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Black Lives Matter in Brexit Britain

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Sparked by deaths in police custody in the United States and fuelled by the effects of the pandemic, protests in defence of black lives spread across the world in 2020. This revolution of dignity forced a conversation on persistent structural racism in Europe, too. As it leaves the European Union, Britain continues to grapple with its imperial past. A full reckoning remains a long way off but its defiant anti-racist movement has shifted the debate fundamentally.

Jennifer Kwao: A UK government <u>report</u> confirms that racialised communities are disproportionately affected by Covid-19. Why is this the case?

Nadine El-Enany: Racialised people everywhere are dying of the virus in disproportionate numbers. The UK government's report confirms that the Covid-19 pandemic has reproduced existing health inequalities. It shows that, for the time period studied, the risk of dying of the virus was higher among people living in more deprived areas and higher still among black, Asian, and minority ethnic people living in these areas. Members of the Bangladeshi population were overall twice as likely to die of the virus as white people.

There was a particularly high increase in deaths from all causes during the pandemic among people born outside the UK, as well as among nursing and care workers, transport and security staff, and people working in construction and processing plants. Black, Asian, and minority ethnic people died disproportionately in these sectors. In London, more than a quarter of transport workers driving tube trains and buses are racialised.

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The government refused to apply the lockdown restriction to these occupations, ostensibly on the basis that they were essential, and at the same time failed to require employers to provide personal protective equipment or put in place proper safety measures.

Exposure to violence, harm, and premature death is not a new condition for racialised people, whether they live in or outside the colonial metropole – we need only think of disproportionate deaths in custody, the 2018 Windrush scandal that saw black British citizens deported, and the Grenfell Tower fire.[1] In Britain, half of people of African descent live in poverty. Two per cent of the white British population lives in overcrowded housing conditions compared with 30 per cent of Britain's Bangladeshi population, 15 per cent of Britain's black population, and 16 per cent of its Pakistani population.

How did the British government's initial "herd immunity" strategy affect at-risk groups in the UK?

The British government's herd immunity strategy was based on allowing, in the words of Prime Minister Boris

Johnson, the virus to "move through the population". This approach necessitates the death of large numbers of people and the result is that the UK has one of the highest Covid-19 death tolls in the world. This decision was taken after it was already widely understood that the virus was particularly dangerous for older people and those with underlying health conditions. Johnson treated vulnerable people as surplus population, as acceptable sacrifices, so that Britain could remain "open for business". This dangerous position was exacerbated by a combination of arrogance and racism on the part of officials who considered the virus to be something happening "over there", to people who were not white, not European, not British; people who didn't matter. The assumption was that the virus would not reach Britain and, if it did, Britain would be better placed to deal with it.

As people died needlessly in their tens of thousands, officials fudged the figures, showing and then concealing graphs which demonstrated the true scale of the disaster. Effectively, they did what they could to hide the bodies. The same combination of exceptionalism, complacency, and racism was an important part of colonial rule in the British Empire. Colonial subjects were left to die as famines took hold, as illness spread through populations, as people's land and livelihoods were taken from them in the course of conquest. We can see the parallels in the way that the government left vulnerable populations to die during the pandemic and how racialised people have been disproportionately affected.

Politicians have described the pandemic as a war, with health workers celebrated as soldiers on the frontline. What do you make of such rhetoric?

It was disturbing but not surprising to see the language of war adopted by government officials and the media. There was talk of "frontline workers", summoning the "Blitz spirit", and "the great nation pulling together in a time of crisis". This discourse rests on an odd and inaccurate construction of the virus as a national crisis rather than a worldwide pandemic requiring an international response. It's a painful irony to watch health workers, disproportionately made up of migrant workers, being asked to sacrifice their lives – and glibly applauded for it – in a context in which they were so recently constructed as unskilled and unwanted.

