‘RACE’, ETHNICITY AND ADOPTION

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The twin aims of this chapter are to chart the history of ‘race’, ethnicity and adoption as a public issue in Britain and to contextualize that history. This mapping exercise will involve both a broad outline of developments in the adoption of black and minority ethnic children, and identifying the key terms of debate which are to be explored in subsequent chapters. The goal of contextualization rests upon recognizing that there are many ‘histories’ relevant to ‘race’, ethnicity and adoption. In addition to the internal influences of practice experience, research, legal judgements or official guidance, developments are crucially shaped by external factors. For ‘race’ and adoption, these include both those pertaining to child care and social work more generally and the wider contexts of policy and politics surrounding ‘race’ and ethnicity.

Any such historical approach faces two related difficulties, namely the lack of official data collection and the fact that for the most part adoption remains a private phenomenon. The profound effects it may have on members of the adoption triangle (adopted child, adopters, and birth parents) remain largely hidden from view, while confidentiality ensures that the activities of legal and social work professionals are similarly inaccessible. Taken together, the hidden nature of adoption and the absence of systematic data on ethnicity render study difficult at both micro and macro levels, not to mention efforts to link the two. For these tasks, we are reliant to a large degree on snapshot views, arising from particular research studies, writings, broadcasts and so on. As will be seen, the glimpses afforded are by no means insignificant in number or quality, and collectively offer valuable insights into the history of ‘race’ and adoption. It is, however, important to emphasize the many gaps in our knowledge.

**The emergence and establishment of transracial adoption**

While no doubt informal ‘transracial adoption’ (TRA) is as old as adoption itself, its origins as a public issue in Britain can be traced to the late 1950s.
The emergent ‘problem’, which was to frame developments thereafter, was that of a growing number of black and minority ethnic children in the public care system for whom long-term substitute care was viewed as desirable yet ‘impossible’. This formulation took place within the context of changing adoption practices, but also that of the postwar ‘New Commonwealth’ migration and reaction to it.

If the 1950s saw the high water mark of adoption as ‘clean break’ – with complete severance from birth families seen as best for all concerned – they also marked the beginning of important changes. Foremost among these was a closer link between adoption and the public child care system. Enshrined in the 1958 Adoption Act, this brought not only a stronger social work influence within adoption but also an interest in extending adoption to those children previously considered beyond its scope, whether on grounds of their age, disability or racial background. Collectively, those who fell into one or more of these categories became known as ‘hard-to-place’, simultaneously indicating both the possibility and difficulty of their adoption. The presumed unadoptability of minority ethnic children is only explicable in the context of responses to postwar migration. The latter’s course has been covered in an extensive literature (Hiro 1973; Castles et al. 1984) and only salient features will be commented upon here. Notwithstanding the focus on the immigrant as newcomer, postwar migrants to the UK were entering a society steeped in racialized thinking and attendant exclusionary practices.

The relationship between modernity and racialization has been the subject of considerable debate (Gilroy 1993; Goldberg 1993; Rattansi and Westwood 1994; Malik 1996) but it is widely recognized that western liberal democracy has been characterized by a disjuncture between the formal principles of equality, justice and reason and the largely informal practices of subordination, discrimination and coercion based on racialization. (It will be argued that this complex and fraught relationship has continued to bear down upon the adoption of minority ethnic children.) If such contradictions were far from new, their form during the postwar years was influenced by important contemporary factors. These included the juxtaposition of migrant and subordinated labour with the status of citizenship, involving rights, in principle, to equal treatment with the white native population. Public commitment to goals of equality was fuelled not only by a liberal tradition and national self-image of ‘tolerance’, but by a changing world order. Decolonization, the Cold War, and the aftermath of Nazism and the Holocaust all served to undermine the ‘respectability’ of racism (Miles 1989: 47). In turn, this tended to drive such discourse underground and gave rise to more coded forms focusing on culture and difference (Barker 1981). The combined effect of these factors was to foster a climate in which expressions of tolerance and formal commitments to equality sat alongside widespread discrimination. A loose form of compromise appeared to emerge where a certain antipathy towards (black) immigrants was to be seen as ‘only natural’, but with its expression generally constrained. Coldness, indifference and rejection (including the various ‘colour bars’ and the ‘no blacks’ notices)
were seen as socially acceptable in ways which more overt hostility and violence were not (Richmond 1961: 247; Patterson 1965: 339).

The climate of the late 1950s and early 1960s is well, if perhaps unwittingly, captured in Patterson’s (1965) study of West Indians in Brixton. Our concern here rests not with Patterson’s assimilationist assumptions, her playing down the extent of discrimination, or her tendency to see West Indian ‘touchiness’ as a major problem. Rather, it lies with the detailed setting out of the ‘common-sense prejudices’ of the day and Patterson’s implicit naturalization of them. An indication of the customary distance between ‘immigrants’ and ‘hosts’ is given when Patterson notes the general lack of any social mixing and talks of a ‘rank order of avoidance’ (p. 247) which grows as the relationship becomes potentially more intimate. Patterson also comments more directly on the position of black children and those of mixed parentage, citing figures which suggest that they comprised 10–20 per cent of foster children in London by the late 1950s (p. 239). Given the general findings of her study, the notion of black children being ‘hard-to-place’ is perhaps unsurprising. Indeed, Patterson reports one welfare agency where 80 per cent of its (white) foster carers had refused to take black children (p. 237). She also notes how agencies were often sceptical regarding prospective white adopters, concerned they may be motivated by guilt, and that with such hostility to miscegenation and intermarriage it would always be difficult to envisage ‘a coloured child as a full member of a white family’ (p. 239).

It is important to emphasize that adoption (or foster care) by black families was not completely off the agenda at this time. Similarly, given the picture painted by Patterson, it would seem to fit well with the prevailing notions of social distance and status. Braithwaite (see below) was to note the prevailing belief that ‘being with one’s own kind’ is best (1962: 12). It should also be remembered that ‘matching’ ideas, especially on the basis of physical characteristics, prevailed in adoption at the time, the ideal being that adoptees should look as if born to the adopters. Rather than being seen as socially ‘undesirable’, racially matched adoption for black children was seen as impractical, at least on the necessary scale. Patterson herself comments on migrants’ housing difficulties as an impediment to foster care, while also noting that adoption in West Indian communities almost invariably operated only in an informal way. Impressionistically, it is known that both same-race and transracial adoptions did occur during the 1950s. We also know, thanks to the book Paid Servant (Braithwaite 1962), something of the first more concerted attempt to find black homes for black children. E.R. Braithwaite (author of the popular novel To Sir with Love) was seconded by London County Council to promote such efforts. His narrative is of great historical interest, and not only for its inside story of a black worker in a child care agency of the day. Braithwaite raises, albeit largely in passing, a number of issues which would later assume greater importance. These include the often prejudiced attitudes of workers and the underlying ‘white norms’ of the agency; the failure to understand black family forms; and the
effect of class divisions on relationships between black workers and the wider black community. Initiatives such as the LCC’s were rare. An early 1960s survey by the National Council for Civil Liberties found only five agencies attempting to place ‘coloured’ children and reported judges often refusing transracial placements on grounds akin to ‘miscegenation’ arguments (cited in Gaber 1994: 15).

More systematic efforts to find adoptive homes for black and minority ethnic children are usually traced to the work of the British Adoption Project (BAP), which also established transracial adoption as a ‘recognized’ phenomenon. More detailed aspects of the BAP will be considered in later chapters, but a brief overview is useful at this point. The project’s establishment was first mooted in 1962, promoted by International Social Service of Great Britain, and recruitment activities commenced in 1965. Optimism over the adoptability of ‘non-white’ children had been boosted by the adoption of around 100 children from Hong Kong in the early 1960s (Bagley 1993: 152). By the mid-1960s, as the BAP’s own survey demonstrated, adoption of non-white children was by no means rare, accounting for 3.4 per cent of agency adoptions nationally, and 7.5 per cent in London (Raynor 1970: 168). A clear majority of these, however, were adoptions by foster carers with whom the children had been placed, leaving the question of direct adoption more open. It was such direct recruitment which the BAP sought, and, as an action research project, the promotion of ‘good practice’ in this area.

