New Times or new circuits: recovering Sivanandan’s political economy

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*Abstract*: In 1990, A. Sivanandan published an essay subtitled ‘The hokum of New Times’, which took aim at Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques’ theorisation of Thatcherism and the neoliberal revolution. Central to this criticism was Sivanandan’s decade-long tracing of the ‘new circuits of imperialism’ that had been engendered by a new global division of labour and hierarchies of production, technological change and the domestic fall-out of such processes in forms of British state racism and racialised forms of exploitation. Although Hall’s work has diffused into the field of international political economy, Sivanandan’s take has largely been neglected. This article, developed from a presentation at the ‘New Circuits of Anti-racism Conference’, King’s College, London, October 2022, will briefly return to the Hall and Sivanandan debate to help foreground Sivanandan’s international political economy and also highlight how it took racism and imperialism to be integral to the neoliberal order in Britain and beyond. The paper will show how Sivanandan’s anti-racist and anti-imperial international political economy can help us to frame and understand the current crisis of neoliberalism from the vantage points of ‘over here, and over there’, and how thinking with and through international political economy must be at the heart of contemporary anti-racism’s address of the current crisis of capital.

*Keywords*: communities of resistance, debt, IFIs, international institutional racism, international political economy, IRR50, neoliberalism, new circuits of imperialism*,* Sivanandan, xeno-racism

**New Times or new circuits?**

In 1990, A. Sivanandan published an essay entitled ‘All that melts into air is solid: *the hokum of New Times*’, which he dedicated ‘to those friends with whom, out of a different loyalty, I must now openly disagree’.[[2]](#endnote-1)

The friends in question here were protagonists of the British Left, and the most obvious friend in question was Stuart Hall, who in 1982 had written the introduction to Sivanandan’s first collection of essays.[[3]](#endnote-2) In 1989, Hall and Martin Jacques published a collection of articles from *Marxism Today*,the magazine of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB),entitled *New Times: the changing face of politics in 1990s.*[[4]](#endnote-3)The rationale of the project was nothing short of a new strategy for the British Left in the wake of an epochal shift in capitalism from Fordism to post-Fordism, the electoral success of Thatcherism and the expansion of new subjectivities within this altered mode of production. What New Times suggested was that old-fashioned class analysis was no longer fit for a neoliberal society underpinned by ‘diversity, differentiation and fragmentation’ and the subjective moods, feelings and identities of its subjects. The old industrial proletariat and the class identities of the previous epoch, as Thatcherism had already apparently acknowledged, had now given way to a world of skilled service workers, consumerist politics and ‘new social movements’ (anti-racism, LGBTQ, Green, Feminism). The Left, and the Labour Party in particular, either had to adapt to this new environment and its subjects or become politically irrelevant. [[5]](#endnote-4)

Many now see the New Times project as a stop on the hard road to New Labour. But more interesting than the potential link between the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and Blairism was Sivanandan’s belief that such thinking was the practice of dialectics without materialism. The core of Sivanandan’s rejection of New Times as ‘fraud, counterfeit and humbug’ centred on its navel gazing at subjective politics – and how to muster such a politics of the subject to deliver a Labour Party majority in parliament – whilst seemingly jettisoning: ‘the notion of imperialism out of new Marxist reckoning − the ravaging of the Third World, the exploitation of its peoples, the theft of its resources, ecological devastation. The Third World is no longer out there as an object of struggle.’[[6]](#endnote-5) This criticism was founded on Sivanandan’s decade-long tracing of the ‘new circuits of imperialism’ that had been engendered by a new global division of labour and hierarchies of production, technological change and the domestic fall-out of such processes in forms of British state racism and racialised forms of exploitation. In doing this, Sivanandan pushed beyond New Times’ national story about Thatcherism and the Labour Party into a global story about the reorganisation of capital and class and its relation to racism.

Although elements of Hall’s work on political economy have diffused into the academy, in fields such as international political economy (IPE), Sivanandan’s take on political economy has largely been neglected.[[7]](#endnote-6) This paper aims to recover elements of Sivanandan’s political economy of neoliberal globalisation and highlight how it took racism and imperialism to be integral to the neoliberal order. The reasons for this return to Sivanandan’s political economy are two-fold. The first is epistemic, with debates within IPE now taking up how the link between ‘racialisation’, ‘racism’ and ‘capital’ remains a blind spot of the discipline. This has seen scholars return to reformulating the links between colonialism and capitalism and expanding on the idea of raced markets. Linked to these interventions, which innovate IPE conceptually, is also an idea of alternative set of interlocutors (anti-colonial thought, the Black Radical Tradition, dependency theory) for IPE to engage with, and through, on the link between issues such as race and class.[[8]](#endnote-7)

The second reason to return to Sivanandan’s political economy is inherently political. The current moment is defined as a crisis of neoliberalism with economic, political and ecological drivers pushing the world to greater forms of deglobalisation and the return to the state as an economic actor. The conclusion of this article will show how Sivanandan’s anti-racist and anti-imperial international political economy can help us to frame and understand the crisis of neoliberalism from the vantage points of ‘over here, and over there’ and how thinking with and through IPE must be at the heart of contemporary anti-racism’s address of the current crisis of capital.