Migrant National Health Service (NHS) staff whose visas were about to expire were told over the summer that these would be automatically renewed so that they could focus on fighting Covid-19. NHS staff, who face daily abuse from patients asking to see a white doctor, and having been harangued by a media all too willing to unquestioningly repeat the line that "migrants are a drain on the welfare state", were asked to sacrifice their lives and the wellbeing of their families.

Shortly after the December 2019 general election, the newly elected Johnson government announced its intention to move forward with a points-based immigration system. This proposed system significantly limits permanent settlement prospects for precisely the people – including nurses and care workers – that Britain has depended on during the pandemic.

2020 saw the protests against the killing of George Floyd spread around the world. The movement was particularly large in the UK. Why did Black Lives Matter make the impact it did?

There was something very specific about the timing of these demonstrations. First, they were organised during the lockdown at a time when people were seeing society being radically restructured from the top down, in ways that we had been told for decades would never be possible. Second, Britain had seen the worst death toll in Europe and people's ability to grieve and gather was hugely restricted. Unable to fully mark the loss of loved ones on an individual level, people were affected on a mass scale. The disintegration – of society, conceptions of society, and people's psyches – meant that the anger and collective grief after learning of George Floyd's death in police custody galvanised people in an unprecedented way.

The pandemic also clearly showed how structural racism makes racialised people vulnerable. It was not only the

general public that learned this for the first time; many racialised people woke up to this too. I spoke to neighbours and friends from racialised communities who were confused. Before, they would never have gone through their everyday lives thinking of themselves as disproportionately vulnerable to a virus due to racism, but suddenly they had become aware of this and felt scared for their loved ones.

Were the protests a landmark for Britain's anti-racist movement?

The scale of the uprisings – in terms of locations, the number of protestors, and the frequency – was unprecedented. The reception by the media, corporations, and the establishment was new, too. Of course, much of this was co-optation, but the mere fact that the movement was met with a response that seemed, at least on face value, to take it seriously was a first. All of a sudden, politicians felt they had to comment on police abolition; obviously they were against it, but it entered mainstream discourse for the first time.

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At the same time, the protests are part of a long history of anti-racist activism that has been responsible for every progressive win on tackling racism. Thinking about the statue of slave trader Edward Colston that was pulled down in Bristol, it's important to remember that Rhodes Must Fall, the movement for the removal of a statue of colonist Cecil Rhodes, started in South Africa and then took off in the UK at Oxford University in 2015. This is an anti-colonial movement at heart. It's about resistance against a system that subjugates black lives. The direct action we have seen is the sort of resistance that tackles structural racism at its core. The law presents the protesters as criminal, as having desecrated public monuments, as having damaged property. The reality is that these protesters are engaging in acts of resistance against centuries of violence and destruction of racialised people, their bodies, their culture, their freedom, and their humanity.

Where should the anti-racist movement in the UK go from here?

We face many obstacles at the present moment including rising nationalism and a right-wing authoritarian government, which, as the Covid-19 pandemic has showed us, is prepared to let swathes of its population die needlessly. Every progressive win must be vigorously defended. Governments have a way of re-legislating inequality the moment they get the chance. Sometimes there are progressive wins, in or outside the courtroom, only for the government to re-introduce harmful policies. One risk is that the demands become limited to a question of the removal of statues rather than about dismantling structural racism. It's been refreshing to see demands around prison abolition because these are the sorts of radical demands we should be making. The focus on statues distracts from the material effects of racism on poor racialised people's lives. We should be making demands around access to safe housing and work, healthcare, clean air, and food security.

Brexit has dominated British politics since 2016. How does it connect to Britain's colonial past?

Brexit mixes nostalgia for empire with amnesia. Longing for a time when Britain ruled the waves is a lingering state of mind. We can see it in Britain's cultural reproduction of itself and its discourse about influence on the world stage. Much of this discourse is around Britain as a bastion for human rights, and of course colonialism was sold on the idea of civilising barbaric cultures and places. During the referendum, politicians claimed that leaving the European Union would return Britain to global dominance, a dangerous euphemism for the colonial era of exploitation.

