

A close-up photograph of a raised fist, symbolizing protest or solidarity, is the central focus. The fist is set against a background of interlocking puzzle pieces. The puzzle pieces are a light tan color, and several of them are missing, revealing a solid blue background behind them. The lighting on the fist is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the skin and the tension of the muscles.

DOES PRIVILEGE EXPLAIN RACISM?

CONTEMPORARY DEBATES IN ANTI-RACISM

**ESME CHOONARA, YURI PRASAD
KEN OLENDE AND WEYMAN BENNETT**

Does Privilege Explain Racism?

Contemporary debates in anti-racism

Esme Choonara, Yuri Prasad, Ken Olende & Weyman Bennett

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Can ideas of privilege help us understand racism?

Yuri Prasad & Esme Choonara

Introduction

For millions of people across the world who have taken to the streets in the brilliantly militant and multiracial Black Lives Matter movement ‘white privilege’ best encompasses what they see all around them. We live in a country where most of the most powerful positions are occupied by white people. The politicians who lie about black lives, the cop arresting, the judge sentencing and the boss hiring and firing are all usually white. And, as a result, our everyday interactions with authority are determined, to some degree, by our ethnicity and origins. In short racism means that black and Asian people are more likely than whites to experience the world in a brutal and damaging way.

For many the ideas of ‘white privilege’ and ‘white supremacy’ have become a common way of recognising racism and understanding how that it impacts on us. But describing racism as a form of privilege can have far bigger implications than simply noting the way experiences can be so different for black and white people. As a set of ideas, it draws on privilege theory, a way of looking at oppression that was born among US academics and diversity trainers and which spans the last 30 years. Privilege theory insists that all white people gain from racism and therefore have a vested interest in maintaining it. This article puts that claim under the spotlight, and proposes an alternative way to understand how racism works, and how black liberation can be achieved.

What is privilege theory?

Rather than beginning by analysing the way racism is embedded in the system, privilege theory usually starts with the personal. It encourages us to think about oppression as rooted in

our interactions with individuals and says that privilege works through a series of “unearned advantages” enjoyed by those who do not suffer racism or other forms of discrimination. One of the most influential pioneers of privilege theory, US activist Peggy McIntosh, famously described privilege as an “invisible knapsack”. Considering her own position as a white woman, she writes:

“ I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was “meant” to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks.¹

She goes on to list 46 areas of her everyday life where she is able as a white woman to take things for granted that most black people could not. At one level, this can be taken as an exploration of some of the ways in which racism impacts on everyday life. Yet behind the description McIntosh offers an explanation of how oppression works and in whose interest it functions. McIntosh is explicit about this, arguing, “The conditions I have described here work to systematically over-empower certain groups. Such privilege simply confers dominance, gives permission to control, because of one’s race or sex.”²

So privilege theory says racial oppression is a reflection of an in-built desire to dominate that is common to all of humanity. We are, according to this view, hardwired to be prejudiced because it’s in our own self-interest. Yet the theory also says that the beneficiary of these privileges may be completely unaware of them — in fact much emphasis among privilege theorists is on what they would describe as “making privilege visible” — alerting people to the unearned advantages they may take for granted. In this way, notions of privilege are tightly bound to those of “unconscious bias”, which seeks to show us the ways in which racism seeps into the subconscious and then influences behaviour. And, just as individuals are not always aware of their advantages, so they also do not choose whether or not to have these “privileges” — they are automatically bestowed by virtue of being white. So Reni Eddo-Lodge writes:

“ To some, the word ‘privilege’ in the context of whiteness invokes images of a life lived in the lap of luxury, enjoying the spoils of the super-rich. When I talk about white privilege, I don’t mean that white people have it easy, they’ve never struggled, or that they’ve never lived in poverty. But white privilege is a fact that if you’re white, your race will almost certainly positively impact your life’s trajectory in some way. And you probably won’t even notice it.³

1. McIntosh, 1988, p14.

2. McIntosh, 1988, p21.

3. Eddo-Lodge, 2018, p87.

This notion of white privilege as an innate, sometimes unconscious and always inescapable fact of everyday life turns racism into a natural and ahistorical phenomenon and obscures the way in which race itself is a social construct. Racism is of course a very real feature of the world in which we live, but “races” are constructed groups without any basis in scientific fact.⁴

It was the European empires that first determined how those with darker skins should be grouped and by what criteria. It was these Empires that measured skulls, noses and the angles of eyes so they could place us in a racial hierarchy. And, it's not just black and Asian identities that are socially constructed and constantly reimagined, so are notions of whiteness and who gets to be seen as white. So, while British racism in the 19th century refused the status of “white” to many southern Europeans, someone of the same nationality could enter the United States and immediately be classified as white. At the very least this poses a problem for privilege theorists because it means the notion of who is “privileged” is subject to constant shifts. Privilege theory takes no account of the way new groups previously marginal to racist ideology can quite suddenly become central, while others can fade from racism's gaze and become white.

If ideas of white privilege offer an accurate explanation for how racism functions, then the best that anti-racist whites can do is first own up to their privileges, and then ask others to acknowledge theirs too. In this concept of “allyship”, a white anti-racist is participating in someone else's struggle and must accept that, because they lack an instinctual response to racism that comes from having directly suffered it, their role is at best secondary. But what we've seen in the Black Lives Matter movement thus far strongly contradicts that understanding. The elderly white man who suffered a brain haemorrhage at the hands of cops policing a protest, the young white woman killed by a car while blocking a road in Seattle, and those many white protesters who joined the ranks of those who've had their eyes shot out by police rubber bullets are surely not to be regarded as mere “auxiliaries” to the struggle.

