

Are we blind to British structural racism?

It is very encouraging to see the overwhelming response to the brutal murder of George Floyd. Quite rightly, people demand such killings by agents of the state must stop. However, I am concerned that the righteous indignation about a racist murder in another country can also serve as a kind of displacement activity to avoid confronting the racism, sexism and other forms of oppression right in front of us in our everyday lives.

There will probably be people in the UK outraged by the death of George Floyd who will have recently voted for a prime minister from a very privileged background who has a track record of making racist comments. One very concrete thing we can all do against racism is not vote for racists.

How many people who are expressing outrage at this one incident fail to see and accept how we are all complicit in an institutionalised system of exploitation, which requires these ubiquitous acts of violent oppression to maintain the many layers of privilege which sustain it? Political leaders talk of “bad apples” as a way of isolating and belittling the problem, to divert attention from the reality that the whole damned barrel of apples is rotten.

We live in a global economic and political system which has been built on the systematic dispossession, enslavement and genocidal slaughter of countless millions of humans over the past four centuries or so. How many people who decry institutional racism in the USA also glorify and celebrate British history, our wonderful traditions, our beautiful cities, our constitutional monarchy? How many turn a blind eye, or are ignorant of the monstrous crimes against humanity perpetrated by our own country? We comfort ourselves that the government-sanctioned piracy of the East India company, the slave-trade and opium-trade profits that built the beautiful cityscapes of London, Bristol, Liverpool, are all in the past.

The reality is that the elite who profited from that trade in human misery – and who even now are glorified in our obsequious deference to royalty, wealth and privilege - are still with us, and even more powerful and genteely murderous. Their descendants who inherited that ill-gotten wealth now own the banks, the financial institutions, the multinational corporations, as well as large chunks of real estate in this country and around the world. Their wealth has been built on an ideology of eugenics and racism that justified dispossessing the poor at home (and stealing their land and birthright) and taking by force the land of other peoples across half the globe. They are inferior to us, so the ideology says. Their relative poverty and “primitive” cultures are evidence of their inferiority. It is the white man's destiny to take the land and natural resources from them, because we as the superior race and culture will make better use of them, so the justification has always run. Nowadays, of course, it is not expressed so baldly. It is dressed up in with other justifications and spin, but the inherent disregard, disdain and sense of entitlement over others less fortunate is still at the root of it.

It's that ideology which fuels racism. The policeman with his knee on the neck of the black man is not the cause of the ideology of racism, he is simply a foot soldier, a follower. He could even be seen as a victim of the ideology, having been indoctrinated with the ideology of racism in a culture and economic system which tells him that although he may be low in the pecking order, at least he is above the black man. He can vent his frustration and hate with impunity on those he has been taught are even more lowly than he. Of course it is right that he is held to account. But the culture, economic and political system – and those at the top of it must be held to account too. Until they are held to account nothing will change, because to them, white police officers are almost as expendable as black men.

The reality is that exploitation and destruction of other human beings and our planet is still endemic in our economy and our political system. We ignore the vindictive and punitive welfare system which drives poor and disabled people into poverty, homelessness and even starvation in Britain - one of the wealthiest countries in the world. We ignore the extermination of indigenous peoples in mining and logging operations. We ignore the Bangladeshi women who make our clothes, locked inside death-trap sweat-shop factories. We ignore the effective enslavement of millions of workers around the world who work for poverty wages in insecure work, with no rights to challenge their employment conditions. We ignore the plight of Middle Eastern, Asian and African people fleeing for their lives from British-made weapons indiscriminately used in our proxy wars by so-called allies such as Saudi Arabia. And now the government is trying to ignore the fact that BAME people are much more likely to die in the current COVID19 pandemic.

Until we challenge the whole structure of privilege, dehumanisation and oppression which is inherent in our current political and economic system, there will be no change and many more poor and oppressed people will die.

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