**Imperialism’s new hierarchies**

As early as 1979, Sivanandan had outlined the changing nature of the ‘classic centre-periphery relationship’ of western imperialism with the onset of a new international division of production and labour.[[9]](#endnote-8) The centres of advanced economies would no longer be the only suppliers of manufactured goods and the periphery of underdeveloped countries only suppliers of raw materials. Rather, Sivanandan argued that the centre would now supply, within limits, the technology and knowledge, and the periphery would now provide both the primary products and manufactures. The background to this change in the global economy had been western economic, political and military interference in Third World economies and the failure of the Third World’s idea for a new international economic order as a result of this interference. The primary political agents of this globalising of capitalist production and exploitation were multinational corporations and an architecture of international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB) and what would become the World Trade Organisation (WTO).[[10]](#endnote-9)

However, Sivanandan outlined how an information technology revolution, in particular microchip processors, had been the main facilitator of what we have come to know as neoliberal globalisation.[[11]](#endnote-10) The integration of microprocessor technology into industrial production had now deskilled and automated production processes – with the highly skilled needed to program machines and the unskilled needed to operate the machines. With this change in production came a concomitant change in the spatial configuration of production and redrawing of the international division of labour. The expansion of information technology into the production process saw Sivanandan offer an early narrative of what others have called ‘disarticulated Fordism’ – where multinational corporations broke up and scattered factory production across global assembly lines stretching from ‘Silicon Valley in California or Silicon Glen in Scotland to the Export Processing Zones (EPZs) of Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Sri Lanka’.[[12]](#endnote-11) These global assembly lines contained within them a ‘hierarchy of production’ – whereby advanced economies retained high-technology or rent-seeking patent rights, newly industrialising countries sites of industrial production, and underdeveloped countries took on the unskilled, back-end work of assembly. Commodities such as cars and electrical goods were now created across and through these hierarchies of production rather than through the simple centre/periphery relationship that had underpinned the previous era of capitalist production.[[13]](#endnote-12)

This new hierarchy in production was underpinned by a new ‘hierarchy of labour’ – with the periphery now a set of peripheries where economically stronger regions (e.g., oil-rich Gulf states) exploited the unskilled labour of other peripheral regions (e.g., South Asia) and the centre’s labour further split between skilled and unskilled workers.[[14]](#endnote-13) All these levels of exploitation thus fed into each other and created a hierarchy of labour stretching out from the centre to the different peripheries – with populations inserted into the hierarchy of production of commodities when and if needed. This even took place between the ‘unskilled’ of the centre and peripheries, as Sivanandan highlighted through the example of circuit board production – whereby the most hazardous bonding work could be outsourced to female labour in the peripheries and integration of these circuit boards could be done in cleaner and safer working environments by de-skilled workers in the centre.[[15]](#endnote-14)

Against Eurocentric ideas that class was now dead, Sivanandan argued that the working class had been expanded and ‘scattered all over the non-industrialised world’ through the integration of Third World labour into these new hierarchies of production. This new global order facilitated a new form of imperialist extraction of surplus value – through what others have called super-exploitation – from the vast labour pools of the Third World that freed capital from the political and legal impediments that were often encountered in the centre from organised labour:

To put it differently, the technological revolution has allowed capital to shift the burden of extracting surplus value from the workers at the centre to the workers at the (outer) periphery. And that surplus value is not relative, as at the centre, but absolute. Capital does not need to pay peripheral labour a living wage to reproduce itself: it does not need labour on a long-term basis when technology is all the time catching up to replace it and, unlike at the centre, there is no social wage below which labour cannot fall, and what there is is readily abrogated by the government to let foreign capital in. And, in any case, there are enough cheaper and captive labour reserves in the periphery for capital to move around in, discarding each when done. [[16]](#endnote-15)

The economic impacts of the new circuits of imperialism would transform both the centre and the peripheries. In the centre, the rich became further enriched – rewinding the inequality contractions of the social democratic era. The moving of old industries (coal, steel, ship-building) and production to the peripheries, and the expansion of service sector work emptied traditional workplaces of their workers and weakened the traditional labour organisations that mobilised against capital. [[17]](#endnote-16) Neoliberal hotbeds such as Britain became an expression of ‘monetarism and the market’ whose welfare state had been ‘asset-stripped of the social and economic infrastructure’ that underpinned British welfare capitalism and ideas of social mobility. This created a new underclass of citizens who were locked out of mainstream society: de-schooled, under-employed and over- policed. The result was a society that now harboured income inequalities that replicated the Third World within the First.[[18]](#endnote-17)

In the peripheries, Sivanandan recognised what Samir Amin had coined as ‘disarticulated development’[[19]](#endnote-18) − whereby capitalist production in the peripheries did not generate enough income for its workers to fully partake in the consumption of their own labour: ‘They produce what is of no real use to them and yet cannot buy what they produce − neither use value nor exchange value − neither the old system nor the new.’[[20]](#endnote-19) The fruits of increased GDP and capitalist profits are thus never fully shared with the majority of people in the peripheries but, along with the goods they produce, exported into the centre. Although the new hierarchies of production and labour offered newly industrialising countries the chance to move up the geo-economic ladder, the reality was that only a select few were allowed to break through towards levels approaching the standards of advanced economies – the rest must remain, for capitalism to remain stable and have labour and resources to feed upon. After all, a ‘world of classless capitalism, where all the nations are equally capitalist’ would not be capitalism.[[21]](#endnote-20)

The political ramifications of the new circuits of imperialism also drew parallels between the centre and periphery. The weakening of organised labour now meant that the working class in places such as Britain had effectively lost its economic power to keep capital in check or create political change:

Capital no longer needs living labour as before, not in the same numbers, in the same place, at the same time; Labour can no longer organise on that basis, it has lost its economic clout and, with it, whatever political clout it had, whatever determinacy it could exercise in the political realm. What is crucial here is not that the productive forces have altered the balance of dependency between Capital and Labour, but that they have altered it so radically as to allow Capital to free itself of Labour and yet hold Labour captive. [[22]](#endnote-21)

With the absence of the power of organised labour, the economic confrontation with capital moved to the political confrontation with the power of the state. This saw the emergence of ‘communities of resistance’ – politics formations around community issues such as anti-racism, migrant movements, green politics, LGBTQ rights, and movements against gender violence – that confronted the state and, through confronting the state, struggled against multinational capital. Unlike Hall et al., however, Sivanandan did not divorce such politics from the class – and saw such communities of resistance as the richest political seams of the working class. The absence of the power of organised labour now simply meant that there was no ‘working-class arm’ but rather a host of ‘battalions’ to take on the system. [[23]](#endnote-22)