In June 2020 US intellectual Cornel West talked about how President Donald Trump may be fantasising about a coming “race war”. But, he said, “The good news is that if there was a race war, we've got lot of white brothers and sisters on our side now. And that makes a big difference.”⁵

Institutional Racism

By locating oppression in our interactions with individuals whose skin colour bestows them with more or less power than ourselves, privilege theory points away from seeing racism that arises from any institution or system as anything other than the result of a collection of bad individuals. But that approach is hard to sustain when faced with the key questions of the day. If we take police racism, for example, few now believe that the daily rounds of oppressive brutality are the result of “a few bad apples”, instead most believe the whole barrel is infected, and

4. See Saini, 2019 for an excellent discussion of this and other debates around ‘race’ and science.

5. www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2020/06/10/cornel_west_if_this_was_a_race_war_weve_got_a_lot_of_white_brothers_and_sisters_on_our_side_now.html

that there must be something systemic going on. The impact of the Covid pandemic has also shone a spotlight on the huge structural inequalities of race and class that scar our societies.

Proponents of privilege theory do accept that having a large layer of people bound together by privilege is bound to have such systemic implications. The result of receiving these advantages, they say, is that white people are naturally inclined towards defending them in a collective way — through “white supremacy”. This mechanism for societal control encourages all whites to work together to ensure their continuing domination over all non-whites. And it is through this mechanism that all whites, regardless of class or status, are endowed with a power that even the wealthiest black and Asian people simply do not have. But this way of thinking generally starts by saying the in-built prejudices of the individual come first and then go on to infect the institution, rather than accepting that the institution was conceived as a racist endeavour and that individuals have been moulded to fit within it.

Pioneering director of the Institute of Race Relations, Ambalavaner Sivanandan, long ago argued that theories about “individualised” racism were a planned diversion from the fight against state racism. “People’s attitudes don’t mean a damn to me,” he said. “The acting out of prejudice is discrimination, and when it becomes institutionalised in the power structure of society, then we are dealing not with attitudes but with power. Racism is about power, not prejudice.”⁶

Structural or institutional racism is not just a sum of all the white privileges of those in positions of power or those who staff an organisation — it flows from the function of those institutions, in particular from the state which is central to organising and defending a capitalist system which has been entwined with racism from its very birth. This explains why simply increasing the number of black or Asian personnel in the police, prison service or judiciary doesn’t change the experience of racism in the criminal justice system.

It is also why a strategy of “Black faces in high places” has failed. And here again, an understanding of the experience of the United States is vital. Starting in the late 1960s social movements against racism attempted to take the radicalism of the street into elections for various state positions and started to win seats for black community activists. The hope was that once enough of these people were in power they would start to see some fundamental changes, particularly in areas of social policy and policing. But in the mid-1970s, as the street movements went into decline and the world economy crashed, these thousands of black elected officials became increasingly detached from their base and ever more incorporated into the middle classes. So rather than changing the institutions from the inside, the institutions changed them.

Structural racism, embodied in the state’s core institutions, is not simply a reflection of those within them but a reflection of the needs of the system that created them. That’s why black revolutionary Angela Davis said, “When the inclusion of black people into the machine of oppression is designed to make that machine work more efficiently, then it does not repre-

6. A. Sivanandan, 1990, p65.

sent progress at all”⁷ and why Malcolm X insisted, “You can’t have capitalism without racism”⁸

The concept of institutional racism has radical roots among Black Power activists of the 1960s, who wanted to show that racism was not just the act of a few extremists, but something systemically embedded in a racist system. So Stokely Carmichael, the black revolutionary and member of the Black Panther Party, argued:

““ When white terrorists bomb a black church and kill five black children, that is an act of individual racism, widely deplored by most segments of the society. But when in that same city — 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.”⁹

Privilege theory’s tendency towards the individual builds on the theoretical framework of the identity politics that dominated the left in the 1980s and 1990s. These politics reflected the fragmentation of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s that set out to fundamentally change the world through revolution. In place of that optimism came the political pessimism of the Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan years.

In Britain this meant a shift from struggles that challenged the power of the state to either seeking accommodation with it or retreating into increasingly lifestyle-focused or identity-based politics that ignored the state and questions of structural inequality altogether. In many cases, including in Britain after the 1981 riots, the state actually encouraged such fragmentation, with the funding for example of discrete “ethnic” projects that were forced into competition with one another for financial survival.

Identity politics essentially argued that only those who experience something can really understand it or be relied upon to challenge it. Privilege theory largely accepts this premise, but in many ways is the flip side of this framework — focusing not on the oppressed, but on the supposed “privileged” oppressor.

With such a concentration on the power imbalances between the individuals that surround us, privilege theorists often struggle to identify the origins of racism or the way in which it is perpetuated and reinvented to suit the changing needs of the capitalist elite. Influential US writer Tim Wise, for example, accepts that the origins of racism are bound up with capitalism and slavery. However, he suggests that after slavery racism became so deeply entrenched that “white racism can now take on an auto-pilot effect” in which it is sustained not by the needs of capital, but by white people themselves.¹⁰

7. Davis, 2007. www.theguardian.com/world/2007/nov/08/usa.gender

8. Malcolm X, 1965

9. Stokely and Hamilton, 1992, p4.

10. www.timwise.org/f-a-q-s/

Do all whites benefit from racism?

