

Challenging racialized institutions

A history of black and minority ethnic housing associations in England between 1948 and 2018

Black and
minority
ethnic housing
associations

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to review the history of black and minority ethnic housing associations in England since the arrival of Commonwealth migrants.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on the theoretical framework of Lawrence and Buchanan (2017), the authors examine the interplay of institutional control, agency and resistance, in a highly racialized context.

Findings – The authors identify five phases in the development of grassroots organizers into housing associations, describing the different types of “institutional work” involved in challenging racialized institutions and establishing new institutions. The exercise of episodic power to achieve institutional agency created resistance from powerful actors seeking to maintain systemic power. The growing movement for black and minority ethnic housing fought to establish organizational legitimacy. Achieving this not only enabled them to serve and represent their communities but also entailed compromising more radical political agendas.

Originality/value – Racialized aspects are largely lacking from institutional theory, as are the actions of racialized individuals and organizations. In looking at a highly racialized context, the authors hope to contribute to understanding the institutional work done by such groups and the challenges they face as their efforts develop and become legitimated.

Keywords Institutional power, Institutional work, BME housing associations, Racialized institutions

Paper type General review

Introduction

Institutions shape, and are shaped by, human agency. The rules, norms and practices which frame social life are powerful means of control. Institutions order societies, groups and organizations and regulate access to opportunities. By and large, organizational research concentrates on powerful actors as they vie for influence through maintaining, disrupting and creating institutions. Institutions which enrich or empower particular groups are vigorously guarded. As are institutions which circumscribe opportunities, marginalize or exclude groups on the basis of social constructs such as race, including the categories of black and white (Rojas, 2017). It appears that sustained agency is needed to contest such institutions (Claus and Tracey, 2019).

Within organizational theory, the interactions between institutions and racialized groups have received little scholarly attention (Rojas, 2017). The impact of institutions on marginalized groups, and how those groups have responded to achieve agency, has been neglected (Lawrence and Buchanan, 2017; Suddaby *et al.*, 2014). In race studies, there is a voluminous literature on the persistence of racial inequality, and resistance to social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement (Emirbayer and Desmond, 2015).



Management historians have charted the roots of black enterprise (Prieto and Phipps, 2019; Walker, 2009), and there is burgeoning research on black and minority ethnic (BME) entrepreneurship (Jones and Ram, 2007; Jones *et al.*, 2018). Yet, racialized interactions at the organizational (rather than the individual) level remain largely neglected. Recently, organizational scholars have begun to draw on race scholarship to integrate insights into racial dynamics with theories of institutional control (Rojas, 2019). We would like to see further systematic exploration of racialized institutional action, and for this to be more visible in mainstream organizational theory.

This paper examines how marginalized racialized groups have achieved and sustained institutional agency over time, through an exploration of the history of BME Housing Associations in England. In extending our knowledge of the institutional agency of racialized groups we have focused on the housing field. There are numerous other examples of organizing and organizational forms, developed to overcome racial exclusion, which merit attention. For instance, the black supplementary school movement (Andrews, 2013), British Black Power (BBP), black studies and national political groups. In addition, the re-emergence of “black studies” in the curriculum of British universities such as Bristol, Goldsmith and Birmingham City is evidence of growing scholarly interest. The largely forgotten histories of black grassroots organizing and organizations deserves particular attention. We focus on one of these neglected histories: that of BME housing associations. By presenting the phases of the development, we offer an account of how these marginalized groups have been able to create agency. The process they undertook is still a powerful means in today’s political and business landscape.

In seeking to understand the dynamics of these socio-historical processes, we take a neo-institutional view. That is, we see both institutions and race as social constructs. Neo-institutionalism is a useful lens, as it emphasizes the role of systems of meaning, symbols, language and emotions in guiding action. When we take this view of institutions, what agency can we ascribe to individuals, groups or organizations in challenging or changing them? We draw on the work of Lawrence and Buchannan (2017), who provide a framework for understanding the dynamics of institutional politics. They explain that institutional control is maintained through systemic power, which involves discipline and domination; while institutional agency is asserted through episodic power which involves influence and force, and requires individual or organizational agents. Asserting institutional agency is also referred to as “institutional work”: “the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006, p. 215). Power is “often acquired through episodes of institutional work” (Rojas, 2010, p. 1264).

We outline the institutional work undertaken by Commonwealth and British citizens from 1948 to 2018 in five phases: they first worked to maintain familiar institutions; then to disrupt racist institutions; to create new institutions and organizations; and to maintain institutional gains; and finally, to recreate institutions which had lost legitimacy. We draw on contemporaneous research and fiction, historical accounts, and BME housing associations’ organizational histories. (We keep to usage of the terms “black” “BME” and “white” that we find in the literature and news material of the time.) We also asked peers – a historian, two institutional scholars and two senior housing practitioners – to critique the trustworthiness of our historical narrative (as recommended by Gill *et al.*, 2018), who confirmed the validity of our account. The five phases of institutional work we identify here provide a conceptual model to show how institutional agency can be created and maintained – with difficulty – by relatively powerless groups and organizations.

The largely forgotten “extraordinary history” (Mullins, 2010, p. 18) of BME housing associations is a testament to the fortitude of generations of unsung grassroots organizers. They engaged in numerous institutional battles to frame and realize their vision of black-led organizations “providing homes and communities without racism” (SBHA, 2019). BME associations drew on the legacy of housing associations which emerged in the early twentieth century to provide affordable homes for marginalized people. They were independent and not-for-profit precursors to state-managed social housing. As the state took increasing responsibility for housing from 1918, housing associations tended to ‘live in the shadows’ (Mullins, 2010, p. 8). However, they were at the forefront of institutional struggles to frame the housing needs of neglected groups or neighborhoods. As such, housing associations provided a legitimate organizational form, with which Commonwealth migrants experiencing racial exclusion could achieve institutional agency.