It is interesting to note that in its original Memorandum, the BAP stated ‘as a fundamental principle that children should be placed whenever possible with adoptive parents of the same racial background as themselves’ (cited in Raynor 1970: 26). Equally clear, however, was the assumption that the ‘whenever possible’ might be severely limited, and that the majority of adopters would be white. As it transpired, roughly 20 per cent of families coming forward (and of those eventually adopting) had at least one ‘non-white’ member. For the white adopters, the profile of transracial adopters found in the United States (Grow and Shapiro 1974; Simon and Altstein 1977) was repeated, namely that adopters were drawn primarily from the ‘liberal middle class’, highly educated, though not generally very high earners, and living in predominantly white areas (Raynor 1970: 87–8). Most were already parents, their interest in adoption relatively new and specific to ‘non-white’ children (p. 92).

It is clear that the BAP saw its pioneering role as working in spite of a climate where prejudice was prevalent. Among criteria for (white) adopters was that they should have ‘no more than a minimal amount of mild prejudice’ (Raynor 1970: 68). Similarly, Raynor notes that the conflicts faced by many white workers in this field, who experienced feelings of racial prejudice while knowing them to be unacceptable, often led to ‘denial’ on ‘race’ issues (p. 77). Such openness gives a powerful indication of the extent to which prejudice remained a naturalized phenomenon. Yet there is also an eerie silence on the question of prejudice. In spite of the above criterion,
we are given no indication of even mild prejudices among those accepted as adopters, while prejudice does not appear anywhere among reasons given for rejection (p. 94). This coupling of abstract recognition with concrete denial tells us much about racialized discourse at the time.

What is clear from Raynor’s work is that the BAP was as much about the establishment of transracial adoption as finding homes for specific children. She is quite clear about its achievements on both counts, combining ‘successful’ placements with the establishment of the Adoption Resource Exchange to coordinate future placements. Transracial adoption was given its official blessing in the Home Office’s *Guide to Adoption Practice* (Home Office Advisory Council on Child Care 1970). The guide made no mention of the desirability of ‘same-race’ adoption or the need to recruit black families. Court judgements which supported white private foster carers in disputes with Nigerian parents also appeared to endorse the desirability of transracial placements (CRC 1975: 35).

**Transracial adoption in context**

Having looked at the emergence of transracial adoption, it is now time to return to its wider social and political context. The 1960s saw major changes in both adoption and the politics of ‘race’ in Britain. Adoptions peaked in 1968 at almost 25,000 or roughly 2 per cent of live births, driven up by the same social forces which would subsequently bring about their decline. Initially, the changing pattern of sexual mores which led to increased illegitimate births, including those of mixed parentage, was reflected directly in a greater number of children given up for adoption. By the late 1960s, however, the declining stigma of illegitimacy, allied to more freely available contraception and the legalization of abortion, began to reverse the trend and by 1977 the number of adoptions had returned to its 1950s level at around 12,000 per year, continuing to fall thereafter. In the absence of reliable figures, it is not possible to gauge accurately the impact of these changes upon the adoption of black and minority ethnic children, their number or the ethnic backgrounds of their adopters. What is rarely disputed, however, is that the decline in adoption was most marked in relation to ‘healthy white babies’, whose supply fell far short of matching demand. Henceforth, adoption would become increasingly focused on those regarded as ‘hard-to-place’, a category still taken to include ‘coloured’ children well into the 1970s (ABAA 1975: 2). It is not clear how many white adopters turned to transracial adoption as a result of such ‘market forces’, although it seems certain that a significant number did so, as was the case for TRA in the United States (Simon and Altstein 1977: 27; Small 1986: 83).

The 1960s were also to witness profound changes in the politics of ‘race’ and ethnicity in Britain (Saggar 1992: 67). From immigration control to the legal machinery of ‘race relations’ or policy on social disadvantage, developments during the decade gave rise to an enduring legacy. The nature of
both the emergent political mainstream and the bases of its opposition were also later to exert a major influence upon adoption practice for minority ethnic children. It is for this reason that a brief excursus, to provide an overview of the period, is appropriate at this point. During the 1950s, the British government had attempted to manage the contradiction between universalist principles and racialized exclusion by publicly setting its face against immigration control (increasingly called for by some backbench MPs), while covertly attempting to institute controls (Holmes 1991: 55; Solomos 1993: 56–7). Racist violence in Notting Hill and Nottingham during 1958 acted as a catalyst for the abandonment of so-called ‘laissez-faire’ immigration policy. Although widely condemned, the attacks were quickly cast as ‘understandable’, an almost inevitable response to ‘the colour problem’. The conceptual racializing of immigration hardened to the point where ‘all immigrants were black and all blacks were immigrants’ (Moore 1975: 23; Miles and Phizacklea 1984: 21). Growing clamour for immigration control led to the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962, with its voucher system based on labour market requirements being used to squeeze out black immigration steadily over the next decade (Solomos 1993: 64). From an initial position of principled opposition, the Labour Party was rapidly converted to the need for controls, notably after the electors of Smethwick made plain the strength of white working class views (Anwar 1986: 18–19). The new Labour government dropped plans to repeal the 1962 Act, actually strengthened its restrictions, and notoriously went on to introduce a further Commonwealth Immigrants Act in 1968. The latter represented a crude device to prevent Kenyan Asians with British passports entering Britain, by linking right of entry to having a parent or grandparent born in the United Kingdom. Subsequently termed ‘patriality’ under the Conservatives’ 1971 Immigration Act, this principle should have destroyed any ideas that immigration was an issue of numbers rather than colour. Following the Act, the ‘bad news’ was that many more people were able to enter Britain. The ‘good news’ was that they were, almost without exception, white. Children adopted from abroad were classified as patrials.

Doubtless concerned to deflect allegations of racism in its immigration policy, the Labour Party evolved its ‘dual strategy’ (Solomos 1993: 83), coupling immigration controls with legislation against racial discrimination and the establishment of bodies to promote ‘good race relations’. Combined, such measures were aimed at integration, an ill-defined term which moved rapidly from the vague to the virtually meaningless (Deakin 1970: 22). Whatever its meaning, the Labour government was clear that it fitted hand-in-glove with immigration control. In Roy Hattersley’s famous formulation, ‘integration without control is impossible, but control without integration is indefensible’ (cited in Deakin 1970: 106). Responding to mounting evidence of ‘colour bars’ and pressure from the newly formed Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD), the Labour government introduced the 1965 Race Relations Act, which took the first timid steps
towards outlawing racial discrimination. Initially this applied only to public places, such as social and leisure facilities, but in 1968 was extended to employment and housing after research evidence showed massive discrimination in these areas (Daniel 1968). Daniel’s findings (from a study undertaken by research group Political and Economic Planning (PEP)) were also powerful in their explosion of the notion that discrimination was based on ‘newness’ (perhaps no surprise to the black populations of Liverpool or Cardiff; Deakin 1970: 312) or lack of educational qualifications. Such rationalizations were wearing ever thinner. Evidence of pervasive discrimination also called into question the optimistic findings of an influential, but contentious, survey into prejudice which concluded that only 10 per cent of the native population were seriously prejudiced (Rose et al. 1969).2

However neat Roy Hattersley’s phraseology, the coupling of immigration control and race relations is revealing of the politics of ‘race’ in Britain in a deeper sense. Critics have readily pointed to the paradox whereby in order to eliminate racial discrimination in Britain it had to be practised at the borders or, as Small puts it, a case of ‘love thy neighbour, who shouldn’t be here in the first place’ (1994: 62). Moreover, a powerful message was sent by the contrast between strong, often over-zealous, enforcement of immigration controls and weak policing of anti-discrimination laws (Jones 1977: 162).