Sivanandan also saw such a change of politics in the peripheries, with the new circuits of imperialism putting the final nail in the coffin of national liberation movements, the Third World project and hopes of a New International Economic Order. Disarticulated development, he argued, was conjoined with ‘disorganic development’, where the economic system in the Third World was often at odds with the cultural and political institutions of the very people it exploited. The spread of capitalist production in the peripheries not only immiserated societies but also saw ‘a wholesale attack on the values, relationships, gods that made such immiseration bearable’.[[24]](#endnote-23) With a national bourgeoisie set on attracting and maintaining the attention of transnational capital – often through western-backed authoritarianism − capitalism in the peripheries was often unmediated by the pretence of capitalist democracy found in the centre. The authoritarian nature of capitalism in the peripheries thus meant that resistance in the Third World was therefore now primarily aimed at the repressive state apparatuses of their own rulers:

Hence the revolutions in these countries are not necessarily class, socialist, revolutions − they do not begin as such anyway. They are not even nationalist revolutions as we know them. They are mass movements with national and revolutionary components − sometimes religious, sometimes secular, often both, but always against the repressive political state and its imperial backers.[[25]](#endnote-24)

What should be clear now is that it was Sivanandan’s many years of grappling with the changing nature of the global economy and imperialism which informed his visceral distaste for the New Times project. New Times obscured the global transformation of capital and class both in the centre and peripheries with a national electoral strategy for the Labour Party. The strategy may have been alluring, but, even at a national level, it was unclear how the New Times strategy of assembling new blocs of Labour voters – skilled service workers and new social movements – would lead to socialist outcomes for the immiserated one-third of British society. This is to say nothing of how such a voting bloc and the Labour Party would approach the Third World’s violent conscription – what Sivanandan later would call the return to primitive accumulation − into global capitalist production. For Sivanandan, such an environment demanded the memory that class struggle was neither solely about culture nor about the subject, but, still, about the ownership and control of the means of production and the exploitation of workers. The centre of gravity of such exploitation now moved to the periphery and, within the centre, to all the bits and pieces of the working class that global transformation of capital and class had thrown into the air.

**Racial neoliberalism**

It is tempting to read Sivanandan’s narration of the new circuits of imperialism as a forerunner to contemporary takes on neoliberal globalisation. In the mid- 1990s Sivanandan even found himself debating the idea of globalisation in the pages of the *Monthly Review* with fellow Marxists such as Ellen Meiksins Wood, who seemingly had a hard time accepting that neoliberal globalisation marked any change in capitalist production or exploitation.[[26]](#endnote-25) But Sivanandan also differs from these contemporary takes on neoliberal globalisation by centring the relationship between racism and capital in the formation of the neoliberal era. As Arun Kundnani has pointed out, contemporary critiques of neoliberal globalisation, if not ignoring racism outright, relegate racism and its relationship to capital to prior periods and conditions of capitalism, e.g., social democracy. Here contemporary racism and its links to nationalism, and debates about access to national forms of welfare, are seen as anachronistic and incompatible with neoliberal approaches to labour outsourcing, free markets, and welfare retrenchment. Neoliberalism is thus taken to be generative of racist resentment about the collapse of the racialised privileges of the social democratic era, such as stable employment, rising living standards and social welfare for the majority of western (white) workers, but not generative of ‘its own distinctive structures of racism that are discontinuous with the past’.[[27]](#endnote-26)

Yet Sivanandan’s political economy of neoliberalism does acknowledge the very generation of distinctive structures of racism that are discontinuous with the past:

Racism, then, is not a given. It never stays still. It changes its shape, size, contours, purpose, function with changes in the economy, in the social structure, the political culture, the system – and above all the challenges, the resistance to that system. Today’s racism, as we have seen, is embedded and shaped by globalisation.[[28]](#endnote-27)

On this front, Sivanandan’s political economy of the new circuits of imperialism frames an idea of a form of international institutional racism as being key to understanding imperialism and state racism at home. In Sivanandan’s *oeuvre*, racism is normally defined by ‘laws, constitutional conventions, judicial precedents, institutional practices’ − all of which have the ‘imprimatur of the state’. This state racism entrenches discrimination for some and death for others in the service of economic exploitation:

In a capitalist state, that power is associated with the power of the capitalist class and racial oppression cannot be disassociated from class exploitation. And it is that symbiosis between race and class that marks the difference between the racial oppressions of the capitalist and pre-capitalist periods.[[29]](#endnote-28)

Yet Sivanandan’s political economy of neoliberal globalisation expands this idea of institutional racism away from a simple focus on the nation state to include the racism woven into the institutional structures of the global economy. The global economy and its governance, through IFIs such as the IMF, WB and WTO, trade and arms agreements, patents and intellectual property rights, are key to creating the conditions that lead to imperialist unequal exchange, dependency and super-exploitation in the Third World. However, Sivanandan also argues ‘racism is tied to dependency’ and outlines how racial and civilisational ideas – a ‘historical deposit of slavery and colonialism’ – still underpin the global economy and its institutions of governance. This racist paternalism determines who is capable or deserving of market freedoms, who can run and hold power in IFIs, and naturalises underdevelopment and poverty as part of the Third World and its peoples. This international institutional racism not only serves to justify the division of the world between the haves and have nots, but also facilitates the continuous intervention by IFIs, multinational capital and powerful nation states into the economies of the Global South and the maintenance of imperial extraction and exploitation across the peripheries. [[30]](#endnote-29)

The international institutional racism of neoliberalism Sivanandan fundamentally tied to neoliberal state racism in places such as Britain. Departing from accounts of neoliberalism as the end of state power, Sivanandan saw the neoliberal nation state as the ‘market state’ − where the state is neither small nor big. Rather, the state is highly regulatory and interventionist − but in the interests of global capital and multinational corporations – through its instigating of privatisation, deregulation and financialisation of society and its use of foreign military intervention for both business (arms trade) and imperial control (foreign occupation, supporting authoritarian regimes). There were also direct links here between the effects of the market state and racism – the market state is a racial state. This is politically expressed through the state’s political renouncing of multiculturalism and fear-mongering about immigration, and expressed policy-wise through increased policing and surveillance of ‘troubled’ minority populations who were surplus to labour markets, draconian forms of immigration control and deportation regimes. The use of private firms to fulfil such state racism did not herald the end of the nation state but, rather, reimagined and reinforced racialised ideas of nation, nationality and citizenship in reaction to conditions of neoliberal globalisation.[[31]](#endnote-30)