In seeing the world through the prism of “unearned advantage” privilege theory accepts the common sense appearance of how oppression functions — that the worse quality of life that black and Asian people experience results from over-privileged whites. But as Karl Marx argued, “All science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided”.¹¹ To understand how oppression works and in whose interest it functions, we have to look beneath the surface.

Marxists see racism as a uniquely capitalist phenomenon. The ideology has its origins as a justification for the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, where it was developed first by white plantation owners whose profits were being made primarily through the labour of African slaves. As both the Enlightenment and Christianity taught that “all men were created equal”¹², slavery was difficult to justify in moral terms. The way round this problem was to declare that black people, and many other “inferior races”, were not really people at all — they were a different species, something more akin to apes or other animals. After slavery’s long and drawn out ending, racism persisted both because it provided a useful justification for colonial domination abroad and because it helped maintain division at home. It offered a distraction from the real causes of poverty, exploitation and misery.

Just as colonial rulers used a strategy of divide and rule in Africa and Asia, so they did at home. Racism was used to drive division deep into the workers’ movement by racialising those with black and brown skins — marking them out as having separate economic and social interests that sprung from their supposedly different biology and culture. The aim was to encourage among white workers the idea that they, just like their bosses, belonged to a superior caste. To help the process, all sorts of petty advantages were bestowed upon whites, often symbolic rather than material in nature. This is what WEB DuBois, the black radical and preminent historian of post-civil war era America, referred to as a “psychological wage”. Writing of poor white labourers in the post-civil war Reconstruction era in the US, he said:

“ They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness.¹³

But the “privileges” that were accorded to them was a strategic device by the rich:

“ The theory of race was supplemented by a carefully planned and slowly evolved method, which drove such a wedge between the white and black workers that there

11. Marx, 1972.

12. US Declaration of Independence 1776

13. Du Bois, 2013, p626.

probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently and who are kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common interest.¹⁴

The key phrase here is “practically identical interests”. DuBois argues that despite many favours granted to the white poor, their material interests remain best served by fighting alongside the black poor. DuBois says that racist oppression can help make white workers feel superior, and that whiteness can offer them all manner of comforts that flow from societal acceptance, and even a degree of relative material advantage in terms of better jobs and wages, but to the ruling class these are mere trinkets designed to dazzle and confuse. That’s because the real beneficiary of a divided working class is the boss.

Workers who cannot stand and fight together are unable to mount effective resistance, and the cost of that failure is borne by both black and white people. Economist Michael Reich, for example, looked at income distribution in 48 US metropolitan areas in the 1970s and found that the greater the divide between black and white incomes, the greater the inequality between white incomes themselves. That is, the more racism divides workers, the more the capitalist is the beneficiary.¹⁵ Reich observes that:

“ The divisiveness of racism weakens workers’ strength when bargaining with employers; the economic consequences of racism are not only lower incomes for blacks but also higher incomes for the capitalist class and lower incomes for white workers. Although capitalists may not have conspired consciously to create racism, and although capitalists may not be its principal perpetrators, nevertheless racism does support the continued viability of the American capitalist system.¹⁶

This was a point Karl Marx understood well when analysing racism against Irish labour in Britain in the 19th century which he described racism as the “secret of the impotence of the English working class” and explained it is “the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power”.¹⁷

Racism today performs a similar role for the system. Whenever Donald Trump or Boris Johnson lash out with a racist tirade, as they have both done often, they are not simply expressing their own prejudices, they are seeking to polarise society and also solidify their racist base. They are not only transmitting a message to millions that it is ok to be racist, but are also suggesting that only they can be trusted to look after the interests of the white worker. The racist appeals are specifically designed to bind rich and poor whites together into a shared political space. But in doing so, racist politicians are constantly looking at ways in

14. Du Bois, 2013, p626.

15. Reich, 1978, p524.

16. Reich, 1971.

17. Marx, 1870.

which the anger at their economic and social policies can be diverted away from themselves. So racism is playing a dual role.

It should be clear that racism works in the interests of the capitalist system — and that representatives of that class are its chief ambassadors. It does not follow, however, that Marxists see all such divisions as solely engineered by the ruling class in a conspiratorial fashion. Certainly, some among that group — media barons, for example — are consciously involved in ratcheting up divisions and actively seek out ways to divert attention from the real causes of hardship for the working class towards those who have no reason to be blamed. But in general, divisive ideologies function in a less carefully constructed way. For some of the ruling elite, their stoking of oppression reflects deep-rooted prejudices passed down through generations of their class. For others, their behaviour is based on pure opportunism. The point of developing such a divisive ideology is that it must enter the popular imagination, and influence the common sense of millions of people. These ideas percolate through society and operate with a certain amount of independence from the economic base but are at the same time constrained by it. So Frederick Engels writes:

“ Political, juridical, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic, etc, development is based on economic development. But all these react upon one another and also upon the economic base. It is not that the economic position is the cause and alone active, while everything else only has a passive effect. There is, rather, interaction on the basis of the economic necessity, which ultimately always asserts itself.¹⁸

This process of interaction explains how it is that the nature of racism changes continually as the capitalist system itself evolves. This understanding underpins the way the capitalist class can abandon certain racist strategies, such as legal segregation and apartheid, and embrace new racialised ideologies such as Islamophobia, for example.