The middle years of the 1960s heralded a significant change in policy direction, witnessing the demise of ‘naive assimilationism’ and new initiatives to deal, albeit obliquely, with ‘racial disadvantage’. In practice, assimilation involved an amalgam of aspiration and social engineering, notably in so-called ‘dispersal’ policies. Perhaps the best known of the latter was the early 1960s rule which limited the number of ‘immigrant’ children in any school to 30 per cent (Deakin 1970: 171), but dispersal was also practised by housing authorities, employers and even children’s homes (Patterson 1965: 238). Retreat from naive assimilation was prompted by several factors. These included its manifest failure to reduce discrimination and the predictable side effects of crude social engineering. Above all, it became apparent that assimilation was not going to take place. On the one hand, significant sections of white society were clearly unwilling to accord equal status, regardless of how ‘British’ or ‘English’ black migrants or settlers became. On the other, and at least partly as a response to such exclusion, the latter actively resisted assimilation. For those from the Caribbean, Hiro (1973) gives an account of the gradual emergence of a ‘West Indian’ identity (p. 44) and the steady growth in separate provision, whether religious or social, and self-help in areas such as housing. Hiro notes (1973: 84) that for the second generation ‘voluntary separatism . . . had become an accepted norm’. For most Asian groups, whose economic motivation for migration was often clearer, and whose culture was in some senses more sharply differentiated from that of white Britain, wholesale assimilation was even less appealing. Mirroring developments in the United States (Glazer and Moynihan 1970), society as ‘melting pot’ gave way, in principle, to that of ‘cultural pluralism’.

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In his characterization of integration, Labour Home Secretary Roy Jenkins explicitly denied that it involved a ‘flattening out process of assimilation’, but rather ‘equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance’ (cited in Deakin 1970: 23).

The new policy direction on ‘racial disadvantage’ included measures such as section 11 of the Local Government Act 1966 which directed funding to areas of significant black population to deal with their educational and welfare needs. The size of the black population (the term immigrant was still widely used) was also increasingly adopted in itself as a measure of social deprivation, for example in the designation of Education Priority Areas following the Plowden Report in 1967. While this subsuming of ‘race’ within a broader category of social disadvantage was no doubt useful as a defence against white resentment, it also had the effects of creating a deep-rooted ambiguity in policy and marginalizing ‘race’ as a specific issue (Young 1983: 288).

This marginalization was to come under increasing challenge in the climate of the late 1960s. The reasons for this lie with what Omi and Winant (1994: 96) describe as the ‘Great Transformation’: the explosion of Black consciousness in late 1960s America. The background lay in the civil rights movement, its achievements and limitations. A mighty and largely successful struggle for formal equality had the effects of raising black expectations and consciousness while simultaneously exposing the limits of formal equality (Sivanandan 1982: 57–8). The relative lack of substantive improvement in the lives of many black Americans prompted a radical turn and deeper analysis of the nature of racism. Liberal views on both the pluralistic nature of society and its foundation in reason were challenged by those which highlighted the depth and pervasion of racial domination. The existing paradigm of ‘irrational’ prejudice increasingly ceded ground to one in which prejudice was far from irrational for its beneficiaries and arguably more effect than cause of racial domination. The focus switched from ideas to acts and to structured patterns of inequality (Zubaida 1970). In the words of Sivanandan, ‘racism is about power not about prejudice’ (cited in Miles 1989: 54). The term ‘institutional racism’ was coined to describe this more pervasive, structural standpoint (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967). More broadly – in line with Jerry Rubins’s famous dictum ‘if you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem’ – there was a sharp decline in tolerance of inaction over, or collusion with, racism.

Black nationalism and black power emerged as the key markers of the new militancy in the mid-1960s. Omi and Winant point to the diversity of the former, its roots and currents – from bourgeois to Marxist, Pan-Africanist and cultural nationalist – the shared element being the perceived importance of (internal) colonialism (1994: 37). They similarly describe black power as ‘a flexible, even amorphous concept’ (p. 102). Here, the common ground lay in militant black struggles against integration which was seen as taking place on ‘white terms’. Writing in the British context, Moore argued that black communities already were fully integrated – ‘at the bottom’
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(1975: 109), while Dummett and Dummett noted that the best on offer to them was likely to be a ‘patronising tolerance’ (1982: 123). Meaningful integration would only come as a result of political power and equality; it would not be the means by which they were brought about (Omi and Winant 1994: 103). In turn, this meant a greater emphasis on self-reliance and autonomy, requiring a degree of separation which was often interpreted as ‘separatism’. Central to this endeavour was the rejection of white leadership and the ‘paternalism’ of white liberalism. Liberation also required freedom from ideological and cultural domination through the forging of a strong racial identity (Rex 1986: 44). The erstwhile derogatory term black was reclaimed, and infused with positive meaning – from slogans such as ‘Black is beautiful’ to the introduction of black studies. The (re)discovery of black history and the influences of Africa were to be of particular importance (Williams 1974; Bernal 1987; Diop 1991). Culture was a vital component, indeed for some the central component, in the liberation strategy. For Karenga, ‘culture . . . gives identity, purpose and direction. It tells us who we are, what we must do and how we can do it’ (cited in Sivanandan 1982: 60). This will be examined further in Chapter 3, but it is worth noting at this point the particular place attributed to culture as a site of resistance to racism, from the time of slavery onwards (Gilroy 1993: 56; Omi and Winant 1994: 103).

If the high water mark of black radicalism was relatively short-lived, there was, as Omi and Winant observe, an enduring legacy in terms of racial awareness, meaning and subjectivity. ‘The black movement redefined the meaning of racial identity and consequently of race itself, in American society’ (1994: 99, original italics). As we shall see below, the effects of the Great Transformation would soon be felt in US policy on ‘race’ and adoption.

In Britain, there were parallels in the struggle for racial equality, notably in the emergence of radical black groups (such as the Racial Adjustment Action Society or later the Universal Coloured People’s Association) and their splitting off from more mainstream reformist politics. As Stuart Hall notes, both the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination and the Institute for Race Relations were torn apart by the political struggles of the 1960s (Foreword in Sivanandan 1982: xi). However, it is important not to over-equate the two situations, as vital differences flowed from the relatively small black population (and its ‘middle class’) in Britain, its generally recent arrival and lack of (separate) institutional development. While growing black militancy was one element of the increasing politicization of ‘race’ and ethnicity during the late 1960s, this process was compounded by the growing, and more overt, expression of white racism. The National Front was founded in 1967 and served to give the extreme right, expounding an openly violent brand of racism, a more powerful presence.

Of greater weight, however, was Enoch Powell’s ‘call to arms’ for white Britain, launched in 1968. Powell’s contribution was twofold. First he gave voice to white resentment at the black presence in Britain, with his high political rank guaranteeing it prominence and implicit ‘respectability’. Second,
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he articulated (often aided by lurid rhetoric) themes which would become crucial to the racial discourses of the 1970s and 1980s. They included those of ineradicable difference, the inevitability of violent confrontation (‘rivers of blood’), white victimhood and the threat of black takeover (Barker 1981: 37–42). Mere immigration control was insufficient. Only wholesale repatriation would avert disaster. If Powell was destined in personal terms for the political wilderness, his influence remained immensely powerful. In the caustic words of Sivanandan, ‘What Powell says today, the Tories say tomorrow and Labour legislates on the day after’ (1982: 24). Faced with Powellism, the Labour government proceeded with its twin-track approach, being ‘tough on immigration’ but also introducing ‘race relations’ measures. With the inner city increasingly recognized as a (likely) flashpoint, the government introduced the Urban Programme in 1969, explicitly targeted at social deprivation, but implicitly at the deprivation of minority ethnic groups and their localities.

In considering the history of race, ethnicity and adoption in Britain, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of developments in the 1960s. Highlighted especially through the work of the British Adoption Project, the notion that black children were ‘unadoptable’ was decisively challenged. It was clear that, however widespread prejudice may be, this did not preclude adoption by white families. The small-scale recruitment of black adoptive families was also to be an important precursor of later developments. Yet even as these developments were beginning, the wider context of ‘race’ and ethnicity was changing rapidly. While the practice of transracial adoption fitted relatively easily with assimilationist ideas, the latter were increasingly undermined in a more polarized political climate. Both white racism and black resistance had ‘come of age’ by the end of the 1960s, in turn heralding a growing loss of innocence for transracial adoption. The so-called ‘liberal hour’ had passed (Deakin 1970).

Transracial adoption in the 1970s - the stirrings of challenge

Transracial adoption had received its official blessing in 1970 (see p. 10). Its course during the following decade is, as ever, difficult to chart accurately due to patchy information. It is, however, possible to detect important trends and identify many of their contextual factors. The trends included those which would have the effect of promoting TRA and others which would see the mounting of an increasingly forceful challenge to it.