The relationship between the new circuits of imperialism and institutional racism – both at international and national levels – in turn altered the relationship between racialisation and capital. In the first instance, the neo-imperial structures of neoliberal globalisation, although shifting elements of production and capitalist social relations, still largely encoded the world along the racialised contours of the colonial era. For all of the talk about the rise of the global middle class and economic power in the Global South, the reality of globalisation was that ‘those who are poor, and are powerless to do anything about their poverty, are also those who, by and large, are non-white, non-western, Third World’. Here poverty and powerlessness were still imbricated in the link between class, colour and racialisation that underpinned the classic centre and periphery model of imperialism. [[32]](#endnote-31)

However, the ramifications of neoliberal globalisation, which saw the opening up of the Third World and former Communist bloc to capitalism, the rise of the BRICS bloc and the displacement of peoples through economic and military intervention, increasingly displaced people and forced some to head towards the West as migrants:

Such an understanding of capitalism-sans-frontiers, and the worlds it throws up, not only sheds light on the displacement of whole populations within and between Third World countries and continents, but also on the forced migration of peoples to the West in search of asylum. And, invariably, these are political refugees fleeing the authoritarian governments that the West has set up and/or sustained in the interests of multinational capital. To decry them, then, as economic refugees is to overlook the basic fact that it is your economics that create our politics that make us refugees in your economies.[[33]](#endnote-32)

The false divide between ‘economic migrants’ and ‘political asylum seekers’ prevalent in states such as Britain was a wilful misunderstanding of the economic and political machinations of contemporary imperialism and an embracement of what Sivanandan helped to coin as ‘xeno-racism’: a specific form of state racism that focused on the figures of the refugee, the asylum seeker and the economic migrant and that now went beyond the colour-coded racism of colonial empire:

there are other racisms, apart from this ‘civilisational racism’, that globalisation has thrown up through its displacement of peoples. The racism meted out to asylum seekers and migrants, even when they are white, for instance – which is passed off as xenophobia, the (natural) fear of strangers. But the other side of the ‘fear or hatred of strangers’ is the preservation and defence of ‘our people’, ‘our culture’, our race- nativism. If it is xenophobia, it is, in the way it denigrates and reifies people before segregating and/or deporting them, a xenophobia that bears all the marks of the old racism, except that it is not colour coded. It is racism in substance, though xeno in form. It is xeno-racism, a racism of global capital.[[34]](#endnote-33)

The link between neoliberal globalisation’s generation of surplus populations and different forms of racisms were, for Sivanandan, tied to opportunities for economic exploitation in the centre. We have already seen above that part of the outsourcing of industrial production has confined vast swathes of people in the Third World to hard and hazardous work and working environments, and the threat from global capital to move from one labour pool to another. But this also fed into exploitation in the core of the global economy in the First World where state racism led to the integration of racialised migrant labour into:

the arduous, unskilled, dirty jobs in the ever-expanding service sector, who constitute the casual, ad hoc, temporary workers in computerised manufacture, who provide agribusiness with manual farm labour. They are the invisible workers in the service industries, serving in the up-front kitchens at McDonald’s, as porters and cleaners in hospitals and shops, as waiters and petrol pump attendants, security guards and night watchmen, servants and slaves. They are the peripheral workers in manufacture, peripheral in the manufacturing sense too, because modern production processes do not require a permanent workforce but a functionally flexible ‘core group’ which can adjust to changes in technology and a numerically flexible ‘peripheral group’ which can be adjusted to changes in the market. They are the sweat-shop workers in the primitive putting-out system of the garment industry. They are tomato-pickers for agribusiness. They are, in a word, the cheap and captive labour force- rightless, rootless, peripatetic and temporary, illegal even – without which post-industrial society cannot run.[[35]](#endnote-34)

Racism towards migrants who head towards western states thus hides and obscures how capital accumulation and the prosperity of western life depends on racialised system of exploitation both abroad and at home. But it also justifies a racialised form of political economy where ‘the refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, the flotsam and jetsam of latter-day imperialism’ are exploited as ‘the new underclass of silicon age capitalism’.

The neoliberal transformation of the global economy also transformed the established racialised structures of British political economy. This centred on what Sivanandan called an industrial ‘geography of decay’ engendered by neoliberal-induced deindustrialisation, deregulation and privatisation in the UK. This had seen the decomposition of the working class, which had been disaggregated between the West and Third World, but also within Britain itself. Writing in the era of austerity Britain, Sivanandan concludes that neoliberal globalisation has led to the British working class’s ‘subsequent disaggregation and segregation’ as a class in itself and potentially for itself:

The working class has itself been broken up into semi- and unskilled manual workers living on the edge of existence (the ‘precariat’) and ‘the casuals’ who have fallen off the edge into the ‘underclass’ of the never-employed, estate denizens, inner-city youth, refugees, asylum seekers – the flotsam and jetsam of market society, the waste product of market economics, now rendered a worldwide phenomenon by globalisation. The middle 50 per cent consists of the lower middle class and the skilled working class (Social Groups C1 and C2) and accounts for a ‘squeezed middle’ who are ‘often too poor to benefit from the full range of opportunities provided by the private markets but too rich to qualify for substantial state support’, and are therefore electoral fodder, aka the floating vote, that can make all the difference in a general election. Whereas the precariat and underclass – one an aspiring working class whose aspirations are never met, and the other a despairing workless class whose despair turns to riot – are not only surplus to electoral needs, but a potential danger to the state and need to be kept under strict surveillance and subjected to ‘heavy manners’.[[36]](#endnote-35)