Conclusion

Because privilege theory assumes that all white people have some kind of stake in maintaining racism it finds the idea that they can play a role in the struggle against oppression perplexing. It is almost as if those white people who do find a place in the struggle are acting against their own material interests, be they real or imagined, conscious or unconscious. The most pessimistic of views locks us into an endless loop where we cannot break the hold of prejudice until we have ended white privilege, but that cannot happen because prejudice constantly holds back the struggle. Only a tiny minority of whites can ever break out of this cycle, and this role of these enlightened few seems only to encourage other whites to hang back.

If white workers have developed a theory of superiority that permanently prevents them from seeing the world in a class conscious and inter-racial way, how is it that in periods of high

18. Engels, 1894.



class struggle so many come to question ideas of superiority they may have lived with their whole lives? Every revival of working class militancy has created its own challenge to racial division. There is a long, often hidden, history of workers — including large numbers of white workers — in Britain making common cause with migrants or with those fighting to free themselves from slavery or Empire. For example, the first use of mass petitioning by working class people in Britain was the huge petitions raised as part of a campaign to abolish slavery, with more working class people signing this in solidarity with others than signed the Charter which was about securing their own rights.¹⁹

Those workers that have faced racism have also organised to dramatically challenge their oppression and transform the political landscape. From the Irish, then Jewish workers who engaged in a wave of strikes at the end of the 19th century and into the next, and upon which the structure of industrial trade unionism then stood, to the way Asian workers' battles in the 1960s and 70s transformed the way unions related to post-war immigrants.²⁰ In these cases, workers struggles opened up huge possibilities for anti-racists.

Ideas of division, so carefully cultivated can suddenly appear distasteful and out of date. They do not do so automatically, or by a process of slow increments, but only when those committed to fighting racism refuse to make concessions to it. Struggle opens people's minds because so many of the ideas we hold reflect and reinforce the existing state of affairs. But

19. Choonara, 2013, p302

20. See Prasad, 2016

when people battle they need new explanations for why the white people at the top of society, who promised them grace and favour, are now using every means at their disposal to crush them. They also want to understand how those long designated as “alien” or “other” are now people they are forced to rely on for support. In such physical and ideological battles, socialist ideas about the need for working class unity, to break the hold of prejudices and chauvinism, can be won.

So the class struggle is one crucial arena. But the Black Lives Matter movement shows us another. The millions of people who’ve taken part in protests that range from taking the knee on their street to facing heavily armed cops amidst clouds of teargas will never quite be the same again. Many of the whites who have joined these actions have only recently begun to see society as being repeatedly scarred by racism and other forms of oppression. They are looking at the world and their place in it, and asking “am I complicit”? And, “If I am, how can I change that?” Those are good questions.

Many black people thought they would be forced to stand alone against such a vicious tide of injustices, and they are now asking, “Can we fight together?” and, “If so, can we do so in solidarity rather than in sympathy?” Those too are vital questions.

Together black and white people are questioning so much about what they have been told by their parents, their schools, the media and politicians — and they are beginning to form connections in their minds between the way the search for profit hampered the fight against the coronavirus, the fight to save the planet, and the way the system deliberately cultivates division.

Those people must be offered something more than theories that encourage guilt that hampers the fight for change. Instead we have to hold out the prospect of a revolutionary struggle to overturn this rotten system.

What is intersectionality?

Esme Choonara

How are different forms of discrimination related? How do multiple forms of oppression impact on our lives and what does this mean for liberation struggles?

These are some of the questions that the concept of intersectionality attempts to address. Intersectionality is essentially an attempt to recognise the existence and experiences of multiple oppressions. It originates in discussions of the specific forms of discrimination faced by black women, but has been embraced as a way to understand the relationship between many other forms of oppression.

The US legal scholar and civil rights activist Kimberlé Crenshaw, who is usually credited with first naming the concept, compares intersectionality to an actual road intersection, where danger can come from any direction:

“Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination.²¹

Crenshaw goes on to argue that multiple oppressions cannot be understood by just adding together forms of discrimination:

“Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women’s experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination... And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women-not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women.²²

21. Crenshaw, 1989, p149.

22. Crenshaw, 1989, p149.

So the specific intersection of those oppressions creates something that is more than a sum of its parts. Racist ideas, for example, operate through specific gendered stereotypes of what it means not just to be black, but to be a black woman or a black man. One example of this is the way in which Islamophobic ideas work — casting Muslim men as terrorists or sexual predators and women as submissive (a stereotype that has been very successfully demolished by many brilliant Muslim women activists in recent decades).

Intersectionality is not the same as privilege theory, but often there is an overlap: many privilege theorists use intersectionality to explain how people can be “privileged” in some areas and face oppression in others. For example, Courtney E Martin argued in the *New Statesman* that when Peggy McIntosh drew up her influential list of “unconscious privileges” she had “started thinking intersectionally (in her case, not just about being a woman, but about being a white, heterosexual woman)”.²³

Similarly the key proponents of intersectionality tend to use concepts of privilege to critique the way in which those who face multiple oppressions are marginalised within wider struggles. So Kimberlé Crenshaw writes that black women are marginalised both by white women and black men: “the focus on the most privileged group members marginalises those who are multiply burdened”.²⁴

The central ideas and concerns of intersectionality predate the use of the term and go back further to a body of writings by black women in the US. These writers and activists were critical of the women’s movement of the 1970s and 1980s, and of the black liberation movements, for ignoring and excluding the specific experiences of black women. This body of work has become known as black feminism — and formed the subject matter and title of Patricia Hill Collins’ seminal study *Black Feminist Thought*.²⁵

Black feminism and the roots of intersectionality

The emergence of black feminism was in many ways a response to the specific character of the US women’s movement. The women’s movement in the US emerged later than other struggles such as the civil rights, Black Power and Anti-Vietnam War movements and was largely formed as a reaction against the sexism activists faced within these movements.²⁶ Unlike in Britain, the US women’s movement developed in a situation where the socialist left was extremely weak, trade union membership was low and even mainstream reformist organisations were largely absent. In this context, despite its initial radical politics and mass impact, by the mid-1970s the women’s movement became increasingly narrow, conservative and detached from wider struggles.