Three main factors served to promote TRA, namely its perceived ‘success’, the continuing shortfall of black adoptive families relative to children in care, and the rise of the ‘permanency movement’ in child care. By the 1970s, TRA had become an established, if still doubtless unusual, practice. Its growth made adoption agencies and workers more aware of its possibility and often led to families following the example of friends in applying to
adopt transracially. Moreover, early research on the BAP showed it to be generally successful (Raynor 1970; Jackson 1976), a picture confirmed in American studies of TRA (Fanshel 1972; Grow and Shapiro 1974; Simon and Altstein 1977). Foren and Batta’s (1970) study in Bradford provided powerful evidence of black children’s over-representation in the care system. This was found to be particularly pronounced among children of mixed parentage, generally taken to be the victims of both social deprivation and likely alienation resulting from prejudice and lack of clear identity (CRC 1975: 21; ADSS/CRE 1978: 20). It is worth noting that it is this group for whom TRA was considered particularly relevant. The ABAA (1975: 5) guide to adoption used the terms coloured and mixed race interchangeably. As to the availability of black and minority ethnic adopters or foster carers, most comment is highly impressionistic, mixing cautious optimism with an assumption of inevitable shortfall for the foreseeable future. Even in the late 1970s, the ADSS/CRE report on Multi-racial Britain combined its belief in the ‘untapped potential’ in minority communities with recruitment being ‘a difficult and delicate task’ (1978: 24; CRC 1975: 25).

The move for ‘permanency’ in the 1970s can be seen to derive from various sources, whose combined effect was to weaken significantly the perceived importance of the ‘blood tie’. Theories of parenting increasingly emphasized the psychological over the biological (Goldstein et al. 1973), a shift boosted by the death in 1973 of Maria Colwell following her return home after several years in foster care. Meanwhile, influential research studies pointed to the dangers of children drifting in the care system (i.e. remaining in the care system without any clear plan for their future being made), with black children found to be particularly vulnerable (Rowe and Lambert 1973), the instability of foster care (George 1970) and the benefits of adoption over institutional care or even long-term foster care (Tizard 1977). Influenced by such developments, the 1975 Children Act and 1976 Adoption Act both attempted to facilitate adoption and strengthen the position of substitute carers vis-à-vis birth parents. Although permanency did not formally favour childrearing in substitute as opposed to birth families, it was widely regarded as having this effect. With few resources put into preventive child care or work to reunite children quickly with their families, critics felt that permanency amounted to little more than an adoption policy (Family Rights Group 1984). With the rise of transracial adoption, the controversial passage of black children into white homes had been added to the long-established pattern of poor children being adopted into more affluent homes (Mandell 1973; Holman 1978).

The 1970s witnessed little in the way of concerted opposition to TRA in Britain. It would be over ten years before the Association of Black Social Workers and Allied Professionals (ABSWAP) would publicly echo the position taken in 1972 by their American counterparts, the National Association of Black Social Workers. The latter articulated its opposition to TRA in the strongest possible terms. The emphasis on the place of children within the black community and nation building, and the importance of racial identity
and cultural heritage for survival in a racist society, bore the hallmarks of militant black struggles and of black nationalist influences in particular (Simon and Altstein 1977: 50). The significant time lag before such ideas would become powerful in Britain was predictable for two main reasons. The first is that in the early 1970s there were few black social workers and no obvious base inside or outside social work around which they could organize. (By contrast, mobilizations on educational issues were much more developed in the late 1960s and 1970s; Gabriel 1994: 81; Brah 1996: 40.)

The second is that reliance on same-race adoption seemed much more of a possibility in the United States at that time. Even at the peak time for TRA in the US in 1971, it only accounted for roughly one-third of adoptions of black children (Simon and Altstein 1977: 30; Day 1979: 93). Despite the lack of accurate figures in Britain, it is safe to assume that the proportion of white families involved was significantly higher than in the US during the 1970s (ADSS/CRE 1978: 24). Research studies suggest that, even in the early 1980s, over 80 per cent of minority ethnic adoptions in the UK were transracial (Hill et al. 1989; Charles et al. 1992).

While a concerted attack on TRA was still some way off, there was nonetheless a growing expression of the concerns which would later fuel it. Discussion of these will form the basis of later chapters, but it is useful at this point to chart their historical emergence. Questions of identity for adoptees had taken on an increasing importance since the 1950s (Haimes and Timms 1985: 14). Initially, this was understood in terms of personal identity and revolved around the rights of adopted people to know of their adoption and the background leading to it, and the possibility of their being able to trace birth relatives if they so wished. These moves away from the ‘clean break’ view of adoption took place both informally, with the importance stressed of letting children know of their adoption, and formally through the 1975 Children Act which allowed adoptees access to their original birth certificate and the potential to commence tracing. They reflected a growing view that interest in birth family was both natural and psychologically healthy (Haimes and Timms 1985: 50). Cohen observes how identity came to be viewed in terms of a birthright or inheritance and how for black children this was racialized and collectivized, with black identity entailing ‘actively locating an individual life history within the collective memory of a “race”’ (1994: 59). As noted earlier, themes of racial and cultural identity were central to black struggles in the 1960s, and these began to filter through to the worlds of adoption and social work from that time on. The demise of assimilationism was noted, along with the rise of new and more militant black identities among second generation migrants (John 1972; Triseliotis 1972). Cheetham writes of social workers being seen as establishment lackeys and proffers the gloomy verdict that ‘the social workers who can make useful relationships with this new generation of coloured people will be exceptional’ (1972: 77).

Culture was seen as an important part of identity, closely linked to personality formation and providing a secure base from which to deal with
 difficulties (Kent 1972: 39; Triseliotis 1972a: 2). In this context, black and minority ethnic children in foster care or adopted were seen as vulnerable. Pryce talks of the threat posed to black children’s cultural identity in white homes, the danger of internalizing negative images and resultant ‘disturbing psychological problems’ (CRC 1975: 7, 23–4). Living in white areas and Anglicization were seen as likely to alienate black children from family, culture and community, rendering them racially black but culturally white, and making future relations more difficult (Triseliotis 1972: 12; CRC 1975: 24). Where once the feasibility of TRA had been questioned due to largely implicit assumptions about racial divisions, its desirability was now challenged on the basis of much more explicit accounts of those divisions. Growing black assertiveness meant that the criteria by which substitute family care for black children was to be judged would become more demanding, and the ability of white families to measure up increasingly challenged. Introducing her follow-up study of the British Adoption Project, Jackson notes the more critical climate surrounding TRA. ‘There is a developing feeling, particularly among black social workers, that the disadvantages to the child’s cultural and racial identity outweigh all the other advantages. The question undoubtedly arises, are we creating essentially white children in brown and black bodies?’ (1976: 5).

Informally, the pressure was increased by many birth mothers, particularly African–Caribbean, expressing a clear choice that their children should be placed with a black adoptive family (Independent Adoption Society 1975; Gaber 1994: 18). Arguably the most important development in the 1970s, however, was the challenge to recruitment practices. As has been noted, the desirability in principle of same-race adoption had rarely been disputed. Rather, the necessity for TRA was seen to rest on the shortfall of black families able or willing to adopt. With the mounting challenge to TRA, shortfall became, and remains, one of the main planks in its defence (Aldridge 1994). The Soul Kids Campaign launched in 1975 represented the first concerted effort at recruiting black adoptive families for children. While its success was limited if judged in the number of eventual adopters, it had more powerful effects in its critique of existing practice. The debate on recruitment will be considered further in Chapter 5, but the critique can usefully be summarized at this point. In essence, it was argued that adoption agencies had evolved their practice around an assumption of adoption as a white middle class phenomenon. This was reflected in everything from advertising to assessment and judgements about the nature of family and the suitability of adopters (Day 1979). The shortfall of black adoptive families began to be seen as the result of such ‘Eurocentrism’ rather than material circumstances or lack of a cultural tradition of formal adoption. In due course (see below), the gauntlet would be thrown down to adoption agencies – and the recruitment of black families seen as a measure of their commitment and competence.