Race and racism again became key mediums through which this disaggregation and segregation was cemented as Britain’s racialised labour market was transformed under neoliberalism. The breakdown of the social democratic compact in Britain caused racial resentment about the privileges of social democracy (stable employment, access to housing, rising wages) which had been racialised by elites and the state. Even the idea of a geography of decay, often construed as a North/South divide for example, is often coded language for a racialised demarcation between a non-white, criminal urban South and a white and unemployed deindustrialised North – when the reality is that ‘haves and the have-nothings’ run across society. Race here became a way of dividing working-class issues all deepened by neoliberalism − such as policing, unemployment, welfare retrenchment and sub-standard education, health and housing provision − across communities which were pitted against each other. For example, writing in 2001, in the aftermath of uprisings in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley by South Asian youth, Sivanandan pointed out how issues of white and South Asian communities living so-called ‘parallel lives’ in northern English towns were linked to the neoliberal destruction of industries such as steel and textiles and the dissolution of once multi-ethnic workforces. The subsequent restructuring of these local economies around service work, with South Asians over-employed in service sector work, combined with local government racism and the onset of the ‘war on terror’ firmly split any form of solidarity between these communities. Not only did neoliberalism create its own distinctive forms of racism that facilitated capitalist exploitation, but it also now remade old ties between racism and capital that further split working-class people from one another both within and beyond Britain. [[37]](#endnote-36)

**Dead circuits: the end of neoliberalism?**

Sivanandan’s political economy from the late 1970s and its examination of the relationship between globalisation, imperialism and racism set him apart from other theorists of neoliberalism. There could be a sense that simply acknowledging this is enough, but Sivanandan’s political economy is no museum piece. Just think, for example, how pertinent his ideas about the centrality of microprocessors are for the current ‘chip wars’ between the US and China. Or how his ideas about South Asian female labour in the Midlands garment industry undercutting labour in the Third World and xeno-racism help us to understand the racialised exploitation of South Asian and Eastern European women in Boohoo sweatshops in twenty-first century Leicester.[[38]](#endnote-37)

Yet, the current global economy is characterised by a crisis of the very neoliberal globalisation Sivanandan wrote about. This crisis hasn’t come out of nowhere – with the neoliberal global economy being zombie-like since the 2008 global financial crisis – and the disruption to global commodity chains caused by the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbating these issues. The increasing effects of climate change and the inflationary spikes caused by corporate profiteering and the Russian invasion of Ukraine also make the economy ever harder to globalise. At the same time, the era of US geo-political and geo-economic primacy that underpinned the neoliberal order has been challenged by the economic and political rise of China, along with other former subordinate nations, which now look to embrace new forms of trade deals and political alliances that decentre the West.[[39]](#endnote-38) Authors such as Gerbaudo and Meadway point to a reversion to a national form of capitalism and protectionism, the questioning of globalisation and return of state intervention in the economy.[[40]](#endnote-39) Here the prime example is the Biden regime’s approach to the US economy, which, in its containment war against China, has turned to deficit-driven social spending and protectionist measures to public procurement to further its national interest. The retreat of neoliberalism for these authors offers a possible political opening through a critique of globalisation and a return of the state. Here it is said that a rejuvenated politics of the Left may be able to avoid the pitfalls of authoritarianism and launch a new national form of progressive politics around welfare policies and platforms such as the Green New Deal.

What I want to do in the conclusion of this piece is to use Sivanandan’s approach to political economy to analyse the crisis of neoliberalism discourse, to update the story as it were, both ‘over there’ and ‘over here’ and suggest the new circuits anti-racism must take to confront the crisis of capital we are currently living through. [[41]](#endnote-40)

**Over there**

Neoliberal globalisation is certainly in trouble but, as Sivanandan’s political economy reminds us, neoliberal processes in the Global North, such as deindustrialisation, privatisation and state retrenchment, are dependent on dispossession, disarticulated Fordism and super-exploitation and forced labour in the Global South, or what we used to call the Third World. Missing from the current debate about the demise of neoliberalism is a discussion of neoliberalism in the Global South and the international institutional racism that underpins such a system of capital. The erasure of the Global South in the ‘end of neoliberalism’ discourse appears somewhat as Eurocentric as the death of class debate Sivanandan wrote against in the 1990s.

The imperial value transfer of global economy, from Global South to Global North, has been relentless during the neoliberal period. Hickel et al. estimate that between 1990−2015 the North’s imperial appropriation of embodied raw material, energy and labour has drained from the South $242 trillion (constant 2010 USD).[[42]](#endnote-41) This has meant that poorest nations on earth have often borrowed to keep their states and populations alive – never mind, develop. Between 1990 and 2019, for example, the total external debts for the poorest nations on average rose from 90 per cent to 170 per cent of their GDP.[[43]](#endnote-42) The impact of Covid-19 on the global economy, rising interest rates in advanced economies (namely the US dollar), inflation and the increasing effects and costs of climate change have made this situation worse for these poor countries. According to the IMF, at the start of 2023 around 15 per cent of low-income countries are in debt distress and an additional 45 per cent are at high risk of debt distress. Among emerging markets, about 25 per cent are at high risk and facing default-like borrowing spreads.[[44]](#endnote-43) The recent sovereign debt defaults of Zambia and Sri Lanka provide signals of a potential much wider debt crisis to come in the Global South.