A number of black feminists developed a sharp critique of the claim of those at the centre of the women’s movement to speak on behalf of all women. In particular they pointed out that

23. Martin, 2007

24. Crenshaw, 1991, p1244.

25. Collins, 2009 (first published in 1990).

26. See German, 1989.

the movement reflected the concerns and experiences of white middle class women to the exclusion of others. As Audre Lorde put it:

“By and large within the women’s movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class and age. There is a pretence to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist.”²⁷

In many ways, the black feminists were right about this. The women’s movement had come to rest largely on a layer of middle class women — predominantly white — and their concerns and methods reflected that. However, many black feminists wrongly generalised from their experience of the women’s movement to see a seamless history of all white women activists at best marginalising black women, and at worst being instrumental in racism against them.

As Angela Davis illustrates in her brilliant book *Women, Race & Class*,²⁸ the reality is much more complex. Many of the earliest campaigns for women’s rights in the US emerged from the struggles for the abolition of slavery, as women — both black and white — found that to be taken seriously in the fight against slavery they had to also fight to be taken seriously as women. She also shows that while some white women went on to make concessions to racism or even to actively embrace racism, there was another tradition of some white women making common cause with black women against racism. Davis writes, “Sisterhood between Black and white women was indeed possible, and as long as it stood on a firm foundation... it could give birth to earthshaking accomplishments.”²⁹

Not all white feminists accept that the US women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s uniformly ignored issues of racism and imperialism. Many activists came to the women’s movement from struggles against the Vietnam War and involvement in the civil rights movement. In its early days the women’s movement was active against the war and protested against state persecution of the Black Panthers. US activist Lise Vogel has rejected the idea that feminists ignored questions of race and class until the 1980s. She argues that some of the earlier general politics was lost in the collapse and retreat of many of the radical social movements at the end of the 1970s.³⁰ In other words, the undeniable problems of the women’s movement had political causes, and were not reducible to the privileges of white women.

The black feminist text most commonly seen as the foundation of what came to be known as intersectionality is the 1977 statement by the Combahee River Collective. Their statement captures some of the main themes of intersectionality:

27. Lorde, 2000, p289.

28. Davis, 1982.

29. Davis, 1982, p104.

30. Vogel, 1991

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.

The Collective goes on to say that they are motivated to organise separately by their experiences in wider liberation movements and around the “white male left”, that they had identified a need to “develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men”.³¹

Their statement sounds radical, stating for example that “the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy”. However, their politics are eclectic to say the least, and in reality highly contradictory. So they state that they are “in essential agreement with Marx’s [economic] theory”, but end by approvingly quoting a passage from a feminist text *Sisterhood Is Powerful* that argues: “I haven’t the faintest notion what possible revolutionary role white heterosexual men could fulfil, since they are the very embodiment of reactionary-vested-interest-power”.³²

While black feminists may have criticised the concerns and composition of the wider women’s movement, they didn’t necessarily reject their methods. So the Combahee River Collective embraced the focus on study groups and consciousness raising that had come to dominate much of the women’s movement, eventually splitting over the same arguments over questions of sexuality and separatism that consumed many other feminist groups at that time.

Black feminism as a body of thought coheres around a number of themes, yet that does not mean it is coherent. That is not surprising — just the fact of being black and female doesn’t determine someone’s political views. Yet there is an attempt, for example in Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought*, to present these ideas as a coherent whole. Collins herself openly states that she overemphasises this for political ends. There are in fact important debates among key figures in the tradition. Bell Hooks, for example, while sharing with many black feminists a sharp critique of the women’s movement, criticises the decision by the Combahee River Collective to organise separately as black women, arguing that they essentially abandoned the field of struggle.³³

However, black feminists did have some justification for their criticisms of the women’s movement. Marxists are also critical of the notion of an undifferentiated “sisterhood” in which all women are assumed to share common interests. The framework adopted by some feminists that asserts the unity of all women obscures the differing interests of women of different classes, as well as the other questions of oppression. Of course all women suffer from women’s oppression — but ruling class women can use their wealth to mitigate against some

31. Combahee River Collective, 1977.

32. Combahee River Collective, 1977

33. Hooks, 1992, p150 (first published 1982).



aspects of sexism. And when it comes to challenging the system as a whole, working class women of all backgrounds have an interest in challenging the system, whereas those in the ruling class have a stake in maintaining it as a source of their wealth.

It is also true that there is no automatic unity of the oppressed — and that some feminists have played a reactionary role in relation to other oppressed groups. Take, for example, the role played by many mainstream feminists in France and elsewhere in arguing against the rights of Muslim women to choose to wear the hijab. However, these questions are all political — they are about how we understand oppression and the strategy for our struggles, not about the unconscious operation of privilege or bias as some would have it.

How does intersectionality inform strategy?

