

Challenging the structures of racism

We are living through a moment of multiple disruptions - and race is central to these. It is working like an electric current that galvanises both left and right, and many people are experiencing these unsettling times through its prism. What is different from earlier crises in which race has played a central part, however, is that the upsurge in anti-racism we are witnessing is posing a strong challenge to the divisive politics that have been mobilised by Donald Trump and supporters of Brexit over the last few years. The racialised dispossessed and their allies are destabilising the forces of white nationalism that have been in the ascendant in recent years.

Black Lives Matter

It is notable that this emerging counter-narrative has been driven by civil society and movements from below. Before the recent mobilisations, there had already been a number of challenges to the mainstream consensus in the UK on the meanings and exclusions of Britishness, in particular as expressed in public outrage about the Grenfell and Windrush scandals, and the widely supported campaigns in response to these terrible injustices. Despite very little government action or acknowledgement of the failings that led to these scandals, these events have acted to destabilise the consensus. The Windrush scandal revealed to the wider public what racialised communities have known for a long time: that, for some, citizenship will always be contingent and they will always be treated as foreigners and outsiders. The deaths in the fire at Grenfell Tower became a symbol of the disregard of successive ruling elites for the safety and well-being of working-class and BME families.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the higher rates of infection and deaths amongst

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BME communities have further revealed the disturbing effects of structural racism in the workplace as well as in housing and health (particularly given the visibility of BME workers in the NHS and in other key roles). These are issues which would not otherwise have got an airing in the mainstream media. What's more, the crisis has also exposed some of the contradictions inherent in mainstream policies on migration: its highlighting of the UK's reliance on migrant workers in essential services may have given pause for thought to those who believed in keeping them out. (It also provoked a government announcement of a U-turn on the immigration health surcharge - although this has yet to be implemented.) But there is still much work to be done to further expose and unsettle the little Englandism of the government and its supporters: for instance to connect the questions which have been raised around racism to other aspects of the hostile environment, including the No Recourse to Public Funds rule, which has left many people destitute.

The links between Covid-19 infection and death rates and racism in the workplace were evident in the British Medical Association's recognition that BME health professionals are more likely to be bullied and less likely to have concerns about health and safety taken seriously. But perhaps the most tragic illustration of these links was the case of Belly Mujinga. Mujinga, a railway worker, suffered from a respiratory condition that made her more vulnerable to Covid-19 infection, and she begged her employer to keep her away from the station concourse but was refused. Whether or not her death was caused by the man claiming to be infected with Covid-19 who spat on her, Mujinga was almost certainly infected because she was told to work on the concourse because of a lack of respect for her well-being at her workplace.

The mobilisations in the UK in response to the murder of George Floyd were closely linked to anger about the impact of Covid-19 on BME communities. In many of the protests people carried placards supporting Black nurses and calling for justice for Mujinga. Floyd's death and the protest movement it ignited also opened up wider questions about British racism and colonial history, lending greater visibility to campaigns - many of them longstanding - to remove statues of slave traders and other figures whose prominence and wealth was based on colonial exploitation, and to end the exclusion and marginalisation of BME communities by many institutions.

Football has also become a site of struggle: from American football players taking the knee to the Premier League footballers replacing their names with the #BlackLivesMatter slogans on their shirts. Marcus Rashford's successful campaign for

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free school meals made him a national hero, a spokesman for the people. Here the weakness of the government's position saw it execute another in a series of U-turns, a further sign that its dominance is much less secure now than it was a few months ago. The leadership shown by footballers - who have sometimes been more effective than the official opposition - raises questions about race, class and who speaks for the nation, challenging assumptions about the apolitical nature of sport as well as the construct of the working class as white.

Central to the George Floyd protests has been the renewed public attention on policing, and especially police violence and police killings, as well as their routine practices of stop and search, Taser, and all the other forms of everyday harassment that blight the relationship between the police and racialised communities in the US, the UK and elsewhere. In the US, there have been increasing calls to defund the police, and for public money to be invested in communities instead - a perspective which would have not received much consideration before. This is supported by research which challenges the 'broken window' theory of policing, finding that the aggressive policing of minor offences increases rather than decreases crime rates.