Institutional control and agency

In viewing institutions as social constructs, we see them as “enduring elements in social life” which have a ‘profound effect on the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of individual and collective actors’ (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006, p. 216). Institutions are often taken for granted, even though they are repeatable behaviors, which “enable self-producing social order” (Greenwood *et al.*, 2008, p. 5). Learnt through socialization, habitual institutions provide patterns of conduct (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). Institutions “exist to the extent that they are powerful”, that is, ‘the extent to which they affect the behaviors, beliefs, and opportunities of individuals, groups, organizations and societies’ (Lawrence and Buchanan, 2017, p. 477). Institutions exist at the level of the individual (e.g. a handshake), organization (e.g. ranks), field (e.g. status hierarchies in groups of similar organizations) or society (e.g. legal systems) (Greenwood *et al.*, 2008).

Institutional control is exercised through discipline and domination (Lawrence and Buchanan, 2017). That is, controlled systems that restrict the range of options to a particular group. The way that racial discipline and domination manifest has shifted over time, for instance, from the total institution of the plantation (Knottnerus *et al.*, 1999) to the new “Jim Code” of algorithms (Benjamin, 2019). African diaspora have experienced a perpetual struggle against the grievous bodily, cultural and economic violence embedded in the institutions of slavery, colonialism and postcolonial racism. Such struggles are echoed in the experience of numerous colonized peoples including those indentured and transported across the British Empire (Miles and Phizacklea, 1977).

Racial groups are often portrayed as a “white/non-white polarity” which belies nuances of ethnicity (Emirbayer and Desmond, 2015, p. 15), context and self-identification. Racialization occurs when racial meanings are extended to bodies, emotions, cultural objects, resources, organizations and institutions (Ray, 2019). Racialized institutions tend to either constrain the opportunities of particular groups or attempt to equalize relations, such as in anti-discrimination laws.

Such institutions embed us in patterns of order, control and behaviors which can appear binding. Institutions play an important role in the reproduction and legitimization of racialized practices. They frame the distribution of social and material resources (Ray, 2019), interactions (such as official or unofficial color bars) and the agency of racialized groups. In considering the institutional work involved in challenging racialized institutions, we explore the agency of individuals and organizations. We look at the practices and processes of actors’ “endeavours to build up, tear down, elaborate and contain institutions, as well as amplify or suppress their effects” (Hampel *et al.*, 2017, p. 558). As noted by, Lawrence and Buchanan (2017) this agency is exercised through influence and force.

Influence and force in institutional agency

Once an institution or field is established, those who benefit defend the status quo. “Challenger groups” may emerge in times of institutional crisis to offer “new frames and rules to reorganize the field” (Fligstein, 1997, p. 403), propagating them through influence or force. Influence is the art of persuading actors to ‘do something they would not otherwise do’ (Lawrence and Buchannan, 2017 p. 492), while force is usually understood as physical. The use of force “is overlooked” in organizational studies, but, from a historical perspective, it is an important means by “which state and state institutions have been created, maintained and disrupted” (Lawrence and Buchannan, 2017 p. 493). The legitimate force of state agencies is conventionally contrasted with the illegitimate force of the protestor, rioter or non-state actors such as armed insurgents. However, state agents can also use force illegitimately. Indeed, what constitutes legitimate physical force by state agencies is contested. There have been many historical instances of minority communities contesting the legitimacy of the police (Olusoga, 2017; Ramdin, 1987). “Bureaucratic force” is also a potent means by which organizations maintain institutions. It constrains or resists institutional change by excluding or expelling the disruptive or transgressive (Lawrence and Buchannan, 2017, p. 493). However, the exercise of force – physical or bureaucratic – is not necessarily an act of violence. The threat of force, or latent force, can also be an effective form of power; for example, intimidating a neighbor to move. Institutionalized illegitimate force remains a potent means to impact others. For instance, a state official might illegitimately misuse power by providing their own interpretation on policy, racially motivated attacks or riots. While often indiscernible, latent force can lead to knock-on effects that are highly visible, or entail significant consequences for those influenced by it. As such, it represents a particularly powerful tactic. Attending to the power dynamics of institutional control and agency, over time, can illuminate how institutions are maintained and disrupted.

A historical view of racialized groups and institutional agency

In the UK, there is a tendency for research to characterize “black communities as passive recipients of racism by the state” (Beider, 2012, p. 83) and dominant white groups (Phillips, 2007). In highly institutionalized fields, achieving agency may well be difficult for marginalized actors. To explain agency that is embedded in “totalizing” institutional complexes, scholars often turn to “a mythical actor that exists outside the sphere of institutional control”: the institutional entrepreneur (Suddaby *et al.*, 2104, p. 116). We take an alternative approach – historical institutionalism – in which institutions are understood to be the outcome of “enduring historical processes” (Suddaby *et al.*, 2014, p. 118). Exploring racialized institutions across historic contexts can reveal the institutional work required to create, maintain and subvert them. This approach brings the institutional agency of marginalized groups into sharper relief. It brings into focus “what forms of agency manifest through what kind of social relationships in what situations” (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019, p. 27). We hold that institutional agency – expressed through resistance, ideation and self-organization – can challenge institutions, temper them and create new ones. For instance, actors like the Caribbean and South Asian migrants in the 1950-1980s who felt “blocked” from safe and suitable housing turned out to be “pioneers in exploring and reconstructing contexts of action” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 1009). They disrupted the institutional controls which constrained opportunity and created ideas, categories and organizational forms to overcome the impact of racialized institutions. But the agency of the less powerful can be fragile (Martin de Holan *et al.*, 2019). A longer view can surface the institutional repair work, done by the powerful, to contain challengers or reframe institutions and institutional fields.