This critique of adoption (and fostering) practice should be seen in the wider context of developments in social work, where ‘race’ and ethnicity
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were beginning to force their way onto organizational agendas. One indicator of growing significance can be detected within the literature on radical social work, by comparison between earlier and later works: a colour-blind class analysis (Bailey and Brake 1975; Corrigan and Leonard 1978) giving way to recognition of the specificity of 'race' issues (Husband 1980). In more established circles, the report of the ADSS/CRE (1978) working party (set up to examine local authority duties following the 1976 Race Relations Act) can also be seen as evidence of climate change, albeit mild, in Social Services Departments (SSDs). Notwithstanding its title, *Multi-racial Britain*, or the passage of much water under the bridge of immigration, it was still within the framework of newness, adjustment and resentment from the host community that the working party chose to locate its analysis. Also reported were the results of a revealing survey which found the SSDs' response to multi-racial Britain 'confused and ad hoc' (p. 7), with very little ethnic monitoring, use of s11 funding (see also Young 1983: 294) or effort to recruit minority ethnic social workers. The report's conclusion that 'services should recognise the new dimension of colour as important and not deny its existence' probably gives an accurate indication of contemporary social work practice and thinking on 'race' and ethnicity. In doing so, it helps to explain why opposition to TRA still remained marginal in the late 1970s.

If in some senses the 1970s saw less seismic shifts in the wider politics of 'race' and ethnicity than the 1960s, there were nonetheless developments which would be of importance for policy and practice in adoption. To paraphrase soccer parlance, the 1970s can be seen as 'a decade of two halves', with the economic crisis of 1975–6 prompting reaction and political realignments. The role of economic crisis was largely catalytic, though highly significant in determining those ideas 'whose time had come . . . and gone'. The ideas themselves have longer histories. For the politics of 'race', Saggar characterizes the whole period from 1958 to 1976 as one of 'pragmatism' (1992: 102). During the early 1970s, the leaders of both major political parties held to the 'consensus' established in the 1960s, based on tight immigration control, good race relations and eschewing use of 'the race card'. The consensus was always a fragile one, squeezed between Powellism and fascism on the one hand and campaigns for racial justice and black militancy on the other. During the early 1970s, the political right increasingly mobilized to halt and roll back the gains of liberation struggles. 'Race' played a key part in their picture of crumbling social order – whether in the racialized image of the young black ‘mugger’, or the implicitly causal association with inner-city decay (Hall et al. 1978). More broadly, the liberal interventionist state was blamed for the breakdown, having foisted immigration upon the white population and then failed to deal strongly enough with its consequences. In what Miles and Phizacklea (1984: 96) term its liberal phase from 1974 to 1976, the Labour government appeared to give greater weight to its race relations policy, with a mild easing of immigration controls and the strengthening of anti-discrimination law through
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the 1976 Race Relations Act. Thereafter, as immigration once again became more politicized, controls were tightened, including the infamous virginity tests and the X-raying of children (Gordon 1983; Brah 1996: 39).

This politicization was due both to changes within the Conservative Party and the influence of the National Front. The replacement of Ted Heath by Margaret Thatcher as Tory leader signalled a major change of direction towards a more populist approach to politics, including that of ‘race’ and ethnicity (Saggar 1992: 117). Drawing on Powellite themes, Thatcher spoke of the white population’s legitimate fears of being ‘swamped’ by those of an alien culture, and of its fairness and tolerance being overstressed (Barker 1981: 13). By appealing to the great achievements of the British Empire, immigration served as a clear marker of decline (Saggar 1992: 120). She promised an end to all immigration, including that of dependants, and a weakening of ‘race relations’ law (Sivanandan 1982: 43). Almost equally important was the role of the National Front during the 1970s, not only in its direct activities but its raising the spectre of an upsurge in racist, fascist violence. In electoral terms the Front’s support grew sharply from 1972 – following the arrival in Britain of expelled Ugandan Asians – and peaked in 1976–7 (Miles and Phizacklea 1984: 122; Anwar 1986: 139). More significant, however, was its complementary relationship with ‘respectable’ racism. On the one hand, as Saggar suggests, the National Front acted as a ‘catalyst for greater elite responsiveness to grass-roots anti-black, anti-immigrant sentiment’ (1992: 182). On the other, such responsiveness appeared to offer at least tacit support for the Front’s growing violence. By 1979, however, its electoral support had collapsed (though not its involvement in violence), the result in part of the successful campaign of the Anti-Nazi League, but also because the Conservative Party had, to a significant extent, stolen its clothes.

Countering such forces, black resistance and struggles for racial equality continued on a number of fronts, from the workplace to the education system, while racist violence was increasingly confronted on the streets (Sivanandan 1982). The second PEP (Smith 1977) study showed little sign of declining discrimination, providing ever clearer evidence that its extent had little to do with the ‘newness’ of immigration. In this context, it is hardly surprising that the second generation had become, by common consent, ‘less willing to compromise in the face of discrimination and racism’ (Benson 1981: viii).

The significance of such developments for adoption operated at different levels. To a greater or lesser extent, and largely unchronicled, the politics of ‘race’ and ethnicity would have impacted on the lives of those individuals and families directly involved. In the wider domains of policy, the principal effect was the increasingly polarized political environment which had come to prevail. In the following decade, polarization would continue, with the issues of identity and culture central to the struggle.
The rise of ‘same race’ policies in the 1980s

For ‘race’, ethnicity and adoption, the 1980s was to be a decade of radical transformation, bringing significant upheavals within the relatively closed world of adoption, but also periodic controversies which entered into the wider public domain. The transformation reflected both ‘internal’ changes – in adoption, child care and social work – and the ‘external’, stemming from the new political landscape of Thatcher’s Britain.

As the literature of the early 1980s reveals, analysis of the place of ‘race’ and ethnicity within social work was expanding rapidly in breadth and depth (Cheetham et al. 1981; Cheetham 1982). Questions ranging from race policies and ethnic monitoring in local authorities, the treatment of black elders, working across cultures, relations with minority ethnic communities, and training for staff, to the place of black workers in ‘white’ organizations, all came under closer scrutiny. Both the analysis and the initiatives described give a clear sense of the growing importance of ‘race’ issues, and of the black presence within social work. Needless to say, prominence was given in such work to child care (Ahmed 1981; James 1981) and specifically to adoption and fostering for black children (ABAFA 1981; Arnold 1982; Bagley and Young 1982). Local studies published at the same time showed continuing over-representation of black children in the care system, suggesting an urgent need for more preventive work (Adams 1981; Wilkinson 1982). As to family placement for those in the system, there were signs that, in multiracial areas at least, the need to recruit more black families was at last receiving serious recognition within SSDs (Draper 1981: 25). More broadly, there were also signs of a same-race philosophy gaining ground within social work (Fitzgerald 1981).

The work of the New Black Families Unit, established jointly by the Independent Adoption Service and Lambeth SSD in 1980, was to prove a major influence. Building on the critique of traditional recruitment methods, the unit sought to implement a more ethnic-sensitive approach, less rigid in terms of criteria for adoptive families and with less emphasis on formality (Arnold 1982; Small 1982). Its relative success fuelled the belief that the shortage of black families was primarily the result of agency failure or even ‘institutional racism’. Thus armed, campaigners for same-race placements launched a scathing attack on transracial adoption, spearheaded by the newly formed Association of Black Social Workers and Allied Professionals (ABSWAP). In its evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee, ABSWAP described TRA as ‘a microcosm of the oppression of black people in this society’, a form of one-way traffic, depriving black communities of their most valuable resources. ‘It is in essence, “internal colonialism” and a new form of slave trade, but this time only black children are used’ (ABSWAP 1983).

By coincidence, in the same year, 1983, Gill and Jackson’s follow-up of the British Adoption Project was published. Understandably in the new climate of race politics, their verdict that the adoptions were generally very
successful, while noting that the children had become ‘white in all but skin colour’, did little to soothe passions. To the critics of TRA, the findings seemed to provide clear evidence of its failings in relation to racial and cultural identity (Divine 1983; Small 1986). In the mid-1980s, radical London boroughs began to evolve policies in support of same-race adoption and fostering which opponents claimed amounted to a ‘prohibition’ on transracial placements. Thus were the new battle lines drawn, with same-race policies seen alternatively as a prerequisite for commitment to fighting racism or as political dogma which flew in the face of research evidence. The pressure group Children First in Transracial Fostering and Adoption was formed in 1986 to expose and oppose what it cast as the rigidities of same-race policies. The first major press and television debates were held, notably between two black social workers, Ben Brown and David Divine, defending and opposing TRA respectively.

