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Sydney Olivier - White Capital and Coloured Labour (1910)

Olivier is sometimes referred to as one of the lesser Fabians. He was however the only early British socialist to write on colonial policy. Keir Hardie and MacDonald wrote on Indian nationalism and Macdonald also wrote on Labour and the empire, but it was Olivier who sought to analyse the colonial relationship within its economic context and to challenge assumptions widely held among the early Labour leaders as to the inferiority of the 'negro race'. There is only one modern biography of Olivier, written by *Chartist's* own Frank Lee, and published as *Fabianism and Colonialism* in 1988. Olivier's widow published a memoir with selections from Olivier's writings in 1948. Olivier was secretary of the Fabian Society from 1886 to 1889 and served on the executive committee until 1899. Starting his career as a colonial office official, Olivier served as colonial secretary in British Honduras from 1890 and then as colonial secretary and subsequently as Governor in Jamaica. Between 1913 and 1917, he was permanent secretary to the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries. Having retired from the civil service, Olivier became Secretary of State for India in MacDonald's 1924 Government. Excluded from MacDonald's second government, Olivier became a critic of the government's colonial policy, but served as a member of the Labour Party's advisory committee on imperial questions, under the chairmanship of Leonard Woolf.

White Capital and Coloured Labour was published in the ILP's Socialist Library edited by Macdonald and was a serious analysis of what was referred to as 'the race question' focusing on the economic context of colonialism and challenging some of the Darwinian perspectives of racial superiority as the justification for empire, widely held by early socialists including the Webbs as well as by Liberal imperialists. Olivier also published *The Anatomy of African Misery* in 1933, and two books on Jamaica, including one on the Governor Eyre controversy and the Jamaican slave revolt of 1865. Olivier wrote the chapter on the morality of socialism in the 1889 *Fabian Essays*:

'Socialist morality .. is only the morality which the conditions of human existence have made necessary, that is only the expression of the external passion of life seeking its satisfaction through the striving of each individual for the freest and fullest activity; that Socialism is but a stage in the unending progression out of the weakness and the ignorance in which society and the individual alike are born, towards the strength and the enlightenment in which they can see and choose their own way forward – from the chaos where morality is not to the consciousness which sees that morality is reason; and to have made some attempt to justify the claim that the cardinal virtue of Socialism is nothing more than Common Sense.'

In *White Capital and Coloured Labour*, he considered the morality and economics of colonialism:

'The question of relations between black and white is obscured by a mass of prejudice and ignorance and blindness, proportional to the isolating differences in their evolved constitutions. These barriers are not different in kind or in strength from those which once separated neighbouring European tribes... It is a deplorable but unquestionable fact of experience, and it is the basis of practical democratic conviction in politics and industry, that if you give one average man command over the services of another for his own purposes, he will abuse it... The danger of inhumanity is much greater where there is racial distinction. Because this, at best, obscures the human sense of sympathy; but where this obscuration is enhanced by a positive theory of racial incompatibility and inferiority, race prejudice intensifies the tendency to oppression in exploitation. The social claims that are recognized in the fellow white man are expressly denied to exist at all in the black..... No mixed community can attain unity and health if the white man assumes an attitude which stimulates and maintains this alienating suspicion in the black, or where one governing class bases its polity on the short sighted theory that the dividing habits of Race are permanently stronger than the unifying force of Humanity.'

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