The institutions which framed the experiences of Commonwealth migrants from 1948 were racialized and exclusionary. As white resistance to migration and migrants grew, racialized institutions became more prevalent, overt and coercive. Actors, from diverse colonial and postcolonial contexts, faced with harmful institutional control based on color, developed common ground, organized and garnered significant collaborative agency. We describe how agency was achieved through five types of institutional work. First, through maintaining familiar institutions, migrants sought spaces to meet, play and worship together. They supported and protected each other by finding accommodation and work. They also sought to increase interracial understanding through friendship societies. Second, through disrupting racialized institutions they were able to resist oppression. As racist attacks intensified and discrimination intensified, grassroot activism grew, inspired in part by the Black Power Movement. Third, through creating new institutions they built on familiar institutions which were infused with a new black political identity. Fourth, by maintaining institutional gains, they were able to hold their position as their institutional agency came under threat from once supportive state organizations. Finally, recreating institutions that had lost legitimacy in the eyes of the state, enabled them to sustain solidarity within the black housing movement.

We outline how these five types of institutional work were enacted over five periods, between 1948 and 2018. Within each phase, we outline the types of institutional work occurring (see [Figure 1](#)). We draw attention to the dominant type of institutional work within each phase. We provide an overview of the historical context for each time period, the contours of institutional control - with particular reference to the field of housing - and how racialized actors achieved agency.

Maintaining familiar institutions, 1948-1958

During 1948-1958 economic migrants from the British Commonwealth arrived in England and were confronted with racialized institutions that differentiated and constrained groups, predominantly on the basis of color. Newcomers turned to familiar institutions and organizational forms as sources of reassurance and safety, maintaining and recreating them through their institutional work. By securing homes, they began to disrupt institutions, circumventing widespread racist practices of exclusion.

The institutions which shape social life can vary considerably from one social group to another within the same country, and from one country to another. Travelers and migrants have to accustom themselves rapidly to institutional variations, in order to successfully and safely navigate new environments. More often than not, the unfamiliar becomes quickly familiar, although the origins, nuances or import of certain rules, norms and behaviors may

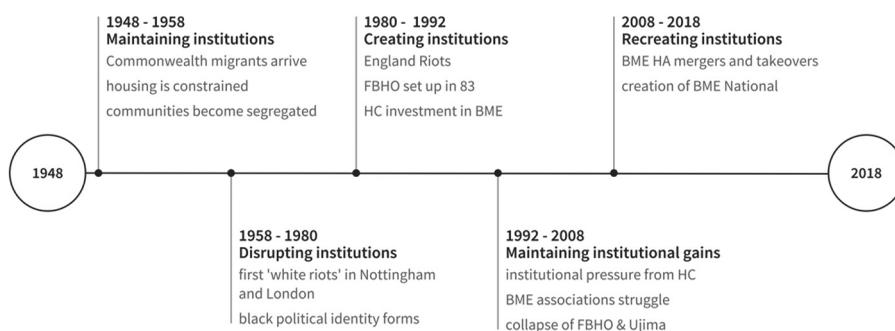


Figure 1.
The five phases of institutional work involved in challenging racialized institutions in housing, in the UK, between 1948 and 2015

remain mysterious. However, when institutional adaptation fails, is disrupted, or differences appear insurmountable, the social life of newcomers can be challenging. Many travelers turn to familiar institutions when outside their comfort zones. For instance, British tourists abroad gravitate to the familiar institutions of British pubs and food. When institutions are racialized on the basis of color, no matter how hard newcomers work to understand and adapt to local institutions, they may still face rejection and exclusion. Maintaining familiar institutions provides emotional and material bridges as well as a basis for organizing.

Britain was “no paradise” for Commonwealth migrants (Phillips and Phillips, 1998, p. 82). Migrants needed to adapt to unfamiliar institutions. In doing so, the issues they faced were exacerbated by the lack of understanding of their diverse identities. Shaped by colonial institutional histories, frames and identities such as subject, class, caste, color, country – and island in the Caribbean case (Olusoga, 2017) – the migrants were heterogeneous (Pearson, 1981). The nuances of the newcomers’ self-identification, contribution to the recent war effort, economic or intellectual endeavor, as well as legal status as British subjects, was lost on many of the majority white community (Hall and Schwarz, 2018). Heterogeneous identities were largely collapsed into simplistic, homogeneous and hyper-racialized categories (Glass and Pollins, 1960). Their “high visibility” was a constant reminder of previous racial orders of “slave to owner, subject to sovereign, conquered to conqueror” (Braithwaite, 1967, p. 496). Racial tropes, which belittled and pathologized migrants, became rapidly normalized in language and popular culture (Fryer, 2018). In the press, and early studies of race relations, emphasis was placed on the perceived institutional differences between “hosts” and “strangers” (Patterson, 1963; Vaughan, 2019). In particular, the shortcomings of the “dark strangers” who failed to adjust to white “host” norms and notions of respectability (Waters, 1997, p. 228). In sum, the newcomers were “bewildered and hurt by the open rejection and dislike that greeted them” (Braithwaite, 1967, p. 499).