Together, these developments have produced an emerging critique of racism specifically as *structural*: as deeply imbricated within the structures of capitalism (as Cedric Robinson argued long ago in *Racial Capitalism*), and in state institutions and civil society.¹ #BlackLivesMatter has also provoked reflections on the extent to which so many aspects of society are based on legacies of racism and colonial exploitation.

And these developments also dramatise the current crisis of the state - which has been undermined by the government's disastrous handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. Both the Westminster government and the Trump administration - in their opposition to the protests and indifference to the issues they raise - have been seen as out of touch with many people's experiences, including of everyday conviviality and multiculturalism.²

Culture wars

In order to neutralise this emerging structural critique and to distract from their mishandling of the Covid-19 pandemic, the government is increasingly trying to reframe the situation in terms of 'culture wars', probably inspired by the US

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strategies to defeat progressive politics that have been more or less successfully deployed since Nixon first invoked the 'silent majority'. This is in line with the Tories' search for 'wedge issues', particularly for the Red Wall constituencies (assumed to hold 'socially conservative' values) won from Labour in the 2019 general election. The aim is to coalesce an alliance around a set of cultural values rather than material interests.

The Tory response to the BLM protests is being framed primarily as a defence of the nation (as a 'battle for Britain' - in reality a battle about Englishness), and is narrated through continual appeals to WW2 imagery, particularly in relation to Brexit. Within this, the government has fixated on statues as national symbols, making claims about protecting and preserving 'our shared history and identity' (along with the usual assumptions about knowing who 'we' are). As well as attempting to play to what the government perceives as its base, it is also seeking to deflect the deeper questions about inequality and structural racism which have been revealed by #BlackLivesMatter and the Covid-19 pandemic.

The subtext of this battle is a defence of white prerogatives, and resistance to the multicultural.³ Questions of history and memory have been cast in racial terms, with whiteness framed as a central part of a sense of shared cultural memory and identity, of which the statues are symbols. As visual culture scholar Nick Mirzoeff has argued, these statues function as idealised forms of whiteness and as part of the infrastructure of racial dominance. Accusing campaigners of historical amnesia is part of the battle to win support for a more complacent and self-serving version of history: this is a battle about which memories are valid, and who is entitled to be commemorated - and literally solidified as 'our history'. The 'culture war' is not limited to statues, however. Other examples include the appointment of Munira Mirza - who has doubted the existence of institutional racism - as the head of the new Race Inequality Commission; and the scrapping of the proposed Gender Recognition Act reforms to enable trans people to self-identify, despite 70 per cent of consultation respondents supporting them.

This appeal to old values is considerably more difficult to sustain these days than it was in the time of Thatcher and Reagan. And the government's resort to the law and order theme has been compromised by the contradictory nature of its own actions, as well as the actions of their supporters. Johnson is a leader who has presented himself as a rule-breaker, and his right-wing libertarianism sits uneasily

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alongside the law and order rhetoric. The difficulties of his 'be a libertarian/don't be a libertarian' stance can be seen in the government's problems in policing the pandemic, for example its inability to persuade large crowds from congregating in Bournemouth and other beaches. The most glaring contradiction - and problem for enforcement - was seen in Dominic Cummings's flouting of the lockdown rules. The violent behaviour of the far right in defending statues has also posed challenges to attempts to paint #BlackLivesMatter protests as violent and aggressive.

For the right, a culture war is a contest about fantasies. It distracts from material inequalities to which neoliberal fundamentalists have no answers, and instead offers one section of the population who are feeling deprived due to lost privilege (particularly older white males) the momentary illusion of some kind of redress through dominating others. It deals with the vast inconsistencies between the things it claims to care about and its actual policies by constantly shifting the terrain towards the symbolic. This was seen most obviously in relation to Brexit: when, for example, Farage said we needed to leave the EU in order to 'reclaim our fishing quotas', 'quotas' were standing in for a vague sense of control and sovereignty rather than having anything to do with actual fish. This habitual reliance on symbolism and myth also underpinned the complete failure of the English press to acknowledge the fundamental inconsistency between the Good Friday Agreement and Brexit: they treated the Irish border as the site of an imaginary power struggle between the UK and the EU rather than an actual geographical, political - and material - entity.

