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An interview with Benjamin Zephaniah

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Benjamin Zephaniah speaks to Anu Shukla about poetry, policing,
the ongoing fight against racism.

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Benjamin Zephaniah is still angry. The legendary novelist, actor, playwright, poet and musician has spent a career raging against the racist machine – and he’s not about to stop any time soon. As a young black man growing up in the 70s and 80s, he saw more than his share of police violence – and spent a stint in prison himself. Those experiences informed a body of work which pulls no punches in its critique of institutional racism.

For Benjamin, success didn’t come easy. He left school at thirteen, gaining a reputation as a wordsmith on the dub poetry scene before publishing his first book of poetry by the age of just 22. The following year, police stop and search brutality gave rise to the Brixton Riots of 1981. Benjamin was in the thick of it, and chronicled those experiences in the 1983 album, *Rasta*.

“When I was picked up by white police officers I told them they were being racist, so they sent in a black officer to beat me instead. Could I tell a black copper he was being racist? He was with the institution. It happened a lot back then. They’d just jump out the car

and beat me up and drive off. That's why we had a lot of riots." The Scarman Report of the time concluded the police were not racist – rather, the black community harboured the dangerous misbelief that they were being treated unfairly by the institution.

Benjamin speaks about this incident on the album track, *Dis Policeman Keeps Kicking me to Death* (Lord Scarman Dub) with the lyrics:

"I am living in de ghetto / trying to do my best / when dis policeman tells me / I'm under damn arrest / Him beat me so badly / I was on the floor / him said if I don't plead guilty / him gwan kick me more / I was feeling sick, I pleaded RACIST ATTACK / another policeman come to finish me off, dis one was black. In dis war we have traitors who don't think to sell you out. In dis war der are people who refuse to hear de shout for human rights to be regarded as a basic right. Still dis policeman kicks me every day and every night."

He notes that the recent influx of deportation stories circulated by UK news media show how little has changed since those times. From the relatives of migrant victims of Grenfell Tower fighting to extend visas so they can see through the public inquiry – to former members of Commonwealth nations living under the radar from fear of deportation: institutional racism, he said, is still here.

Benjamin himself is a patron of the UK Chagos Support Association, which was launched in aid of 'illegal' islanders who have lived most their lives in the UK. He said the UK's treatment of them is 'shameful' and proves the system was built to start as it meant to go on. Another reason, he said, for it to be dismantled and rebuilt.

"I find it really astonishing and depressing that racism is still here. We had movements around Thatcher and racism and sexism in the eighties. By the 90s, I thought 'it's calmed down a bit.' But suddenly, it's just got worse. We've gone back. It's unbelievable.

“So it’s crazy when people say the system isn’t racist, because it’s built on racism, it’s built on empire and its wealth has been gained from racism. And when you get people who are defensive and say it doesn’t exist, maybe it’s because sometimes, they’re guilty of it themselves?”

When riots erupted across the UK in 2011, many drew parallels to the 80s era experienced by a young Zephaniah: a time when rioters cited police violence and discrimination as key reasons for their participation. But when Channel 4 asked him to write a poem about why people riot, he decided to do the opposite: “I decided to write about *why* they *don’t* riot instead, so I told them:

“you don’t riot if you have a nice job and a home to come to at night. You don’t riot if you’re well fed and unemployment doesn’t pressure your head. You don’t riot if you live in the city but have a country cottage with a view so pretty. You don’t riot. Riot happen too late. And that’s South Africa, Britain is great.”

He notes that anti-immigrant propaganda spun by the mainstream media pits poverty-stricken white working class people against BAME communities. This is why, he said, unity has the power to defy such divisions and prevent the empowerment of institutionally racist structures.

“White marginalised communities are the ones we should be uniting with. Making us hate each other is a conscious method of divide and rule. It means those in power won’t have to set up black and white armies because we would already have divided ourselves. So the last thing they want is for poor people from black and white communities to unite and say, ‘shit, we’ve got the same oppressor’.

“But when you speak to people in the BNP and the National Front, you realise they’re just poor little white kids. And when you ask them ‘what is it you want?’ They’ll reply, ‘we just want somewhere to hang out and play, like in a community centre – and those

guys over there said if we follow them, we can.' This is exactly what Hitler did. He'd say: look at how downtrodden Germany is; follow me and I'll make you great again."

In fact, he said, a former neo-Nazi who fought him on the streets of east London got in touch once to say he'd become a Buddhist monk – a spirituality with echoes of Benjamin's own Rastafarianism. But when it comes to uniting against a common enemy, he said racists can also be reformed in other constructive ways.

"When I meditate, I feel connected with the trees, the animals and everything around us. I feel like I'm part of them, that we're all one. But when you're arguing politically, you can't exactly tell someone, 'you need to go meditate because you're a fucking racist'. Reforming racists is more effective when it's coming from someone who used to be one. It's a bit like when I go into prisons. I don't lecture prisoners. I tell them I was a prisoner too. It's how I use my energy to fight the system.

"Seriously though, the solution to getting rid of systematic racism is to tear it down. I'm a revolutionary and these institutions, including the police, need to be fucking disbanded, torn down, and we need to start again.

"Not many people talk about revolution like me though because most are reformists. But there's lots of different ways of having a revolution, though no one can really imagine what it looks like until it happens. Look at the Arab spring: some of it was successful, some of it less, and it began in Tunisia of all places.

"Revolutions have started because of poets or because somebody spoke up at just the right time when everybody else had just had enough. What we need is a grand swell of people saying, okay, we recognise all the other stuff we're trying is not working.

"But they keep going on about reforming. Reforming does nothing. That's why I'm an anarchist. I really sincerely believe this – but we will have a revolution in Britain one day."