The body of work known as black feminism has produced some thought-provoking writings that have increased our understanding of key historical moments, including slavery. Angela Davis, bell hooks and others have written widely and authoritatively on this subject as well as on debates in the struggle for women's suffrage and analysis of racist sexual imagery.³⁴ There are also key writings and speeches on the situation of black women that go back much further

34. Angela Davis is often included in the category of black feminists as she examines the connections between gender, race and class, even though her politics do not generally share the same framework as many other black feminists. In many ways this illustrates the problem with placing black women writers into the same category based on identity, not shared politics.

to the impassioned speeches of Sojourner Truth in the 1850s or to the writings of the brilliant Trinidadian-born Communist Claudia Jones a century later.³⁵

What has become known as an intersectional approach is also useful in the field of social policy to consider, for example as Crenshaw does, what specific needs black and other minority ethnic women might have. What are the additional barriers, for example, that migrant women might face trying to access domestic violence services or healthcare? So this framework can help us to describe and raise awareness of the problems that those with multiple oppressions might face.

Description and awareness are important, of course — it is useful to better understand the mechanisms of the slave trade, in part because that terrible history still informs the present. It is useful to consider how oppressive imagery is simultaneously racialised and sexualised, because it can help us to expose how this reactionary ideology works. However, on its own, it is not enough.

Intersectionality as a concept pulls in two directions when it comes to strategy. In many ways its current popularity reflects a desire for greater unity, and recognition that unity can only be forged by a more inclusive politics that is welcoming to those who have previously been marginalised — for example black women and transgender and non-binary people. This is clearly a positive development.

However, intersectionality often draws on notions of privilege, which when combined with the focus on multiple oppressions can encourage people to introspectively weigh up all the areas in which they are privileged or penalised. As well as tending towards a very individual and passive form of politics, this risks falling into the very additive approach that it claims to reject — where we each become reduced to a sum of our different advantages and disadvantages.

Many of those who pioneered the concept of intersectionality embrace a postmodern politics that elevates subjective experience to being the key source of understanding.³⁶

This is why Collins is able to argue that:

“The overarching matrix of domination houses multiple groups, each with varying experiences with penalty and privilege that produce corresponding partial perspectives... No one group has a clear angle of vision. No one group possesses the theory or methodology that allows it to discover the absolute “truth”.³⁷

Some authors and activists seem to suggest that just living at the intersections of oppression is resistance in itself. Yet for many others who embrace intersectionality, the aim is not just to name, but to struggle to challenge oppression. Many writers and activists talk about coalition building not just to challenge individuals but to strive for social justice. Socialists

35. See Davis, 1982.

36. See Crenshaw, 1991, p1244

37. Quoted in Mann and Huffman, 2005, p62.

share these aims and these struggles. A shared commitment to common goals does not, however, remove the need to better understand what we are fighting or to debate strategies for resistance.

One of the main limitations of intersectionality is that, as an approach, it largely remains at the level of experience, rather than attempting to understand the sources of the intersecting oppressions that it describes. By contrast the method outlined by Marx involves moving beyond the recognition of the complexities of life through abstraction to find what Marx called the “simplest determinants” — in this case to locate the sources of oppression within class society. But this is not the end of the picture. Marxists have to apply the insights gained to concrete realities — what Marx calls “rising from the abstract to the concrete”.³⁸ In this way, we can both understand the sources of oppression and, in grasping this, also better understand how people’s experiences are shaped under capitalism.

Two other points that flow from Marx’s method are worth thinking about in the context of intersectionality. First, Marx insists that seemingly separate phenomena must be seen as part of the totality of society — so forms and experiences of oppression cannot be understood in isolation from the wider questions of how society functions. Second, the concrete is always historical. In the case of oppression, this means recognising that particular forms and experiences of oppression change over time. For example, racism initially emerged as a justification for the barbaric transatlantic slave trade, then evolved into justification for empire and colonialism and more recently became about divide and rule and the creation of scapegoats. Along the way, racism has evolved to create new targets that reflect the wider political context — for example the increase in anti-Chinese racism during the Covid crisis.

Marxism’s strategic insights flow from this method of understanding the world. By locating the sources of oppression in class society, we can see the potential power that workers have within capitalism. While intersectionality rightly points out that there are many interrelated divisions in society, like privilege theory it relegates the question of class to just one of a series of oppressions. This misses out what is unique about class in capitalism. It is a source not just of oppression — but of power — and is the potential basis on which people of many backgrounds and intersecting oppressions can unite. Marx called the working class the universal class not because everyone in the working class is the same, but because all working class people share a common relationship to capitalism and together form the unique force that has the power to abolish class society and oppressive divisions altogether.

38. Marx, 1857.

Does unconscious bias explain racism?

Esme Choonara

When the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, chaired by William Macpherson, announced in 1999 that the police were institutionally racist, it was a huge vindication of the struggles and arguments of black people and the wider anti-racist movement. Yet more than two decades later, there is widespread denial of institutional racism. The London Met police commissioner Cressida Dick said on the 20 year anniversary of the Report that she doesn't see it "as a helpful or accurate description".

This is despite the fact that at current rates, it would take another 100 years for police forces to reflect the diversity of the area they work in, one of the 70 recommendations of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry. The then chair of the national police chiefs' council Sara Thornton has also waded into the discussion, arguing that institutional racism is not a helpful term, and that the real problem is "unconscious bias".