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The amnesia comes in with the Vote Leave campaign's construction of 1940s Britain as the island nation that fought fascism. But Britain was not a nation-state during the Second World War; it was an empire with possessions across the world. Mythological narratives around empire – all driven by fantasy, amnesia, and nostalgia – haunt the present day. Britain could only leave the European Union based on the promise of a return to a "Greater Britain" because of ignorance around what the empire really was.

What will Brexit mean for racialised people in Britain?

Even before the vote, hate crime and attacks against racialised people were rising. Leaving the European Union was quickly made into a matter of taking back control of borders, and curbing immigration was the central rallying point of the Vote Leave campaign. Anybody perceived not to be British quickly became fair game.

The idea of "Leave" had a powerful and devastating effect. There has been a kind of fetishisation of British citizenship that has led to anyone who does not hold that citizenship, or who might be perceived not to, being stigmatised. A horrific consequence of the government's "hostile environment" immigration policy was the Windrush Scandal that saw black British citizens deported. People who rightly considered themselves to have a secure status were told, "You do not have proof that you are entitled to be here, you must leave."

Does the European Union need to have a reckoning with the colonial pasts of many of its remaining members?

Britain is not the only country with a dishonest relationship to its imperialist history. Particularly in its first iteration, the European Union was made up of former colonial powers cutting their losses, pooling the resources that they had plundered through colonial escapades, and pulling up the drawbridge collectively. Creating the Schengen area required the construction of Fortress Europe and Europe's trade arrangements remain configured to the detriment of former colonies.

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to its imperialist history.

The myth that is always told about the European Union is that it was about peace and economic interdependence to prevent future wars. But many European countries still possess colonies, and the absence of war has always been localised to geographical Europe. There was war in Algeria when it was still part of France, and EU member states continue to wage imperial wars under the guise of humanitarian intervention despite the origin story of peace. Without recognising the European Union's roots in colonialism and empire, I don't see how the European Union can deal with the resurgence of right-wing fascist and racist forces in Europe. These are legacies of empire.

What role can the Black Lives Matter movement have across Europe?

Some European countries do not have the same space in civil society as in Britain for anti-racist organising. In France and Germany, for example, it is difficult to discuss racism because of the counterproductive idea that talking about race invites or is itself racism. The Black Lives Matter protests can provide legitimacy and voice to communities who otherwise do not have the space to draw attention to the material conditions in which poor racialised people live.

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I doubt that governments and the European Union can introduce reforms that alter the causes of structural racism. I find hope in the collective organising itself, in movements and communities coming together internationally and nationally. These movements can shift the discourse, support one another, and make sure that these narratives become more prominent.

The Green Party of England and Wales committed to reparations for slavery in October 2020. Are reparations relevant for European countries to pursue seriously?

Reparations are part of righting past wrongs and would be a move towards recognising colonial legacies and their disenfranchising effects throughout the world. But they're not enough, neither for the countries that would receive such funds, nor for countries like Britain, which domestically remains colonially configured to this day. Poor racialised people continue to be made vulnerable to harm and premature death within former colonial metropoles. Would reparations deal with this? I don't think so. Reparations need to be understood in broader terms, as not only covering financial payments to former colonies, but as part of attempts to radically alter structures that we take for granted such as immigration law and difficulties in accessing housing, safe work, and healthcare.

How can progressive parties support the anti-racist movement?

They can start by taking their cue from the demands that are made by people experiencing racial violence. There is so much evidence and research available that could be used to guide policy changes aimed at improving the material conditions faced by poor racialised people. The problem, at least in Britain, is that the main political parties are pandering to the Brexit logic which holds that resources are scarce and the sole entitlement of white people. It's a dangerous and unnecessary zero-sum politics. When progressive parties appeal to patriotism, it ends in the exclusionary politics of nationalism. There is no progressive in the national.

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[1] The Grenfell Tower fire of 2017 killed 72 people, the majority of whom were from black, Asian, or minority ethnic communities.

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