policy, but aggressively sought "colored" immigrants. Less than a decade later, politicians such as the late ultra-conservative Enoch Power would call for the reversal of the policies, and for the deportation of England's blacks. In the last three decades, immigration of people of color from the developing world to the states of Europe has generated antagonism, leading political leaders, the media and conservative political forces to target them as scapegoats for Europe's economic downturn.

Across Europe, the immigration of people of color continued to be a feature of the 1980s and 1990s. While many came to find work, a large number simply came to be with their families. In the Netherlands, for example, the number of Caribbean, African and Middle East immigrants has grown immensely. Official estimates count about 300,000 Surinamese, 260,000 Turks, and more than 200,000 Moroccans out of a total population of 15.5 million.¹⁶ The non-European, foreign-born population continues to grow throughout the region, including Switzerland (18.9 percent), Austria (9 percent), Belgium (9 percent), Germany (8.8 percent), France (6 percent), and Denmark (4.2 percent).¹⁷ Again, while those immigrants are not all people of color, a disproportionately high number are, and they make up the new faces of present-day Europe. Their growth has unleashed a vicious legislative backlash against immigrants of color.

In nearly every Western European country, immigration laws have tightened. What has emerged is a right-center consensus on

immigration that seeks to close the doors on people from the global South, and, where possible, deport and reduce the colored populations that are already resident. In Austria, a new law was put in place in 1988 to stop refugees at the border. In Germany, there has been fierce conservative resistance to efforts to reform the nation's citizenship laws. In Switzerland, in a move reminiscent of California's Proposition 187, a new law was passed that requires physicians to deny medical service to those who are not legally in the country.¹⁸

Such policy battles will constitute perhaps the most serious confrontations that European states face in the coming century. Calls for ethnic or racial purity, while impossible to implement, if carried to their logical extension could ignite atrocities of the worst kind, as witnessed in the ethnically-driven breakup of Yugoslavia.

Global Connections

Extremist and racist groups have long been linked internationally. In the modern era, the Internet and advanced technologies facilitate the connections, and more directly tie European racists to their counterparts in the rest of the world, including the United States.

Racist and neo-fascist groups are not only working together across Europe, but have ties to groups in North America and elsewhere. One U.S.-based group that has reached out to the European right is the Council of Conservative Citizens (CCC). The CCC, formed in 1985, is the heir of the 1950s Citizens Councils of America—popularly known as the White Citizens Councils—which were created to resist the civil rights revolution in the South. The CCC opposes “race-mixing,” thinks the Voting Rights and Civil Rights acts should be repealed, and advocates eugenics-based solutions to the “race problem.” More important than their racist rhetoric are the direct ties of council members to groups such as the Invisible Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, the National Association for the Advancement of White People, the neo-Nazi

National Alliance and other right-wing extremist groups.

The CCC has gone global, establishing international ties to racist and fascist groups in a number of states in Western Europe. According to a report issued by the Southern Poverty Law Center, Mark Cotterill, head of the CCC's youth division, is originally from Britain and was active with the neo-fascist British National Front. Cotterill also has been associated with right-wing extremists in Ireland. In the fall of 1998, states the report, the CCC sent a delegation of its leadership to a meeting in France sponsored by Jean Marie Le Pen and his National Front.

International solidarity around race, however, has not been limited to right-wing and racist groups. Progressive African Americans have a long history of working with and supporting the struggles of people of African descent in Europe. As political scientist Ronald Walters documents in *Pan-Africanism in the African Diaspora: An Analysis of Modern Afrocentric Political Movements*, the links between Afro-Britains and African Americans are long and enduring.¹⁹ From W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey to Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., the ties have been dynamic although primarily one-way. While blacks in England have followed and often emulated African-American politics and culture, few African Americans are aware of black British activists such as black nationalist Michael X, MP Bernie Grant and civil rights activist Lee Jasper.

In recent years, black (and white) Europeans have closely followed racial developments in the United States, from the O.J. Simpson case and controversies surrounding Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, to Jesse Jackson's perennial presidential campaigns, the Million Man March and police killings of blacks.

African-American scholars also have been active in building connections with activists and scholars in England and elsewhere. Historians Barbara Ransby and Manning Marable are both on the editorial board of the Institute of Race Relations in the U.K. Professors

bell hooks and Cornel West are popular speakers in the region, and the late poet and lesbian activist Audrey Lourde played a critical role in the emergence of Afro-German politics in the mid-1980s. Such encounters will likely grow in the future.

Fighting Back

At the grassroots level and in official circles, there has been an organized resistance to racism. Regional groups, such as the Standing Committee on Race in Europe (SCORE), SOS-Racism, and the Institute of Race Relations, have been at the forefront in exposing problems of race and in mobilizing communities to fight for their rights. SCORE has been educating and organizing black communities about developments in the European Union, and SOS-Racism has been fighting against racist immigration legislation as well as confronting the problem of racist violence against African and Arab people by Europe's growing array of neo-Nazi and fascist groups. SOS-Racism has been particularly in the thick of battle in France, where it more or less served as the principle opposition to the National Front.²⁰

At the state level, the Council of Europe, the European Parliament (EP) and the European Union (EU) all have addressed the issue. In 1994, the European Parliament established the Consultative Commission on Racism and Xenophobia to document and investigate racist movements in the region, and make recommendations to the EP about needed legislation to address the rights of Europe's ethnic, migrant and immigrant communities. It has issued a number of reports that activists as well as legislators have found highly useful.