The notion of unconscious bias has become a widespread framework for understanding modern racism. In late 2018, the Guardian newspaper ran a series of reports entitled "Bias in Britain" which looked at the discrimination that black and Asian people face not just in the criminal justice system, but also in areas of everyday life including housing, employment, education, health, driving tests and even eating out. It showed the enduring and pervasive nature of racism in Britain and investigated how this is experienced by black and Asian people. Yet it uniformly attributed the systematic discrimination it revealed to unconscious bias.

Rapid judgements

The idea of unconscious bias is that all humans naturally make categories out of the world around us as a normal part of understanding and processing information. We make rapid judgements based on assumptions about these categories and these constitute the biases that we may not be aware of and that may inform our outlook and behaviour.

Concepts of unconscious bias can be related to any characteristic, and people using this framework often start with examples they believe are less threatening to a person than sug-

gesting they are racist. For example, the arbitration service ACAS starts its explanation of unconscious bias with an example of a manager who didn't do well at school who then unconsciously favours an employee without qualifications (an odd example by any standards). However, the notion of unconscious bias is usually applied to forms of discrimination and oppression — predominantly around questions of racism.

It is important to be clear from the outset that unconscious bias does exist. It is a real phenomenon and individuals, including anti-racists and those on the left, can have unconscious biases, prejudices and assumptions. These biases can affect interactions between people in employment, service provision and in everyday encounters. There is a great deal of evidence around job recruitment, for example, that shows bias against women in the fields of science and technology or against black and Asian people in all fields of employment. Throughout the NHS, to take another example, it is very useful to challenge health workers to think about the way they respond to different patients and the assumptions and biases that may inform those interactions.

Problematic

So unconscious bias is a real problem and should be addressed. However, the notion of unconscious bias becomes problematic when it is elevated from a symptom of a wider racist climate to becoming the over-arching explanation for how racism works.

Notions of unconscious bias suggest that it is natural to favour people who we see as like ourselves and to be hostile to outsiders. So police chief Thornton describes unconscious bias as how “we prefer people who are like ourselves, because we understand them and they are familiar. People who aren't like ourselves, sometimes we feel less comfortable with”.

This is a very simplistic and reductive view of human psychology. For a start, there is the question of how we decide who is “like ourselves” — a contested area that is shaped by society as well as by our very varied experiences. It is not natural to divide the world into “races” — these are categories created by the ruling class at the birth of capitalism. Our sense of who is “like us” could in fact be based on any number of attributes or values — it could be based on class, or geography, or politics or shoe size or a love of yeast extract. The fact that “race” and ethnicity are so important to our identities is a product of the racist world in which we live.

Second there is a question about what is a natural response to others. There are plenty of potential responses to people we feel are not “like ourselves”, including deference, curiosity, indifference and attraction. Yet it is assumed that the natural response to “outsiders” is always fear and hostility.

So where do people's unconscious biases come from? When it comes to racism or other forms of oppression, bias is not just based on a neutral sense of affinity or difference — it is based on notions of hierarchy and stereotypes that are created by wider social forces. And these inequalities do not exist just at the level of ideas — they affect the material reality of people's lives.

Of course many who focus on unconscious bias also see individuals' attitudes as a reflection of wider society — one writer has described unconscious bias as a “thumbprint” of society, for example. However, the focus on individual psychology means a tendency to try to change ideas and attitudes without actually challenging the wider power structures of racism.

The concept also sometimes slides into the idea that all white people are naturally racist. This, for example, is the premise of Robin DiAngelo's best-selling book *White Fragility* which sees all expressions of anti-racism by white people as simply more proof that they won't face up to their complicity in racism. . But if bias is unconscious and natural, it is hard to see how it could be eliminated, so it can only be exposed and contained.

The concept of unconscious bias is sometimes used as a way of contrasting the explicit racism of the past with the more hidden racism of the present. So, for example, Baroness McGregor-Smith in her 2017 review into “Race in the Workplace” argued that the government should create more training to tackle unconscious bias that is “much more pervasive and more insidious than the overt racism that we associate with the 1970s”.

The obvious objection to this is that there is still plenty of overt racism around. Black and Asian people still face racist abuse and physical attacks in the street and racist bullying in the workplace. Racism is being deliberately stoked by those at the top of society — with the Tories' creation of the “hostile environment” and scapegoating of migrants.

It is right, however, that some of the most open racism of the 1970s was driven back for a time. But this wasn't because racism went underground or became repressed into the unconscious psyche of white people, as some argue. It is because anti-racist movements drove back racism and stopped it being respectable. This changed the political climate in Britain. However, gains can be rolled back and globally we are now seeing a frightening resurgence of some of the worst forms of overt racism.

The discussion about how we understand racism matters because it affects how we fight it. Doreen Lawrence pointed out that the institutional racism identified by Macpherson was quickly replaced by notions of “diversity” — a term that hides the underlying power dynamics of racism. Diversity in turn seems to have now been largely replaced by ideas of unconscious bias.

Is racism primarily psychological?

Seeing racism as a primarily psychological phenomenon implies the key battle ground is ideas, and the key aim is to improve equality through mitigating against natural biases. Seeing racism as structured into the functioning of capitalism, by contrast, suggests that collective struggle is needed not just against each manifestation of racism, but also against the system itself.

One of the consequences of focusing on unconscious bias is a reliance on experts. If unconscious bias cannot easily be recognised by individuals it puts the emphasis on scientists, diversity trainers and implicit association tests to reveal the truth about our hidden ideas. This moves the activity of anti-racism away from collective struggle towards technical fixes,

psychological retraining and even, at the extreme, towards medical solutions.