On arrival “the unhomeliness of the imagined homeland” (Schwarz, 2018, p. 8) and the restrictive laws, codes and norms in all walks of life, presented immediate challenges. As Virdee (2019) notes, they faced “unrelenting and sometimes violent racism from all social classes” (2019, p. 21). Senior Conservative politicians talked of threats to the English racial character, the spectre of a “magpie society” and Winston Churchill considered a “keep Britain white” election slogan (Olusoga, 2017, p. 499). The Labor Government quietly discouraged non-white immigration. Most newcomers did not receive the welcome extended to European immigrants. They did not have access to proper accommodation, medical services, fairs or sporting events. The government also turned a blind eye to racist behaviors (Paul, 1997). In some areas, voluntary liaison committees were established by “civic minded white residents” to assist with migrants settling in and in sharing each other’s familiar institutions (Garbaye, 2005, p. 43). Yet every encounter with the white British brought a “new hazard”, as interactions ranged from the courteous to the violent, and migrants expected the worse (Glass and Pollins, 1960, p. 120). There was a “thin veneer of racial tolerance”, at best (Glass and Pollins, 1960, p. 123). Access to employment, housing, worship and other services was severely constrained on the basis of color (Braithwaite, 1967). Ambiguous institutions – including the unspoken rules and veneer of English politeness – created misunderstandings, disillusionment and anxiety. For some, the unequivocal racial order of American South appeared preferable as one “knows where you stand” and who to avoid, rather than the British “elusive enemy” (Glass and Pollins, 1960, p. 121). “Disappointed” is the prevalent descriptor in Commonwealth migrants’ memoirs of their new home (Olusoga, 2017, p. 503).

Extensive research documents how the highly institutionalized housing field controlled the access of Caribbean, Pakistani, Bangladesh, Indian (and other) citizens of the British

Commonwealth, to private rented and social housing during the 1950-1960s (Tomlins, 1999, for an annotated bibliography). Institutionalized patterns of racial steering (Pearce, 1979) shaped the practices of letting or buying houses as well as social housing allocation. For example, letting agents steered prospective tenants away from multiple-occupation housing with white tenants, and towards the poorest accommodation. “To let” notices in shop windows were often more overt (Glass and Pollins, 1960). In Selvon’s 1965 novel, *The Housing Lark*, a character is “catching all hell to get a room”, ‘all he can see is ‘No Kolors’ or “Sorry, Uropean only”. He thinks, “how is a hell of a thing these people don’t want him, when they can’t even spell” (Selvon, 1990, p. 29). Social housing agencies steered those who actually got housed into the most undesirable properties and run-down areas (Henderson and Karn, 1984), leading to concentrations of migrants in declining neighborhoods (Phillips and Harrison, 2010). Burney notes the “many open and hidden pressures” which encouraged residential clusters of migrants and a lack of mobility thereafter (1967, p. 7). The limited choice of private rented housing in the so called “twilight zones” of inner cities pushed newcomers into ‘cramped, expensive and poor quality accommodation’ (Burney, 1967, p. 8). Lack of resources compounded the situation. Many black commonwealth migrants undertook shift work, often paid at a lower rate than white workers (Ramdin, 1987) and paid a “colour tax” to white landlords (Glass and Pollins, 1960, p. 57). To disrupt such institutions, shift workers operated shift systems in shared houses or rooms. Apocryphal myths began circulating about the volume of occupants and drew the attention of state officials who pathologized the tenants rather than landlords (Burney, 1967; Glass and Pollins, 1960). White residents frequently blamed the incomers for the deterioration of neighborhoods (Garbaye, 2005).

In response to intensified marginalization and racial discrimination, institutional work through informal association flourished – initially in friendship or family groups, but increasingly by origin, church or neighborhood (Ramdin, 1987). Meeting at house parties, barber shops, record shops or specialist stores and sharing news, food and music, sustained familiar institutions and heterogeneous identities. As stories of prejudicial behaviors by employers, officials and white neighbors circulated (Glass and Pollins, 1960), associations provided a degree of reassurance. Self-organization grew as groups created places of worship – often house meetings, and then in vacant English churches – clubs and community organizations, in reaction to closed doors and unmet spiritual, emotional and social needs (Ramdin, 1987).

Although racial segregation was not necessarily a choice, it brought “genuine advantages” in mutual support and self-defense (Henderson and Karn, 1987, p. 4). A territorial focus can foster a sense of shared identity through sustaining familiar institutions, and provide the bedrock of security and stability to “exert greater power” as confidence grows (Robinson, 2008, p. 28). The response to exclusionary practices depended on the local context. For most, familiar institutional practices provided respite. Where local solidarities with white neighbors could be forged, newcomers joined resident and tenant associations to broker mutual understanding and solidarity against rapacious landlords.

Disrupting racialized institutions, 1958-1980

Institutional work intensified as the new communities began to settle, and racialized institutions increasingly impacted on all aspects of their lives. In maintaining the familiar institutions of sociability, worship and culture, an organizational base for activism grew, disrupting racial practices in housing and racial violence within neighborhoods. This included experimenting with the creation of new institutions and organizational forms, such

as housing cooperatives and associations, and the development of a black political identity inspired by the Black Power movement in the United States.

The impetus to disrupt racialized institutions enveloping the new communities was a combination of force and external influence. Throughout the 1950-1970s, racial harassment and violence increased in scale and ferocity. State policy increasingly pathologized the new communities as social problems and removed the British citizenship rights of many potential immigrants (Craig, 2007). The institutional trends pushing migrants into unsuitable housing and declining areas became interpreted as purposeful segregation (Burney, 1967). The bifurcation of white and “coloured”, racial tropes and the perception of a growing “colour problem” infused government reports (Paul, 1997). This included blame for self-inflicted squalor and deprivation (Glass and Pollins, 1960).