If this new situation was to a degree generated from within social work, it also owed a good deal to wider political struggles. The terrain was varied, from institutional questions such as central–local government relations or separate organization for minority groups, through to ideological disputes over the causes of racial inequality or the (racial) identity of Britain. The electoral victories of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan had brought the ‘new right’ to government in Britain and the United States, exerting a major influence on both economic and social policies. The ideological project of the new right was to roll back the gains of the Great Transformation and dismantle the liberal interventionist state which it had helped to spawn. Though the project was by no means solely or even primarily a racial one, it had a strong ‘racial sub-text’. As Omi and Winant argue, in a world of democratic and universal values, and with liberation struggles still relatively fresh in the memory, there could be no disavowal of the principle of racial equality (1994: 117). Rather, the new right strategy was to redefine equality in line with the ‘natural order’ which they sought to restore – based on competitive individualism in a free market, with greater reliance on self and family and less on the (welfare) state. Above all, equal opportunity entailed the right to be unequal within this natural order. Theoretically colour blind in conception and aim, the ensuing policies were generally refracted through a racialized social order; to the detriment of minority communities, albeit unevenly in terms of class, gender and ethnicity. As Small wryly observes, while recent decades have seen increasing black stratification, there remain ‘more paupers than princes, mendicants than millionaires’ (1994: 111).

The new right’s project had little place for anything beyond the most basic of anti-discrimination measures, and was scornful of attempts to ‘engineer equality’. In the United States, this meant increasing attacks on affirmative action programmes (depicted as discriminating against white people) and the civil rights ‘industry’ (Omi and Winant 1994: 80; Marable 1995: 81). By implication the quest for racial equality had gone too far. In Britain, it had travelled less far, but definitely far enough for the new right.
Lacking easy targets such as affirmative action, the campaign was waged more at an ideological level. A broadly twin-track approach mixed official (i.e. government) denial of any real problem of racial discrimination with unofficial (maverick MPs, media pundits and new right theorists) baiting and ridiculing of anyone who made such claims. Also targeted were those – in Britain notably the trade unions and welfare professionals – whose values and links with the liberal state made them antipathetic to the radical right. While neither anti-discrimination laws nor unions and professionals had a glowing record in combating racism, their relative disempowerment did have the effect of weakening bases from which such struggles could be waged (Gordon 1990).

The new right's cultural agenda in Britain focused on the (re)creation of a sense of bounded community and the reinvigoration of British nationalism (Barker 1981: 21; Mason 1995: 115). It was unashamedly assimilationist in tenor, opposed to ‘multiculturalism' or the notion of a ‘multiracial' society (Saggar 1992: 178; Solomos 1993: 107). The virtues of colour blindness were counterposed to the divisiveness of racial identities. As the 1983 Conservative election poster, showing a smartly dressed black man, proclaimed, ‘Labour says he’s Black, Tories say he’s British'. (Clearly swayed, over 80 per cent of African–Caribbeans voted Labour.) The emphasis on (white) British culture allied to sociobiological ideas of a ‘natural preference for one's own kind' led some to talk of a 'new racism' (Barker 1981) although, as Small comments, many older variants of racism also still persisted (1994: 12).

Amid the political and ideological ascendancy of new right influences, local government became an important battleground. The early 1980s split in the Labour Party was reflected in certain authorities in London (including the GLC) and other major cities coming under control of the ‘new urban left' which prioritized equal opportunities issues and saw its role as defending local people against the ravages of Thatcherism (King 1989: 201). Particularly in London authorities, black representation was growing significantly, giving further impetus to anti-racist struggles (Butcher et al. 1990: 121). The urgency of tackling racism was also fuelled by the aftermath of the urban disorders of 1981, with Lord Scarman (1982) identifying social deprivation as a factor alongside poor and deteriorating relationships between black communities and the police. The third PEP (now Policy Studies Institute) study also confirmed the continuing prevalence of discrimination, with black people facing higher levels of unemployment, underemployment relative to skills and qualifications and poorer housing (Brown 1984).

The new approach to (race) equality had three major characteristics. The first was to apply an analysis which emphasized power and institutional discrimination, and demanded institutional strategies rather than simply ‘education'. These included development of specific policies and monitoring, but also the organizational presence of equality committees and/or units (Small 1994: 166–7). A second related feature was the principle of separate
organization, the logic of which was that those facing discrimination or oppression needed space to discuss relevant issues and experiences, and a base from which to challenge the wider institution. In the 1980s, Black workers’ groups would become a customary feature of such authorities and those which followed their lead. This principle was also strong in the early to mid-1980s in many trade unions and the campaign for Black sections in the Labour Party (Saggar 1992: 133; Solomos 1993: 208), and implicit in the sharp rise of ‘black-led’ organizations (Sivanandan 1982: 40–1). The third key characteristic was the use of ‘Black’ as an inclusive term for all those facing racism, in some instances even extending to clearly ‘white’ Jewish and Irish people. Within this formulation, ethnicity took a subordinate role and was, in any strong expression, seen as divisive to anti-racist struggle.

If, as we shall see, all three of these elements would come under pressure from those sympathetic to the cause, the major assault came from more predictable quarters. In popular ideology, ‘the loony left’ became the catchphrase for attacks on the new urban left and particularly their equality policies, which were alternately ridiculous (‘Baa Baa Green Sheep’) and sinister (‘the thought police’). The Conservative government strategy ranged from the financial constraints of the Poll Tax and capping, through limiting, by-passing and removing powers of local authorities, to outright abolition in the case of the GLC, the Metropolitan Counties and, later, the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA).

As to the impact of local anti-racist struggles, it must be remembered that local authorities varied and continue to vary widely in their priorities. In their study of equal opportunities policies, Young and Connelly (1981) produced a fourfold typology of local authorities – pioneers, learners, waverers, and resisters. There is little doubt that some social work agencies made significant gains in the recruitment and promotion of black social workers, including some high-profile appointments at directorate level. Yet developments were patchy. A CRE Survey (1989) found Social Services Departments taking ‘race’ issues more seriously than in 1979, but only a minority having equal opportunities policies or monitoring arrangements. The overall verdict of Butcher et al. at the end of the 1980s is unflattering, describing local government as ‘an institution rotten with racism and sexism’, its anti-racist, race equality and multicultural programmes ‘largely marginal, symbolic and cosmetic’ (1990: 134).

Disillusionment with the relative lack of progress achieved by ‘municipal anti-racism’ combined with wider forces to weaken its main tenets. There was increasing recognition that institutional measures were limited without a successful battle for hearts and minds. Critics such as Paul Gilroy attacked the ‘statist’ approach to anti-racism and the effects of class division within black communities, positing a ‘conspicuous divergence of interests between the never-employed and the cadre of black bureaucrats employed by the local state to salve their misery’ (cited in Small 1994: 137). The Black umbrella also came under scrutiny, some wishing to emphasize its permeability as opposed to ‘essentialist’ views of identity and culture (see Chapter 4), while
others at least partially forsook its shelter by reclaiming Asian identities from the African–Caribbean hegemony of ‘Black’ (Modood 1992). The re-emergence of ethnicity was further underlined in the late 1980s by the controversy surrounding Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, which highlighted the salience of religion, notably in the identity of British Muslims (Gabriel 1994: 22–9). A research study by Yawar (1992) showed that relatively little attention was being paid by most child care agencies to the needs of Muslim children.

Summarizing the significance of such developments for adoption (and fostering) in the 1980s, it can be seen that the mounting challenge to trans-racial adoption found fertile ground in the local politics of many multi-racial areas. While same race policies found a natural home in left Labour authorities, their currency ran much wider, influencing Conservative as well as more traditional Labour authorities. A CRE survey of social services departments found fostering and adoption policies figuring prominently among ‘race initiatives’, roughly 25 per cent having written policies (1989: 20), while Butt *et al.* (1991) found that 63 per cent of local authorities in multi-racial areas had same-race policies. Same-race policies and their attendant rationale were also increasingly supported by major child care organizations such as Barnardos, National Children’s Homes, and both British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) and National Foster Care Association (NFCA).