What is interesting here is that debt crisis reveals how things have both changed and not changed: the economic ascendancy of China – and other developing nations such as India − has seen them contest the legitimacy of the IFIs and demand voting shares to reflect their economic power. In the current era, China has also extended its portfolio of loans for lower- and middle-income countries, which, between 2008 and 2021 amounted to almost half a trillion dollars ($462 billion), only $5 billion below the World Bank over the same period.[[45]](#endnote-44) The portfolio of African and Asian sovereign debt thus includes private bondholders, multilateral and bilateral creditors such as China. In the eruption of the debt crisis in places such as Zambia and Sri Lanka, the background has been geo-political contestation around debt, with the US and its allies attempting to indict China on debt restructuring for nations such as Zambia and the Chinese contesting the legitimacy of an international rules-based order that favours western interests.[[46]](#endnote-45) What we are seeing here is that current circuits of western imperialism are being challenged by states such as China – which have their own economic interests – and that in the middle are those nations and peoples in Africa and Asia who have no real power. As Gyude Moore puts it, the current battle around debt, and geo-politics more generally, is best summed up by the African proverb that when elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.[[47]](#endnote-46)

At the same time, as Avery Gordon outlines in this issue, the decline of US global hegemony and the waning of the Eurocentric order doesn’t, of course, mean the end of imperialism. The role of the IFIs during this period has shown neoliberal imperatives are still alive and well in these institutions. As with the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, the IMF seemingly responded to the Covid-19 pandemic with arguments for stimulus on health and social expenditure. However, research from Oxfam suggests that, much like the fallout of the 2008 global financial crisis, the IMF returned to recommending austerity and neoliberal orthodoxy in the Global South once the pandemic subsided. Oxfam’s research discloses that 85 per cent of the 107 loans negotiated in 2020–21 between the IMF and eighty-five national governments, in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and Eastern Europe, indicate plans to undertake fiscal consolidation after the pandemic.[[48]](#endnote-47) These austerity policies include taxes on food, energy and state retrenchment in areas such as health and education. Oxfam has updated this research with analysis of a further fifteen agreements signed by the IMF during 2021–22 with nations in the Global South and concluded that thirteen of these deals enforce austerity.[[49]](#endnote-48) The double standards of IFIs such as the IMF − which has called for austerity restraint in advanced economies in the Global North – underlines the valuing of some lives over others.[[50]](#endnote-49) And confirms that, whatever has happened to neoliberal globalisation, the international institutional racism of the global economy that Sivanandan mapped forty years ago remains strong. The architecture of global governance is still founded on imperialist interests, and its contestation by contenders to have more say in the system or indeed to create their own structures, may create effects that destabilise the lives of those on the ground, ‘who, by and large’, as Sivanandan said, ‘are non-white, non-western, Third World’.

**Over here**

Despite flirting with the idea of levelling up, the UK state appears more of an outlier to this apparent sea-change in neoliberal orthodoxy – the current Conservative government refuses to ditch neoliberal ideas and has planned for a new round of austerity. With the economy stagnant and inflation high, there should be no surprise that British state racism has been mobilised as a form of bread and circuses for the country. Hence, the regular briefings from the Home Office about the ‘invasion’ of asylum seekers, plans for deportations to Rwanda and an ongoing culture war against the ‘woke’. The state is simply shuffling racialised migrants and minorities, along with new ‘others’ such as Trans men and women and climate change activists, as enemies of the state to rationalise economic turmoil and further disaggregate and segregate communities from one another. Yet, underneath the rhetoric is a real expansion of state and institutional power – as Frances Webber has eloquently highlighted, the British state through legislation, including the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, the Nationality and Borders Bill, the Overseas Operations Act, the Elections Bill and the Judicial Review and Courts Bill, has been entrenching ‘impunity for officials and ministers, while filling prisons and immigration detention centres and further criminalising marginalised communities, dissenters and human rights defenders’. For all the current government’s rejection of state intervention into the economy – at least in the interest of most of its people – the British state has continued its expansion of an often racialised authoritarianism.[[51]](#endnote-50)

After decades of trade union acquiescence in the face of neoliberal policy, Britain’s workers also appear to have rediscovered the idea of class struggle. Faced with the legacy of underinvestment and wage freezes after a decade of austerity, and the current cost of living crisis, workers across Britain’s quasi-public sector (railway, education, communication and health care) have embarked on industrial action not seen for forty years – with more workers prepared to collectively act and, importantly, the public supporting such action. At the time of writing, the government is yet to cede ground on public sector pay claims and aims to further anti-union legalisation – adding railway workers and union bosses to an ever-growing list of enemies of the state. The re-emergence of worker militancy is most likely not the return of the economic clout of the working class Sivanandan thought to have died in the 1980s – due to the globalisation of production – but rather, as he suggested, the political contestation of market-state, government and corporate power.

As the British state faces international (from other states) and domestic pressures (from its workers) against its neoliberal settlement, returning to Sivanandan’s political economy is fruitful for this discussion. Writing on the back of the 1981 urban rebellions of Black youth across Britain in response to the state authoritarianism and state racism that underpinned Thatcher’s launching of the Britain’s neoliberal era, Sivanandan wrote:

it is not merely that a free-market economy requires a law-and-order state but that, even in its passing, it leaves only the option of a mixed economy with a corporate state maintained by surveillance. They are but two shades of the same authoritarianism, the one more modern than the other, but neither speaking to the birth of a new society[[52]](#endnote-51)

What Sivanandan was arguing was that the neoliberal imaginary seemed to only leave us with an idea of returning to the flattened idea of class of the social democratic era, which was underpinned by state power, racism and imperialism. Sivanandan’s indictments of Hall et al.’s take on the new social movements are intuitive here – as it reminds us that ‘richest political seams’ of the working class are often found outside of what we perceive to be organised labour.[[53]](#endnote-52) Indeed, the state’s current culture war recognises a plethora of what Sivanandan called ‘communities of resistance’, agency from below that confronts state power: anti-racists and prison abolitionists (BLM), climate and ecological activists (Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil) and feminist direct action groups (Sisters Uncut). If the free-market state in Britain is in trouble, then the role of anti-racism, and other communities of resistance, appears to be to help birth a new society that is not simply a return to a securitised form of social democracy that Sivanandan warned us about in the 1980s. This requires that, along with worker demands for higher wages and better working conditions, such a return of ‘class’ politics demands an end to that super-exploitation of racialised and gendered labour, the end of state and patriarchal violence against women, the end of imprisoning of working-class people abandoned by the state and economy, and the dismantling of the border regimes that target those whose worlds have been torn apart by imperialism and the effects of climate change. As Sivanandan wrote in 1990, these communities of resistance must create a: ‘multi-faceted political culture which finds authority in practice, tests theory in outcome, and works towards a wider political movement commensurate with our times, but unrelenting still of its struggle against Capital.’[[54]](#endnote-53)