The 1958 racially motivated white riots and assaults in Nottingham and London proved to be a watershed in the creation of more overt institutional controls and agency – by the white and incoming communities. The “words colour and immigrant became the most emotionally loaded words in Britain” often deliberately associated with “social ills” and the Caribbean communities “became the bogeyman” (Braithwaite, 1967, p. 502). “Keep Britain White” appeared on walls, placards in numerous demonstrations and became a platform for right wing political aspirants. For the new immigrant communities, the 1958 riots “fuelled the growth in black voices” who “no longer allowed themselves to be rendered silent” or accept the position of “stranger” (White, 1997, p. 235). Racial violence was also a spur to organize. For example, the Guyanese teacher and novelist E. R. Braithwaite, who emphasized mutual understanding and assimilation, joined interracial friendship societies set up by “dedicated white persons anxious to improve the racial situation” (Braithwaite, 1967, p. 509). For others, self-protection, welfare and opposition to racial discrimination was the driver. Most organized around ethnicity, language and religion such as the Indian Workers Association and Standing Conference of West Indian Organizations. The Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD) attempted to unite activists across the divides, advocated nonviolent influencing and was the first to significantly engage with the state advocating for anti-discrimination legislation (Shukra, 1998).

In housing, segregation through racial steering compounded social isolation. Some migrants began to pool savings to pay joint deposits on property and let to family and friends – even though banks and building societies practiced a color code and insisted on higher deposits (Burney, 1967). Racial steering and tacit agreements not to sell to non-whites compounded segregation. Prospective buyers circumvented racist practices by using a supportive white front person. However, on arrival, attempts were made to buy them out or isolate them through a “wall of silent disapproval” (Braithwaite, 1967, p. 507). As state and private landlords neglected migrants’ needs, self-organization became a prime means of escape from expensive and dilapidated housing. Braithwaite participated in the emergence of “West Indian” housing societies to acquire and redevelop large houses to high standards. The process was not easy. Institutions shaped by colonial history, such as the “prejudices and distrust” between people from different Caribbean islands, had to be overcome in order to work together and pool hard earned money (Braithwaite, 1967, p. 507). After two years of “patient persuasion” the founding members took on all aspects of housing management (Braithwaite, 1967, p. 508), including governance and accounts. The self-provisioning of housing was a small but vibrant means of achieving agency. From the 1950s immense energy was devoted to disrupting racialized housing institutions and in developing hostels for young homeless, housing co-operatives and small neighborhood-based housing associations to overcome racial exclusion (Law, 1996, p. 95).

Cooperation was intensified in reaction to waves of anti-immigrant protests following the infamous “Rivers of Blood” speech by Enoch Powell in 1968. A black British political identity began to emerge. At a grassroots level, the fear of force, engendered by the “effective symbolism” of extreme right groups, increased tension between the police and young people, and between generations, and galvanized community leaders to self-organize across communal rather than purely geographical (Caribbean island) or ethnic orientations (Pearson, 1981, p. 177). The older generation sought to sustain and communicate their familiar institutions. Younger generations began to disrupt the institutions of their parents and society through music, language, religion, fashion and direct action (Miles and Phizacklea, 1977).

A milestone was the creation of the Universal Colored People’s Association (UCPA) and its Black Power Newsletter in 1967 following Stokely Carmichael’s visit. A network of BBP organizations developed across Britain engaged in anti-racist campaigns, education, art and literature (Waters, 2019). Black Power’s core themes of identity, community control, anticolonialism and internationalism resonated with BBP activists who also sought unity between people of African and Asian descent (Wild, 2015).

How to “create some kind of new place” became a preoccupation of many migrants and the second British born generation; for some, the construction of a “new way of being” – a Black Briton – and an inclusive political identity was imperative (Hall, 2002, p. 4). BBP activism influenced three important trends in institutional work. First, the emergent political identity unified heterogeneous groups. The framing of a black British identity and community control were central to enhancing institutional agency. The adoption of the self-descriptor “black” in the late 1960s implied pride and dignity. Activists, academics and artists reclaimed language and culture. They extensively critiqued the imposed racial order and fought stereotypes. BBP radicalism was not in itself unifying – there were many variants and detractors – but it certainly pressured the state to make institutional concessions (Andrews, 2018). Second, the potential agency and latent force of racially marginalized groups was recognized. While force was not advocated, if “politicians, the police and the media mistakenly believed that black people were likely to react with violence to discriminatory behaviour, so much the better” (Wild, 2015, p. 28). Finally, BBP activists emphasized territoriality as a means of disrupting the racial institutional order. They created grassroots alternatives which privileged community control through self-sufficiency, self-determination and self-defense. Defense campaigns following arrests, and community initiatives (such as youth clubs and community centers) proliferated. BBP organizations, such as the Bengali Housing Action Group, routinely confronted state power and racist groups by patrolling the streets and monitoring police behavior (Shukra, 1998).

While national organizations played an important influencing role with the state and in challenging racist institutions, much of the activism remained rooted in local communities. Community associations sought to influence the local state, through consultative forums. Some were funded to provide services which largely supplemented or complemented local state provision (Ben-Tovim *et al.*, 1986). Despite enhanced institutional agency, racial disadvantage and a “deepening despair amongst the black communities” intensified in the late 1970s (Hall, 1999, p. 189).

Creating institutions, 1980-1992

By 1980, the institutional work of black and Asian communities in England had created a new political identity, organizational forms, and a degree of influence at a local level, through community activism. Nationally, black organizations attempted to influence policy legitimately, through consultative forums, as well as through the creation of a

distinctive – and critical – Black British voice in literature, art, popular culture and academia. Yet it took the “catalytic impact” (Beider, 2012, p. 81) of the illegitimate force of the protester, to create opportunities for new organizational forms.