One reason for this spread beyond the confines of new urban left authorities was that ‘anti-racism’ was a developing theme within social work itself (Dominelli 1988). Among various social work initiatives was the establishment of the Race Equality Unit in 1987 and a Black Perspectives Committee at the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) in the same year. ‘Anti-racist’ (along with the broader anti-discriminatory) practice became a key feature of the competency requirements for the Diploma in Social Work launched in 1989.

If, on the one hand, such developments indicate a sea change in social work and child care practice, it is also important to remember their unevenness – between and within agencies and localities, management and social work teams. In Young and Connelly’s (1981) terms there would be both pioneers and resisters, and those in between. Barn (1993b) has noted how the research summarized as *Social Work Decisions in Child Care* (DHSS 1985) makes barely any mention of race issues. Rhodes (1992) provides a fascinating account of the complexities surrounding implementation of a same-race policy within one ‘pioneering’ London authority and of the wide variety of practice elsewhere in the capital. Outside the professional arena, Bagley’s (1993) surveys of African–Caribbean views on ‘race’ and adoption provide interesting evidence of the changes taking place during the 1980s. Comparison of a 1979 survey and 1989 follow-up showed that while there was still ‘general support’ for transracial adoption, this had fallen sharply during the 1980s (1993: 256–63), a change Bagley rather glibly attributes to the policy-led decline in TRA.
26 ‘Race’, ethnicity and adoption

The 1989 Children Act and the Major years

In relation to race, ethnicity and adoption, the 1989 Children Act can be seen as marking something of a watershed, from which there was to be gradual retreat during the 1990s. The Act gave the first formal recognition to issues of ‘race’ and ethnicity in statute child care law, requiring local authorities to give due consideration, in decision making for children ‘looked after’ by them, to ‘religious persuasion, racial origin, and cultural and linguistic background’ (s22(5)(c)). A late addition to the Act, prompted by a case in Croydon (see below), was the requirement that in efforts to recruit foster carers, local authorities should ‘have regard to the different racial groups to which children within their area who are in need belong’ (Schedule 2(11)(b)). Accompanying official guidance stated that ‘since discrimination of all kinds is an everyday reality in many children’s lives, every effort must be made to ensure that agency services and practices do not reflect or reinforce it’ (cited in Freeman 1992: 74). Though advocates of same-race adoption and fostering were often to take the Children Act provisions as legal support for such policies, guidance was always more guarded and, as Allen (1990: 61) suggests, giving ‘due consideration’ is open to wide-ranging interpretation.

Part of the context for the Children Act’s provisions was research evidence of continuing over-representation of black children, and particularly those of mixed parentage, in the care system (Bebbington and Miles 1989; Rowe et al. 1989). They were also influenced by the storm which broke in August 1989 when Croydon SSD removed a child of mixed parentage from a white foster family to place him with a black family for adoption. Media and political comment was overwhelmingly hostile to the social workers’ actions and the court judgement which supported them (Johnson 1991; Kirton 1992). In addition to the legal change on recruitment noted above, the controversy also led to new guidance being issued (SSI 1990), which combined general support for the principle of matching placements with warnings against their rigid implementation. The media pot was kept boiling by other publicized removals of children from white foster homes, notably in Liverpool (The Times, 17 March 1990) and later Avon (Community Care, 17–23 September 1992).

The Children Act made only relatively minor changes to adoption law (still governed by the 1976 Adoption Act), but as part of its rolling programme of family law review, the government established a review in July 1989. This was seen as necessary for three main reasons. The first was to harmonize provisions with the Children Act, notably the emphasis on parental responsibilities and partnership, but also its provisions on race, religion, culture and language. A second was to consider fully the wide-ranging changes in adoption which had occurred since 1976, including growing advocacy for ‘openness’. A third was to deal with inter-country adoption (ICA) in the light of the Hague Conference and its impending Convention. In the early 1990s, ICA took on a higher public profile as a result of
developments in Romania and later Bosnia. Inevitably both the significant number of adoptions and the tactics involved rekindled debates about whether ICA in such circumstances is primarily humanitarian or opportunist, child rescue or child snatching? After various background papers, the Inter-departmental Working Group issued a Green Paper in 1992 (DoH 1992). It had relatively little to say on issues of ‘race’ and ethnicity, beyond the need for continuing efforts to recruit minority ethnic adopters (p. 51).

Thoburn, in her summary of research, reports that studies of transracial adoption have not borne out the fears of black social workers, but cites other research which suggests that such a positive picture may need to be viewed with caution (DoH 1992: 148–9). In relation to inter-country adoption, the review also (somewhat wishfully) supported the principle of ethnic matching while noting that a family of different racial origin or religion ‘may be the best available choice’ (p. 102).

The stance on ‘race’, ethnicity and adoption varied little from that at the time of the Children Act. However, as the review progressed towards legislation, it became steadily more influenced by the furore over ‘political correctness’ (PC) which had entered the political lexicon in the early 1990s. Fire was soon directed at social work in general, adoption and fostering practice in particular. Common sense became the watchword as the government took up cudgels against the ‘anti-discriminatory’ thrust of single parent, lesbian and gay, and same-race adoptions. There was a marked shift between the Green Paper and the White Paper, Adoption: The Next Step, published in November 1993 and widely taken to reflect the government’s desire to promote ‘family values’. As the political shadow cast by the ‘underclass’ debate lengthened, (young) single mothers were increasingly cast as both an economic burden and a symbol of moral decline. To right-wing think tanks such as the Institute of Economic Affairs, and commentators such as Patricia Morgan and Melanie Phillips, adoption was an ‘obvious solution’ (Daily Telegraph, 8 March 1995; The Times, 27 December 1996).

The White Paper implicitly expressed concerns about the effect of the Children Act’s emphasis on partnership with parents in giving them too much power and thereby leading to ‘drift’. The other implicit concern was that social workers were, in their treatment of prospective adopters, placing unnecessary barriers in the way of the adoption process. A later circular (SSI 1996a) talked of social workers interrogating and humiliating adopters, subjecting them to their personal views and foisting inappropriate training upon them. PC was the unspoken thread running through much of this criticism. So marked was the shift of emphasis and so strident the tone of censure that many feared a return to the days when adoption was seen primarily as a service to childless parents.

Predictably, same-race adoption was seen as one of the unnecessary barriers to adoption and targetted accordingly. The hardening of attitude was also widely attributed to the ‘Norfolk case’ with a couple, one of whom was black, being refused as adopters, allegedly on the grounds of their ‘naivety’ about racism (The Times, 9 July 1993). As is frequently the case,
the subsequent enquiry supported the decision, but interest in the facts had long since been crushed under the anti-PC juggernaut. The White Paper acknowledged the importance of ethnicity, but argued that it was often given ‘unjustifiably decisive influence’ (para 4.32). Nonetheless, the government indicated an intention to introduce a broad requirement on ethnicity and matching ‘in line with what is now in the Children Act’ (para 4.32).

However, momentum was gathering in the crusade against PC, and the Adoption Bill of 1996 omitted any reference to race. Enacted, this would have created the bizarre situation of local authorities being obliged to consider ‘racial origin and cultural background’ in decision making under the Children Act, including plans for adoption, while facing no such requirement under adoption law itself. Alongside the bill, a letter was issued by the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI 1996a) which attempted the political conjuring trick of setting out a change in policy while simultaneously denying it. The letter opened by stating that the principles of 1990 continued to apply. Yet whereas this guidance had set out carefully the many advantages of ethnic matching before giving its warnings on over-emphasis, its 1996 successor was lukewarm on the former and nothing if not persistent on the latter. For same-race adoption, gone was any reference to ‘the great majority of cases’; ‘other things being equal’ was now pointedly underlined; and ‘is most likely’ to best meet the child’s needs had been diluted to ‘may well be most likely’. Sensitive discussion about the competing needs of children had given way to blunt warnings against ‘unrealistic hopes’ of ethnic matching, while the expectations of transracial adopters in respect of cultural heritage had been noticeably scaled down.