It is important to challenge these fantasies, and to bring the focus back to the material reality of people whose lives are blighted by systemic racism.

What is to be done?

How can we intervene strategically, both to address inequality and challenge the dominance of the racist right? One crucial focus will be sustaining a continuing challenge to structural and institutional racism. Important though it is to call out white supremacists and their offensive claims, in the long run it is a more important - and much more difficult - task to win a better understanding of the ways in which racism works invisibly. The current generation of the right have learned to speak as if they aren't racists - and they tend to frame racism as something belonging to the past, or as being much worse in other countries. Any time they do give to the subject is devoted to condemning the few cases of individual racists or racist acts that been

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brought to their attention. But their entire policy is centrally (not peripherally) driven by the prerogatives of white entitlement: it is built into the system (that is the meaning of institutional racism) at the same moment as anti-racism is spoken.

A noticeable difference between the US and the UK is that Trump talks much more openly in the language of white supremacy, and has deemed it unnecessary to provide the veneer of meritocracy via racialised senior staff that even his predecessor as Republican president George W. Bush felt obliged to adopt - there are no Colin Powells or Condoleezza Rices in his inner circle. In the UK, by contrast, the Tories trumpet the 'diversity' of the cabinet - and the points-based immigration system, which they have wanted to introduce for decades, is finally being implemented by a Home Secretary of Indian heritage. A party that claims to care about addressing racism, and which ventriloquises its ideology and viciously racist policies through black and brown public figures, poses a different challenge from those who see no need for a veneer of diversity.

A starting point, as Liz Fekete has argued, is to understand that a significant part of our struggle in this moment is over the definition of racism itself - to understand that treating it as a matter of personal prejudices, and therefore reducing antiracism to addressing 'hatred' or 'extremism', with no reference to the power held by those individuals within wider systems, is a deliberate strategy. Antiracist voices can only ever be on the back foot if we accept a framework which focuses on attitudes, feelings and speech. This is why 'unconscious bias training' is of limited value: it doesn't address the structural nature of racism, and contributes to a narrowing of the framework through which we understand and tackle it.

Fekete urges us to recognise the 'system of denial ... hardwired into the government's way of thinking on race':

To put it simply, institutional racism today is held in place by policies, institutions and government spokespeople that deny it exists at all - and this is part and parcel of a new common-sense racism held in situ by ... the very institutions meant to protect us by fighting discrimination and upholding equality.⁴

The term institutional racism became part of public discourse in the UK in 1999, when the Macpherson report found it to be a central cause of the Metropolitan

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Police's abysmal failures in investigating the murder of Stephen Lawrence six years earlier. The report's definition of institutional racism was:

The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour that amount to discrimination through prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.

The term had been coined more than thirty years earlier by Stokely Carmichael, as a way of contrasting individual racist acts with the systemic racism that existed within US society.⁵

when in ... Birmingham, Alabama ... five hundred black babies die each year because of the lack of proper food, shelter and medical facilities, and thousands more are destroyed and maimed physically, emotionally and intellectually because of conditions of poverty and discrimination in the black community, that is a function of institutional racism ... it is institutional racism that keeps black people locked in dilapidated slum tenements, subject to the daily prey of exploitative slumlords, merchants, loan sharks and discriminatory real estate agents.

Unfortunately, in the 2000s New Labour began to shift its position away from tackling institutional racism. Only two years later it dissociated itself from its own Parekh Report on the future of multi-ethnic Britain. The 'Old Labour' commitments on antiracism, half-hearted though they may have been, were abandoned.

Since then government attention has shifted away from tackling racism - though the commissioning of reports has been another matter ... Instead, recent governments have been much more interested in creating a hostile environment for migrant workers, in rhetoric and on the ground, as part of the wider shift towards an embrace of right-wing populism. Support for Brexit was heavily focused on mobilising fear of outsiders, and the campaign was instrumental in making the UK environment ever more hostile for a much wider group of migrants, as well as for the local black and brown population.