The relationship between young black people and the police had been deteriorating during the 1970s. This was often associated with overzealous use of Stop and Search powers – known as the “sus” laws – using the 1824 Vagrancy Act. Sparked by local police action, riots occurred in 35 English cities and towns during 1980-82. In the subsequent government inquiry, Lord Scarman accepted that historic socio-economic conditions, including racialized patterns of unemployment and housing, underpinned the unrest (Hall, 1999).

The black housing movement emerged in the UK as a positive response to the urban disturbances of the early 1980s (Stone, 2003). For Steve Douglas (CEO of two housing associations in London) there was “clear demand to be in control of our destinies” (quoted in Murray, 2010). Activists built independent, not for private profit, black and minority-led organizations to overcome the acute housing needs of their communities. In doing so they drew on a shared experience of disadvantage and racism, “very positive cultural and community identifications” (Harrison and Reeve, 2002, p. 759) fused with a black political identity. An identity which privileged shared experiences and ambitions, but recognized heterogeneous needs and issues within and between groups. Black, in this context, embraced all the non-white groups, with BME becoming the shorthand term – to be superseded later by Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME).

The rapid growth of BME associations in the 1980s is often attributed to the Housing Corporation (HC), a government agency (1964-2008) which funded affordable housing, registered and regulated housing associations. The HC was instrumental in providing “new opportunity structures for black people prepared to work within official institutions” (Shukra, 1998, p. 51). Much of the literature focuses on victimization and housing needs of BME communities and state policy responses, giving less prominence to the role of community activists (Beider, 2012). The HC’s decision to invest was not only rooted in the shock of widespread riots, or in the belated realization of racial disadvantage. The institutional influence of community activists played a significant role. Institutional agency was flexed through experimentation in the self-provisioning of housing since the 1950s and the management experience of a growing cadre of housing activist/practitioners. They demonstrated the potential to overcome superseded or sidestep superseded racialized housing institutions and offered solutions that privileged community needs and participation in framing their own solutions (Tomlins, 1999).

Collectively, national influence grew with the launch of the Federation of Black Housing Organizations (FBHO) and the journal Black Housing in 1983. FBHO was a coalition of activists and organizations whose initial aim was to launch one hundred black led associations and increasing black staff numbers in the predominantly white mainstream associations (Beider, 2012, p. 84). The role of membership organizations has been neglected in research on social purpose organizations. In particular, in confronting powerful institutions and building legitimacy (Stott *et al.*, 2019), FBHO and its members built legitimacy by challenging the racialized institutional status quo. They developed a sense of collective empowerment through black run organizations (Harrison, 2002). As a “black umbrella” with a wide constituency FBHO was a “very unusual organization internationally in housing policy fields” (Harrison, 1994, p. 30). Locally and nationally, housing activists influenced politicians and key officers in the HC and exploited “opportunity spaces” (Harrison and Reeve, 2002, p. 761). The influence the early BME associations brought to bear was due to their strong community legitimacy and track record as credible organizations in the eyes of the state - organizations which took action rather than merely critiquing state

policy and provision. In balancing anti-racist activism with service provision, BME housing associations secured a niche and an organizing base for sustained lobbying (Law, 1996, p. 95).

In 1986 the HC made the surprising decision to “encourage, sustain and create separate black-run organizations” (Harrison, 1994, p. 23). A surprise because from the birth of “race relations” policy in the late 1950s to date, the logic of assimilation, integration and cohesion were privileged, rather than separatism. In 1986 the HC launched a five year positive action strategy to “redress historic inequalities” (HC quoted in Law, 1996, p. 87) with revenue grants for startups and running costs, and capital for housing schemes (Harrison, 1998). About ninety other BME housing associations were launched during the “boom years” of state support in the 1980-90s (Gulliver and Prentice, 2015, p. 40). The FBHO viewed it as a “vindication” of community mobilization “generating a new chapter in organizational development on the social housing in the UK” (Beider, 2012, p. 85). Figure 2 shows the number of BME housing associations from 1976 to 1995.

For black communities, after decades of institutional marginalization in the housing field, the autonomy enabled by collective home ownership proved to be empowering (Harrison, 1998). Many associations initially focused on developing specialist schemes to address the problems of the neediest, including the needs of young people, the elderly and large families, because there were acute shortages of housing for these groups (Harrison, 1991). “Deeply embedded in the most disadvantaged communities” (Gulliver and Prentice, 2015, p. 18), BME associations provided more than bricks and mortar (Nehemiah Housing, 2019). They took a holistic approach to entrenched disadvantage through the provision of employment, social care and cultural and employability services, reminiscent of US Black Power’s practitioner arm, the Community Development Corporations (Purnell, 2012). For instance, Walton House Association, established in Manchester in 1978, provided a day nursery, advice center as well as educational and social activities (Arawak Walton, 2019).

For Sheron Carter, CEO of Arhag Housing Association in North London, “nurturing talent and creating wealth” through building businesses was “a powerful thing” (quoted in Murray, 2010). Generations of housing and community development professionals and volunteers were trained (Harrison, 1991) and moved into the mainstream housing field, including senior positions (Beider, 2012). To be categorized as a BME housing association it was expected that eighty percent of lettings would go to BME applicants, and the same