The letter also criticized what it saw as local authority hostility towards inter-country adoption. The controversies of the early 1990s had highlighted the often fraught relationship between (prospective) inter-country adopters and adoption agencies. In turn, the issues were articulated with domestic concerns around the (racial) politics of adoption. ICA was often seen as the result of babies or young children not being available within Britain and, crucially for its supporters, white parents being prevented from adopting minority ethnic British children. Adoption agencies were, with some justification, seen as being at best cool and often hostile to ICA because of its customary transracial, transcultural nature. This was cast as ‘ideological opposition’ based on PC and readily taken up in the government crusade. The 1996 SSI letter had dropped the earlier reference to ethnic matching in ICA and went on the offensive over cultural knowledge. ‘It would be quite wrong . . . for adoption agencies to refuse to process an adoption application on the grounds that the applicants cannot furnish strong personal links with the country of their choice’ (para. 16).

By a neat irony, the government’s small majority, and fear of repeating the infighting which had dogged the Family Law Bill, led to the shelving of the Adoption Bill. Nonetheless, its campaign against PC in adoption continued unabated until the 1997 general election. In December 1996, John Major floated the idea of transferring adoption from local authorities to
private agencies (The Times, 27 December 1996), while in April 1997 new arrangements for Adoption Panels were introduced (Circular LAC (97)13) with measures – such as strengthening applicants’ right of appeal, and increasing lay membership – aimed at countering the perceived PC influence of social workers.

If adoption in the 1990s has been significantly affected by the ‘politics of the family’, it has as ever also been shaped by the politics of ‘race’ and ethnicity. Arguably the most important factor in the latter has been the strengthening hegemony of neo-liberalism which, with a dash of communitarianism, has come to be the trademark of the Democrats in the US and ‘new Labour’ in Britain. This changing climate has been characterized by a growing ascendancy of market values in economics and economic ascendancy in political and social life. The perceived scope for ‘intervention’ – including any attempts to create greater equality – has become much more circumscribed. Equality means formal opportunity to compete, and must be achieved by that route or not at all. For the politics of ‘race’ and ethnicity, this shift has had two related effects. The first is that questions of racial equality have largely been left to the market place. The second is that of avoidance as a political issue. In the United States, Omi and Winant (1994) have linked this to fears about the explosive potential of ‘race’, fears which the police beating of Rodney King and the trial of O.J. Simpson did little to allay. In Britain, avoidance has also prevailed for much of the 1990s, with racism simultaneously unacceptable and yet difficult to demonstrate beyond more obvious manifestations in violence and harassment. If the repatriation and white Britain dreams of the right have disappeared from the agenda, so too has any vision of structural change.

It is also important to recognize that the politics of ‘race’ and ethnicity have been significantly influenced by the growing importance of Europe as a focus for nationalism, and by the outlet for racist sentiment provided by the government’s war on refugees and asylum seekers. As will be discussed in later chapters, the effects of increasing globalization on notions of identity and culture are also relevant.

The generally lower profile of ‘race’ and ethnicity in 1990s British politics is open to different interpretations. The more sanguine may see the relative lack of overt conflict, the many black ‘success stories’ or the growth in mixed relationships as signs of improvement. However, the persistence of racial attacks, the rocketing of black pupil exclusion from schools, continued targetting of black men by the police, and racialized vulnerability to low pay, unemployment and poverty tell a somewhat different story. When the Ford Motor Company can ‘whiten’ pictures of its workforce or publishers remove the faces of black children from books in order to sell abroad, the suspicion of tokenism must remain, while the laudatory tone of reactions to the death of Enoch Powell early in 1998 (not least from Prime Minister Blair) can only raise concern over how seriously the experiences of minority ethnic Britons are taken. In the late 1990s, the MacPherson Inquiry (1999) into the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence has placed ‘race’ firmly back
on the political agenda and has been talked about as a defining moment in the history of ‘race’ in Britain. There is little doubt that the inquiry represents an enormous achievement for campaigners in terms of holding the police to account and bringing the concept of ‘institutional racism’ into the wider public domain as well as prompting formation of the National Civil Rights Movement. However, in the author’s view, there has been little sign in the ensuing public debate that racism is better understood or more readily acknowledged than before, and the prospects for lasting change remain highly uncertain.

Relatively little is known about the impact of this changing climate upon adoption practice. A small-scale study into the effects of the 1990 guidelines upon agency policy found diverse responses, including those which helped both increase and decrease the likelihood of transracial adoption (Kirton 1992). Other studies would seem to suggest a predictably mixed picture within different agencies but one where some significant progress has been made in recruiting black and minority ethnic families. Looking at the recruitment of foster carers in three authorities, Barn et al. (1997: 68) found that all three had managed to recruit carers broadly in line with their local populations and were generally able to match in ethnic terms. On adoption, the most authoritative picture comes from the survey carried out by BAAF, although their national response rate from adoption agencies was below 50 per cent overall. Of the 1221 adoptions surveyed, 125 or 11 per cent involved minority ethnic children. Within the latter group, the over-representation of children of mixed parentage remains striking, comprising 54 per cent, African–Caribbean children 21 per cent, and Asian children 11 per cent. Twenty-one (17 per cent) of minority ethnic adoptions were ‘transracial’, but this rate reached around 50 per cent in shire counties, being much lower in London authorities and lower still among voluntary agencies, ironically often seen as the counter to PC. A higher rate of transracial adoption, at 53 per cent, was found in an SSI report (1997), albeit from a smaller sample, and it may be that the BAAF survey underestimated the extent of TRA because agencies performing better in terms of ethnic matching were more inclined to submit returns. The BAAF survey also provides information on 36 inter-country adoptions from ‘non-designated’ countries (i.e. those whose adoptions are not automatically recognized in the United Kingdom). Six (mostly teenagers from South Asia) were adopted by relatives, while of the remaining 30 roughly half were from Eastern Europe (including Russia), the rest mainly from South America and South East Asia. Of non-relative adoptions, roughly two-thirds were by white couples and one-third by couples at least one of whom shared a similar cultural heritage with the child (Dance 1997: 27–8).

**New Labour, new onslaught**

Following their election victory in May 1997, the incoming Labour government’s first move was to omit adoption from its first legislative programme,
suggesting both a low priority and no strong mood for change. However, in April 1998, Health Minister Paul Boateng launched a blistering attack on adoption PC in general and same-race policies in particular, an attack which could easily have come from any of his Tory predecessors (Express on Sunday, 12 April 1998). He described them as ‘wrong-headed’, and ‘perverse’, dismissed the arguments about racial identity and vowed to facilitate TRA. After briefly doffing his cap in the direction of heritage and the effects of racism, Boateng repeated the oft-proclaimed common sense that what mattered was ‘love and care’. His attack came soon after the release of an Institute of Economic Affairs publication which called for a considerable expansion in adoption and action against social work agencies which ‘obstruct’ it (Morgan 1998). New guidelines were issued which place in italic type the message that ‘The government has made it clear that it is unacceptable for a child to be denied loving adoptive parents solely on the grounds that the child and adopters do not share the same racial or cultural background’ (DoH 1998a, para. 14). To further emphasize the continuity with the previous government, Home Secretary Jack Straw repeated the arguments made by Conservative Minister John Redwood that young single mothers should be encouraged to give up their children for adoption (The Times, 26 January 1999).

Concluding comment

In this chapter we have attempted to chart the historical course of the controversy surrounding ‘race’, ethnicity and adoption in Britain. This has been set in the broader historical contexts of adoption policy and practice, and the politics of ‘race’ and ethnicity respectively. The emergence and establishment of TRA, and the later rise of same-race policies have been traced, along with their subsequent uneasy coexistence. In the 1990s, public debate has come to be dominated by the spectre of political correctness, with social workers cast as anti-adoption and anti-TRA in particular. What is clear is that, within a decade of the 1989 Children Act, its guiding principle of partnership with parents and its emphasis on keeping children with their families have come to be seen as damaging to the interests of many children. In its ‘Quality Protects’ initiative, the government has made clear its desire to promote adoption and concerted campaigns are under way, notably through the Daily Mail (20 March 1999) and MP Julian Brazier’s private member’s bill to force greater use of adoption by local authorities. ‘Race’ remains the key symbol of PC and provides the major sub-text in these attacks. We will be looking at these issues in greater detail in Chapters 5 and 6, but now turn our attention to the key contested issues surrounding ‘race’, ethnicity and adoption as they are seen to impact on children and families.