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The Colonial Office and the Genesis of Development Economics

3.1 Lewis’s hinterland: ‘anti-imperialists’ and the Fabian Colonial Bureau

When he first went to London, Lewis was lonely, shunned by many because he was black, and intellectually isolated. Since the beginning, as we have seen, he had been shy and reticent in nature. This made it still harder for him to form friendships and social networks. But, as he relates, ‘some doors that were supposed to be closed opened as I approached them. I have got used to being the first black to do this or that’. On the other hand, he was ‘subjected to all the usual disabilities – refusal of accommodation, denial of jobs for which [he] had been recommended, generalized discourtesy and the rest’ (Breit and Spencer, 1986). Throughout his life, Lewis was reluctant to speak or write about his very personal experiences of racial discrimination. However, especially after the completion of his PhD in his mid-twenties, the growing support of Plant and others at the LSE gave him confidence, contacts began to be developed, and provided Lewis with a hinterland that could support him in case of need. In the field of development and left-wing politics, these contacts were of two kinds: London’s floating population of ‘anti-imperialists’, and the Fabian Society.

Among the former group, a friend of Lewis in his early London days was the writer Peter Abrahams, a black South African newly arrived in London in October 1940 at the age of twenty-one. In his biography, *The Coyoba Chronicles*, Peter Abrahams recalls that there had not been many black faces on the streets of London in those days. The great influx from Africa, the Caribbean and the
Indian sub-continent was still in the future. Most of the blacks seen in London were in uniform, part of the country’s fighting forces, ‘our boys’, there to defend the ‘mother country’; the empire in solidarity against the Nazis who would enslave the world. The racism of the Nazis threatened to make whatever we had experienced look like child’s play. If they could be so brutal to the Jews, what would they do to the blacks? (Abrahams, 2000, p. 45)

Peter Abrahams was a member of the circle of left-wing anti-imperialists with whom Lewis associated in his London days. London was where anti-imperialism, pan-Africanism and socialism came together, supported by groups of West Indian and West African students, lecturers, teachers, doctors and lawyers. There were very few black females in these circles, neither women students nor professionals, but there was a small cohort of influential and committed white women with political or trade union connections. The anti-imperialists were by definition of the left, but the spectrum was wide and represented all shades of socialist, communist and Marxist ideology. Lewis’s sympathies were with the Fabian socialists, who had long since shed the conservative imperialism of the Webbs to embrace a reformist agenda. What surprised Lewis’s contemporary Peter Abrahams was the degree of colour prejudice he found in London among white radicals. Without a union card or party membership it was extremely difficult for a black person to get a job in white-dominated political and union circles. Accommodation was also very difficult to obtain:

What came across clearly to me was that communists, leading communists no less than the members of the Working Men’s Clubs, saw a difference between black and white, because they were black and white. The brave new communist world of the future, if it ever came, would not necessarily be a world free of race or colour. This was the first of many encounters with colour consciousness among communists, socialists and other left-wing radicals. (Abrahams, 2000, p. 45)

In wartime London, the leading black radical anti-imperialists were C.L.R. James, George Padmore and Jomo Kenyatta. They were joined in 1947 by Kwame (then Francis) Nkrumah, who travelled to England and registered for a doctorate at the LSE. Nkrumah never finished his studies at the School but returned to the Gold Coast where, after the customary period of imprisonment by the colonial administration in 1950, he led his Convention People’s Party to independence in 1957.