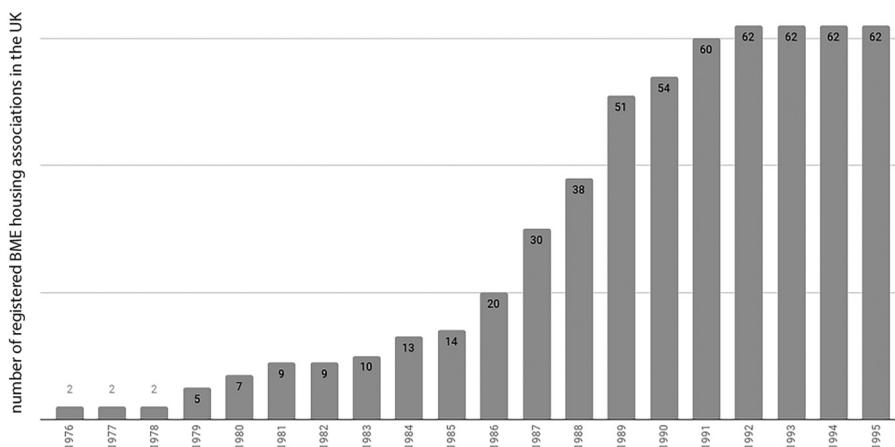


Figure 2. Number of registered BME housing associations in the UK, 1976-1995

percentage would be board members (Gulliver, 2016). The associations acted as a “participation base” (Harrison and Reeve, 2002, p. 760) for paid staff to challenge racism within local and national institutions. BME housing associations positioned themselves as “separate but complementary” (Marshall *et al.*, 1998, p. 1), meeting needs others could not or would not fulfill.

Maintaining institutional gains, 1992-2008

The institutional work in creating BME housing associations was “the most significant collective achievement” in the housing field (Harrison and Davies, 2001, p. 151). However, in the early 1990s the emphasis moved to maintaining institutional gains at an organizational and movement level. BME associations were entrants to a highly institutionalized field which provided little latitude to retain culturally sensitive and inclusive institutional practices. Ironically, it was these practices which had initially made BME associations attractive to policy makers. Maintaining institutional agency as state housing policy shifted became problematic. To a degree, “radicalism and community politics were jettisoned” to fit with a managerial institutional regime (Beider, 2012, p. 86). The FBHO became a pragmatic insider which avoided rocking the institutional boat.

The rapid growth of BME associations reflected a growing appetite for institutional agency and in demonstrating the saliency of black-led organizations in tackling complex issues on their own terms. As new social purpose organizations, many faced considerable challenges. First, they struggled to achieve a balance between social and financial mission. In particular, they maintained a “more than bricks and mortar” approach which added considerable expense. Second, they struggled to deliver complex projects, as they had inexperienced teams and boards of community volunteers, and limited resources to develop management competencies. Third, they struggled to navigate local bureaucratic power and the somewhat opaque institutions which frame political decision making within local government. Fourth, they were in competition with more established housing associations. Finally, they faced racist opposition to proposed housing schemes from white communities and local government (Harrison, 1991).

Registering as a housing association and being allocated resources from the HC brought new institutional controls. The first HC plan released a round of funds (1986-1989), which provided an opportunity for established associations to grow and startup associations to form. Following the first flush of enthusiastic support, the HC began to exert bureaucratic power to ensure that the BME associations fit with the institutional practices of the wider movement. For example, insisting that boards should include up to fifty percent of professionals largely drawn from outside the target community and housing development work be undertaken by more experienced (usually white associations). Superficially, this can be read as the promotion of good governance and safeguarding public funds. However, it was also motivated by a lack of trust in the capabilities and capacities of community groups to deliver in an institutionally acceptable way. For Cym D'Souza, CEO of Arawak Walton Housing Association, it is questionable if the HC intended BME associations to be independent; each startup was allocated an established white association which would monitor them to ensure institutional compliance (2019). Harrison's (1991) research illustrates the complexities BME housing associations faced in achieving their mission. The commitment given to associations varied considerably from area to area. In some contexts, local government and experienced housing association officers actively supported organizational development and engagement with the local housing and political field. In others, “racist obstruction” prevailed (Harrison, 1994) with access to local networks and resources circumscribed.

Just as BME housing associations achieved a degree of state legitimacy and resources to begin to fulfill their ambitions, the restructuring of social housing policy pushed housing associations “towards a future where fewer, larger and more commercially orientated housing associations would dominate” (Harrison, 1984, p. 25). Therefore, in their “infancy” BME associations had to “fight for survival” (Cope, 1990, p. 75) to be sustainable and retain autonomy. Research such as “Set up to Fail?” (Royce *et al.*, 1996) found BME associations particularly vulnerable to market and policy shifts, while in “A level playing field?” they faced “greater day-to-day difficulties than average, while often attempting to address more intractable problems” (Marshall *et al.*, 1998, p. 42). As the HC came under pressure to improve the commerciality of housing associations, it moved from “promotion to consolidation” of BME associations (Harrison and Reeve, 2002, p. 761), believing that this would make them more commercially viable. Institutional pressure increased for mergers between startups and established associations, reflected in the second HC plan 1992-1996 (Harrison, 1994). The number of autonomous BME housing associations began to dwindle from the late 1990s (Beider, 2012).

The research on BME associations conducted in the 1990s tends to focus on changes to housing policy, organizational maturity and that the HC curtailed the financial support for the movement to learn and grow. Previous research neglects the persistence of racialized institutions at a national and local level and the “institutional repair work” involved in sustaining this kind of systemic power. The pejorative view of neighborhoods with clusters of black and Asian communities intensified with further riots in urban areas during the 1990s. The practices of state institutional control veered from support to repression, reflecting a long history of British social policy which sought to discipline and micromanage the behaviors of the poor, disreputable or racialized other (Phillips and Harrison, 2010). For some, the idea of separate housing provision remained an anathema, particularly following the 2001 race riots in northern cities. Government reports highlighted self-exclusion by minority communities, white flight and that white and black citizens lived parallel lives (Phillips, 2006). The future of BME housing associations was questioned (Beider, 2012). Community cohesion became the official mantra of government, and frame for subsequent funding. Vilifying racialized groups, rather than attending to the long-standing deprivation in many urban areas which constrained opportunity for all, fuelled new waves of racial harassment, resentment and violence.