In 1997, the EP launched the European Year Against Racism (EYAR), and for the first time in European history, there was a concerted and coordinated effort by member states to attack racism, xenophobia and all forms of intolerance. As Pádraig Flynn, European Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs, stated at the time,

"I believe that 1997 has the potential to be a historic year. It is the first time that there has been an agreement between the [European] Community institutions and member states to engage in concrete action to combat racism within the existing institutional framework. It provides a very practical vehicle for the Community and the member states to take action together and to take a firm stance against the rising tide of racism through the EU."²¹

The one-year campaign was given a budget of 5 million pounds to launch its activities, which included political events, educational forums, information campaigns, local and regional projects, and a Web site. The six objectives of the EYAR were:

1. To highlight the threat to basic human rights and economic cohesion posed by racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism;
2. To encourage thought and debate on how to combat racism;
3. To promote an exchange of experiences, best practices, and effective strategies developed at all levels of society to combat racism;
4. To distribute information on good practice and effective strategies among anti-racism organizations to increase their efficiency;
5. To make national integration policies understood, in particular in the areas of employment, education, training and housing; and
6. To draw on the experiences of those affected by racism and promote their involvement in society.²²

The public relations goal of the EYAR was not only to initiate its own events and projects, but to be visible at as many public gatherings as possible. An effort was made to involve many different types of organizations, including the media, trade unions, student groups, religious organizations and community groups.

Conclusion

Europe faces a multiracial, multiethnic future whether it wants it or

not. Issues of race, class, gender, nationality and other concerns will continue to unfold in the period ahead, as the region responds to wide and often troubling transitions. A critical variable affecting the quality of race relations will be the interplay between democratic inclusion and intolerance, and how much popular and official support each is accorded.

While the position of people of African descent will likely rise as they continue to integrate and assimilate into England, France, Germany and the Netherlands, their numbers will remain relatively low, impacting the degree and intensity of race consciousness and the available space for race-conscious political action. In any case, the coloring of Europe grows, and it will be important that African Americans continue to build economic, political and cultural ties.

Notes

- ¹ See Ivan Van Sertima, ed., *African Presence in Early Europe* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996).
- ² See Ivan Van Sertima, ed., *The Golden Age of the Moor* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992).
- ³ Goldberg, David, ed., *Anatomy of Racism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).
- ⁴ Hockenos, Paul, *Free to Hate: The Rise of the Right in Post-Communist Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 149.
- ⁵ Sebestyen, Amanda, "Europe's Most Unwanted Race," CARF, February/March 1999, 14.
- ⁶ Ford, Glyn, *Report on the Findings of the Inquiry*, (Luxembourg: European Parliament, Committee of Inquiry on Racism and Xenophobia, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1991), 119.
- ⁷ Blackshire-Belay, Carol Aisha, "Introduction: Critical Essays on the African-German Experience," in Carol Aisha Blackshire-Belay, ed., *The African-German Experience: Critical Essays* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), ix, and Liz Fekete and Frances Webber, *Inside Racist Europe* (London: Institute of Race Relations, 1994), 47.
- ⁸ *Ibid*, Fekete and Webber, 45.

T H E S T A T E O F B L A C K A M E R I C A

- ⁹ Owen, David, *Black People in Great Britain* (Coventry: Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations of the Economic and Social Research Council, 1994), 1.
- ¹⁰ See, for example, Michael Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980* (Urbana, IL: University of Chicago, 1993).
- ¹¹ See, for example, Rand C. Lewis, *The Neo-Nazis and German Unification* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996).
- ¹² Ford, Glyn, "Briefing Notes for Racism and Xenophobia," speech at Back to Basics Conference, October 10, 1998.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, Ford, 11.
- ¹⁵ Paul, Kathleen, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 111.
- ¹⁶ Robinson, Eugene, "Blending In, Or Wiping Out? Immigration Tests a European Society," *Washington Post*, July 5, 1998.
- ¹⁷ "Dutch Diversity," *Washington Post*, July 5, 1998.
- ¹⁸ *European Race Audit*, February 1998.
- ¹⁹ Walters, Ronald, *Pan-Africanism in the African Diaspora: An Analysis of Modern Afrocentric Political Movements* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995).
- ²⁰ Morris, Lorezno, "African Immigrants in France: SOS Racism vs. the National Front," *National Political Science Review*, Volume 7, 20-36.
- ²¹ "A Historic Moment," *Newsletter for the European Year Against Racism, January 1997*, 1.
- ²² Ibid, 2.