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An essential part of sustaining institutional racism, as Stokely Carmichael commented, is that: 'The society either pretends it does not know of this latter situation, or is in fact incapable of doing anything meaningful about it'. Theresa May has claimed that she did not know that the hostile environment would cause deportation problems for so many people who had every right to live in the UK. Boris Johnson has said that Britain 'is not a racist country' (his apparent ignorance about No Recourse to Public Funds is perhaps a clue here?). When it first became clear that the BME population was suffering disproportionately from Covid-19, people were bemused and looked for genetic explanations.

As for the Metropolitan Police, Commissioner Cressida Dick commented in June 2020 that she does not find institutional racism 'a useful or appropriate phrase'. When you look at the figures on lack of trust in the police, stop and search, deaths in police custody and deaths during arrest - alongside figures on BME police officers in terms of the continuing failure to recruit, retain or promote, and the disproportionality in disciplinary proceedings - it is hard to see how such a position can be maintained - or who it is 'not useful' for.

The idea of institutional racism has returned to the agenda in the last few years, though it is sometimes misunderstood and there are a number of debates about whether it is the best way of understanding the racist structures we inhabit.⁶ For example, those describing the Labour Party as 'institutionally anti-Semitic' have generally used the term to mean that it is an institution which contains a high proportion of members who hold anti-Semitic prejudices, rather than focusing on the question of whether its institutional structures systematically discriminate against Jewish people. It is crucial that we get to grips with this kind of distinction.

Though further definitions and debates are clearly necessary, this is a framework that enables us to challenge racism more effectively. For example, because it engages with questions of power, it explains why the offence felt by Muslims when the prime minister describes women in niqab as 'bank robbers' is qualitatively different from the offence felt by a Burnley fan at the club's players taking the knee. Without it we have few resources to oppose those shouting 'white lives matter'.

An important part of these debates will be getting a better understanding of how racism connects with other issues - for example climate change and environmental degradation, prisons and borders. Battling over these issues - and the quieter work of creating collective knowledge about them - is intensely political work.⁷

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Racism is real and material and lethal. We must reject Johnson's attempt to take the debate onto a culture wars terrain - to respond to the protest with a counter-narrative, with its implicit denial that lives are at stake. (He has expressly stated his hope that his newly announced review will 'change the narrative' ... so we 'stop the sense of victimisation and discrimination'.)

There are some signs that the government's strategies are faltering. The antiracist movement is setting new terms of debate and helping to disrupt the underpinnings of the Johnson/Cummings hegemonic project. And it could prove to be a catalyst for a wider change in the political scene. The hope is that it can lay the basis for a more long-lasting shift away from a society and state based on institutional racism towards one that can begin to offer equity, justice and inclusion at every level.

The electricity is still crackling.

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Notes

1. Cedric Robinson, *On Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism, and Cultures of Resistance*, Pluto 2019.
2. On conviviality and multiculturalism see Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, Routledge 2004; and Malcolm James, *Urban Multiculturalism: Youth, Politics and Transformations in a Global City*, Palgrave-MacMillan 2015.
3. Recent articles in *Soundings* by Bill Schwarz and John Clarke have pointed to some of the ways in which Johnson has mobilised these themes in stitching together his majority. Bill Schwarz, 'Boris Johnson's Conservatism: An Insurrection Against Political Reason', *Soundings* 73, Winter 2019; John Clarke, 'Building the "Boris" Bloc: angry politics in turbulent times', *Soundings* 74, spring 2020.
4. <http://www.irr.org.uk/news/fault-lines-in-the-fight-against-racism-and-antisemitism/>.
5. Stokely Carmichael and Charles V Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, first published in 1967 by Random House.
6. There is not space in this editorial to go into these debates. We plan to commission a future article on this discussion.
7. Some of the work that needs doing, which we aim to contribute to in future, includes: the more cultural aspects of race and identity; the shift towards questioning science and substituting alternative facts; and the return of eugenics.