During the 2000s the FBHO and local BME associations remained on the back institutional foot as their collective legitimacy was challenged by the state, within the housing field and more radical critics who saw state patronage as undermining rather than enabling self-determination. In 2004, The Future of BME Housing Associations reported on the attitudes on tenants, associations and their competitors. The report highlighted the main sources of contention for critics of BME associations. These were: BME associations’ racial distinctiveness, their financial performance, and their unwillingness to partner with mainstream associations. Some respondents saw BME associations as increasingly irrelevant, given that the majority of black tenants were housed by mainstream associations or local authorities. Others challenged their ability to respond to the changing needs of their target communities as well as new migrant groups. The veracity of the FBHO as a key influencer was also questioned. However, the report also stressed that BME associations played a significant role, and were a role model for mainstream associations who could “still be criticised as not having done enough to make their services culturally sensitive” (Lupton and Perry, 2004, p. 7). Unfortunately, maintenance of institutional gains was further challenged by the collapse and takeover of Ujima, the largest BME housing association, widely “regarded as a shining example of black enterprise” (Hetherington, 2008). With the

subsequent closure of the FBHO and the HC, BME housing associations lost traction with policy makers.

Recreating institutions, 2008-2018

By 2008 the distinctive organizational form of autonomous BME housing associations was under threat. Despite the intensive maintenance work to influence policy makers and institutional guardians within the housing field, institutional pressures to fit with a housing association model which privileged scale, financial performance and professionalism grew. According to Cym D'Souza, associations had to "fight for their life" (2019). Community approaches which provided holistic service to particular groups lost their salience.

In the last decade BME associations have attempted to maintain institutional gains through re-building national influence, managed mergers with mainstream associations and resisting institutional control by sustaining their autonomy. In an attempt to renew their institutional influence, many of the remaining associations created the membership body BMENational in 2010. The HC had emphasized race and housing issues, but after its demise wider pressures to make the housing association field viable undermined the distinctive contribution of BME housing associations.

It aimed to overcome a "notable feature" of the HC's demise, "the lack of emphasis on "race and housing" issues" (Gulliver and Prentice, 2015, p. 43). Opportunity in many communities remained circumscribed compounded by cuts in public services through austerity measures. New tensions arose focused on Muslims, African immigrants and European migrant workers and levels of racial harassment and violence grew. To maintain institutional relevance BMENational emphasized their deep-rooted service which met the unmet needs of "super-diverse" communities (D'Souza and Gulliver, 2017, p. 4).

Gulliver and Prentice (2015) classify the seventy or so remaining associations as independents, subsidiaries, hybrids and mutuals. The subsidiaries are part of a group structure but retain a distinct organizational identity (D'Souza and Gulliver, 2017). The hybrids have "moved into the mainstream" but remain committed to their "BME legacy" (Gulliver and Prentice, 2015, p. 52). According to Cym D'Souza, Chair of BMENational, there is a danger that associations "merge to the point of disappearance" (2019). The independents and mutuals (the few remaining BME housing co-operatives) remain closest to the autonomous organizational forms developed since the late 1950s. Around forty associations remain "robust", in particular members of the BME London group (D'Souza, 2019).

Despite the significant institutional agency which created and maintained the BME housing association movement, Cym D'Souza is concerned that the housing conditions and life chances of black and Asian communities are getting worse (2019). BMENational sees its role in maintaining the institutional achievements of the movement, through influencing policy makers, promoting the work of housing associations and forging alliances to rekindle communities institutional agency (D'Souza, 2019).

Conclusion

The story of BME housing associations is a testament to the grassroots activists who made concrete gains for the lives of marginalized people in some of the most challenged communities. This paper has outlined five phases of institutional work, to explain how these racialized groups enacted institutional agency. Through collaboration, BME associations exerted influence on the housing field, seizing opportunities at a local and national level to force the state to take race and housing issues seriously.

In the early episodes, there was a need to work within existing institutions, maintaining some and disrupting others. This was done mainly by smaller, politicized grassroots

organizations. Their groundwork established collective agency, allowing actors to create new institutions. This created resistance, as it challenged existing racialized institutional control. There was then a need to maintain institutional gains – in the face of the “institutional repair work” of the powerful – which they did by building a movement. The resulting BME housing movement enabled previously marginalized groups to recreate institutions. Throughout every phase, was the need for ongoing resistance to systemic racialized control. In moving from smaller grassroots organizations to larger legitimized associations, these groups were able to resist institutional control and provide homes and services to vulnerable people. However, in adopting these legitimized organizational forms, there was a need to compromise their more radical agendas, in order to secure resources from the state.

In bringing this largely forgotten history to light, we have highlighted the tensions that confront marginalized groups seeking agency in a highly institutionalized field. While the specific circumstances of marginalized groups vary enormously, we feel there may be important lessons here: in particular, that achieving and sustaining legitimacy entails concessions. In achieving short-term gains, long-term objectives may be compromised. In achieving mainstream acceptance, strong political voices may need to be quieted. The difficult question for activists is where to strike the balance. In needing to play the game, BME housing activists had to repeatedly compromise their political edge. They were presented with the paradox of how to be both radical and accepted. They learnt that being accepted did not necessarily secure the long-term resources to sustain change. Today, more radical voices are returning, and groups are rediscovering a more radical stance is needed in order to be heard.

Until recently, racialized groups have been rendered invisible in the organizational literature. While scholarship in this field is growing, we feel that racialized interactions at the organizational level still remain neglected. The authors would like to see rigorous exploration of racialized institutional action in mainstream theory. In addition, more extensive empirical research could bring to light the often forgotten activism of marginalized groups.

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