**The new circuits of anti-racism**

Finally, and perhaps most poignantly given his proximity to the movement, Sivanandan’s political economy has much to offer anti-racism in the current crisis of capital. The 2020 extra-judicial murder of George Floyd saw the second iteration of BlackLivesMatter (BLM) and mass uprisings across the US. In the UK, the trans-Atlantic diffusion of anti-racist energy, that had once seen Black Power migrate from the Caribbean and US to these shores in the 1960s, happened once more.[[55]](#endnote-54) The most famous image of such protest being the dumping of the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston – former senior executive of the Royal African Company − into the very Bristol harbour from which he accumulated his fortune. The re-energisation and public visibility of anti-racism in the UK − through the impact of BLM and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic – highlighted the institutional racism of policing but also opened conversations across employment, education and health. BLM, and contemporary British anti-racism, have in large part become animated by an abolitionist framework. Abolitionism rejects a longing for state authority, through highlighting the links between state violence, capitalist exploitation and reproduction of racism and patriarchy. The idea is that we must find our future beyond state-controlled organisations − pushing us to imagine non-racist, non-patriarchal, non-transphobic and non-capitalist futures within our communities.[[56]](#endnote-55) Abolition thus conjoins abolishing prisons and borders and defunding the police with building institutions, practices and ways of living that liberate us all. In the current crisis of neoliberalism, just as Sivanandan highlighted in the ’90s, it is the state and its authoritarian power that become the obvious target for resistance. The politics of abolition in some ways is a perfect response for both critiquing and rethinking our crumbling neoliberal society.

Returning to Sivanandan’s political economy, however, reminds us of the need for a distinct anti-racist internationalism. In confronting the violence of the state, we must not forget the imperialist system that underpins and, in many instances, engenders such state violence. The link between state violence and the global economy makes it clear that to the list which includes borders, police forces and prisons, we must also seek to think through and beyond the IMF, WB and WTO, trade and arms agreements, patents and intellectual property rights that facilitate imperialist exploitation and expropriation in the Global South. Indeed, across issues such as health, food, energy, debt and the mitigation and compensation for the effects of climate change, the most entrenched forms of institutional racism centre on the institutions of the global economy and its governance. As Sivanandan outlined, you cannot fight racism without also fighting imperialism[[57]](#endnote-56) − his political economy thus demands an internationalism that sees issues such as super-exploitation of labour, land and resource grabbing, delinking from the global economy, sovereign debt, patent rights, institutions of global governance and global capital itself as anti-racist concerns; and causes and peoples’ movements in the Global South as potential points of solidarity. [[58]](#endnote-57)

This reconnection of anti-racism and anti-imperialist world-making is no easy task. The apparent clarity of the great movements for decolonisation and anti-imperialist world-making were decimated by imperialist interference, internal authoritarianism, and the implementation of neoliberalism in the Global South.[[59]](#endnote-58) The current crisis of neoliberalism makes this task no easier with states such as China, India and Russia – which actively challenge the western rules-based order – suffering from internal authoritarianism and harbouring geo-political ambitions of their own. The anti-racist internationalism demanded by Sivanandan’s political economy thus teaches us to leave our hopes with the communities of resistance across the world. Anti-racism here must find common ground with what can appear disparate and unrelated struggles – such as the land rights of farmers in India, indigenous struggle in the Amazon, and survivors of the deadly Grenfell tower fire – but which all take the confrontation of the market state as their point of struggle. In the current crisis of neoliberalism, the new circuits of anti-racism must therefore create chances for common cause and solidarity between communities here and abroad – we need to map exploitation across the world and its relation to state racism, and think through possible solutions both within and beyond the nation state. Anything else, as Sivanandan’s political economy teaches us, is not anti-racism, but rather the hokum of New Times.

**References**

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2. A. Sivanandan, ‘All that melts into air is solid: the hokum of New Times’,in his *Catching History on the Wing: race, culture and globalization*. (London: Pluto Press, 2008), p.19. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. Hall wrote the preface for Sivanandan’s *A Different Hunger* (London: Pluto Press, 1982). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. S. Hall and M. Jacques (eds), *New Times: the changing face of politics in the 1990s* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. The New Times project and Hall’s involvement has recently been covered in J. Turner’s excellent ‘A difficult space to live’, *London Review of Books* 44, no. 21 (3 November 2022), available at <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v44/n21/jenny-turner/a-difficult-space-to-live>. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. Sivanandan, ‘The hokum of New Times’,p. 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
7. See I. Bruff and C.B. Tansel, ‘Authoritarian neoliberalism: trajectories of knowledge production and praxis’, *Globalizations* 16, no. 3 (2019): pp. 233–244 for an overview of Hall’s impact in IPE. Sivanandan’s work, on the other hand, has barely factored into the discipline. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
8. See recent special issues in IPE journals about the ‘blind spots’ of IPE such as G. LeBaron, D. Mügge, J. Best, C. Hay,  ‘Blind spots in IPE: marginalized perspectives and neglected trends in contemporary capitalism’, *Review of International Political Economy* 28, no. 2 (2021): pp. 283, 294, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2020.1830835> and J. Best, C. Hay, G. LeBaron and D. Mügge, ‘Seeing and not-seeing like a political economist: the historicity of contemporary political economy and its blind spots’, *New Political Economy* 26, no. 2 (2021): pp. 217–228. What Sivanandan’s work offers is an extension of the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist scholarship in IPE that has been neglected. For more on this, see F. A. Oliveira and I. H. Kvangraven, ‘Back to Dakar: decolonizing international political economy through dependency theory’, *Review of International Political Economy* (2023), available at https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2023.2169322. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
9. In this section I predominantly focus on Sivanandan’s ‘Imperialism and disorganic development in the Silicon age’ (1979), ‘New Circuits of Imperialism’ (1989) and ‘The hokum of New Times’ (originally titled ‘All that melts into air is solid: the hokum of New Times’, 1990). These form a tri-party of texts that show the progression of Sivanandan’s theorisation of imperialism. Where needed I use other texts beyond these three to flesh out Sivanandan’s analysis of the new circuits of imperialism. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
10. A. Sivanandan, ‘Imperialism and disorganic development in the Silicon age’ in *Catching History on the Wing*, p. 179. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
11. Sivanandan, ‘Imperialism and disorganic development in the Silicon age’, pp. 185–190. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
12. A. Sivanandan, ‘New circuits of imperialism’in *Catching History on the Wing*, p. 194. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
13. Sivanandan, ‘New circuits of imperialism’, pp. 202−206 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
14. Sivanandan, ‘Imperialism and disorganic development in the Silicon age’, pp. 181−185. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
15. Sivanandan, ‘New circuits of imperialism’, p. 203. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
16. Sivanandan, ‘New circuits of imperialism’, p. 203. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
17. Sivanandan, ‘Imperialism and disorganic development in the Silicon age’, p. 194. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
18. A. Sivanandan, ‘La trahison des clercs’ in *Catching History on the Wing*, pp. 57−58. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
19. See S. Amin, *Imperialism and Unequal Development* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976). Sivanandan’s thought dovetails with the development of dependency theory and Third World Marxism of the 1970s. More research needs to be conducted into the synergies between these debates and how the thought of Amin, Walter Rodney and others inflected elements of British anti-racism. Indeed, this form of political economy appears to be key to understanding the division between Hall and Sivanandan’s takes on the onset of Thatcherism. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
20. Sivanandan, ‘Imperialism and disorganic development in the Silicon age’, p. 190. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
21. Sivanandan, ‘New circuits of imperialism’, p. 196. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
22. Sivanandan, ‘The hokum of New Times’,p. 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
23. A. Sivanandan, ‘Heresies and prophesies the social and political fall-out of the technological revolution: an interview’, *Race & Class* 37, no. 4 (1996): pp. 1−11. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
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25. Sivanandan, ‘Imperialism and disorganic development in the Silicon age’, p. 192. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
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28. A. Sivanandan, ‘Racism in the age of globalisation’ (2004), available at https://irr.org.uk/article/racism-in-the-age-of-globalisation/. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
29. A. Sivanandan, ‘RAT and the degradation of black struggle’ in *Catching History on the Wing*,p. 162. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
30. Sivanandan, ‘La trahison des clercs’, pp. 57−58. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
31. A. Sivanandan, ‘The market state vs the good society’, *Race & Class* 54, no. 3 (January–March 2013): pp. 1–9. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
32. Sivanandan, ‘La trahison des clercs’, p. 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
33. Sivanandan, ‘La trahison des clercs’, pp. 57−58. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
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35. Sivanandan, ‘New circuits of imperialism’, p. 211. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
36. A. Sivanandan, ‘The market state vs the good society’, *Race & Class* 54, no. 3 (January–March 2013): p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
37. ‘Poverty is the new Black’, p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
38. Boohoo was reported to be paying its garment workers as little as £3 an hour in some cases and accused of forcing workers to work during the Covid-19 lockdowns. As Sivanandan wrote in 1989, ‘in the Midlands Asian garment-makers have combined new manufacturing techniques with cheap Asian female labour to undercut garment imports from Asia’ (‘New circuits of imperialism’, p. 196). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
39. See A. Gordon, ‘Radical internationalism and shifts in the global order’, *Race & Class* 65, no. 1 (2023). In one his last major pieces, Sivanandan also foresaw how the neoliberal global economy engendered the decline of the West’s primacy. ‘My own reading is that the neoliberal state is no longer viable, precisely because global capitalism has entered a phase of uneven development whereby, this time, it is the “advanced” countries of the West that have been “underdeveloped” by their dependency on finance capital, while the “backward” countries of China, India, Brazil have grown in leaps and bounds through production and development. They are now the bread-and-butter countries of the world, while the West is living off the froth of monetary economics.’ Sivanandan, ‘The market state vs the good society’, p. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
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46. ‘China vs the multilateral development banks’, March 2023, available at <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/podcasts/china-vs-the-multilateral-development-banks/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
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49. ‘IMF must abandon demands for austerity as cost of living crisis drives up hunger and poverty worldwide’, available at <https://www.oxfam.org.uk/media/press-releases/imf-must-abandon-demands-for-austerity-as-cost-of-living-crisis-drives-up-hunger-and-poverty-worldwide/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
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57. A. Sivanandan, ‘The heart is where the battle is’, in Communities of Resistance, p. 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
58. See A. Shafi and I. Nagdee, *Race to the bottom: reclaiming anti-racism* (London: Pluto Press, 2021) for a contemporary take on the need for this link between anti-racism and anti-imperialism. Indeed, their argument is that peoples’ movements and even states and government in the Global South must be seen as potential sites and subjects of anti-racist internationalism and solidarity. Shafi and Nagdee are a good foil here, as their historical sense picks at a tension between abolition in its current form and the wider history of anti-racism. I do not have the space to unpack all of this tension, but more critical dialogue needs to be had about the international political economy of abolition. At the end of *Becoming Abolitionists*,for example,Purnell unpacks an idea of a new green deal around the politics of the red new deal from indigenous communities – but this has very little detail on the international political economy of abolition. How for example does abolition help us to understand the institutions of the global economy? How does it help us frame reactions to proposals such as Barbados’s Bridgetown Initiative, which aims to help nations in the Global South both mitigate the effects of climate change and shift the dominance of the Global North in IFIs? It may well be that we need to look beyond the current ideas of abolition for these resources and my suggestion is that Sivanandan’s political economy and Third World Marxism more generally may be helpful points of such departures for anti-racists today. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
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