Implicit bias tests

The rising popularity of the concept of unconscious bias has been accompanied by the growth in implicit association tests (IAT) — a computerised form of self-testing that was created by US academics in the 1990s to try to illuminate unconscious psychological biases in individuals. These tests involve timing individuals' responses to associations between images of different characteristics and positive or negative values. Despite their widespread use, the tests are supported by poor scientific evidence. Some studies even suggest that IATs may reinforce, rather than challenge, bias. And there is no proof that increased awareness of bias leads to any change in behavior. Yet IATs have become the core for many of the training programmes around unconscious bias — an industry that has burgeoned into a multimillion dollar money spinner.

In the US it is estimated that companies spend over \$8 billion a year on unconscious bias training. In New York, more than 40,000 members of the NYPD are currently undergoing classes in implicit bias, with over \$4.5 million being handed to a private contractor to carry out the training. Keir Starmer, the leader of the Labour Party promised that he, his staff and fellow Labour MPs would all be undertaking unconscious bias training after he was criticised in June 2020 for comments he made describing Black Lives Matter as “a moment”. He rapidly faced more criticism when it turned out the training in question was a 20 minute online package — which anti-racists rightly pointed out is not a serious way to tackle the great racist inequalities of our era.

The claim of implicit association tests to quantify unknown biases in a scientific way has been extended into the field of neuroscience with attempts to combine the IAT with identifying areas of brain activity connected to unconscious prejudice. Racism, in this framework, isn't a societal problem that we should confront collectively but a neurological phenomenon that can be treated. So a 2012 study from Oxford University claimed to prove that a beta-blocker tablet could stop implicit bias. This was followed by a 2015 Dutch study that claimed to show that forms of induced brain stimulation could reduce prejudice. One member of the Dutch team even humbly suggested that their work meant that “the dream of Martin Luther King... may become a little closer”! This approach offers a hugely reductive view of racism that strips it of history, context and struggle.

The biggest problem with the idea of unconscious bias is that it lets those in power off the hook. If racism becomes just one of multiple natural biases, then there is no need to understand or acknowledge its specific history — how it is rooted in slavery and colonialism and how it is used today to create scapegoats and divide working class people. This is why employers, police chiefs and government ministers are all too happy to embrace the idea of unconscious bias. It points the problem away from them, their vested interests and their institutions. In fact it can cast them as the enlightened good guys trying to retrain and restrain

their employees' baser instincts.

Where unconscious bias is understood in the context of institutions and not just isolated individuals, the logic is often to find ways to mitigate bias — for example by evaluating job applications without details of gender or ethnicity. The establishment of anonymous marking in many university departments is another example — one that came from the demands of student unions in the 1990s. However these measures only deal with one aspect of a much wider problem — which is why a recent large-scale study concluded that the racial disparities in higher education have persisted despite anonymous marking.

Similarly, revealing disproportionality of black and Asian people in particular roles can shine a spotlight on racism, but just demanding better proportionality isn't enough to change the racism embedded in specific organisations. Almost 50 percent of officers in the New York Police Department are of black or minority ethnicity, for example, a much closer correlation to the local population than British police forces, but this has not eliminated police racism. This is because racism is not just lodged in the unconscious bias of individual officers, but in the institutional culture and functioning of the organisation — and in this case is best understood as part of the role of the police in maintaining capitalist society.

The concept of institutional racism, as defined in the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, does allow space for challenging instances of unconscious bias — it encompasses both overt and covert forms of racism in public and private organisations. Macpherson argued that institutional racism could be seen “in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.”

Systematically embedded

This definition was in fact a weak reflection of a more radical understanding of institutional racism that came out of the Black Power movement of the 1960s. However, the framework of institutional racism used by Macpherson is still vastly superior to that of simply unconscious bias. It sees racism as not just located in individuals, but as systematically embedded in the policies and practices of an organisation, placing responsibility for that racism at the top of those organisations.

Saying that racism is structured into capitalism doesn't mean that anti-racists and socialists aren't interested in changing attitudes or tackling specific manifestations of racism. We should combat every area of racism. Ideas, including entrenched biases, can change — but they don't exist in a vacuum. Active struggle against racism and the capitalist system that perpetuates it can help to break down reactionary ideas, drive back racist discrimination and point the way to eliminating racism altogether.

- To read more, see *Race on the Brain: What implicit bias gets wrong about the struggle for racial justice*, by Jonathan Kahn.
- To try an Implicit Association Test for yourself (for free), go to implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html

Race, class and identity

Yuri Prasad

Identity is intrinsic to our very being and poses vital questions: who we think we are; what defines us; who we believe we are connected to — and perhaps as importantly, who we are not, and who we do not feel connected to. It's not hard to see how such notions become intertwined with those of race, community, ethnicity, and nation.

It's tempting to focus solely on ways in which identity gives us some control over our lives — our desire to choose what parts of ourselves to emphasise and mark what we think is important. It's only right that we should want to determine how the world sees us, but it's wrong to think struggles over identity automatically benefit those facing oppression. While struggles over identity can unite behind movements in support of multiculturalism, they can also motivate those who fight for the opposite, demanding “white rights” and ethnic purity.

That the concept of identity can be used by both the right and the left shows that the process of constructing one does not take place in a vacuum. Because we live in a racist society our choices about how to characterise ourselves are at best secondary. Even if we choose to downplay or ignore some aspects of ourselves, there are others who will assert an identity upon us. Equally, if we demand to be included in an identity, such as Britishness, there are those who will deem us unworthy or unqualified.

Racial prejudice forces us to define ourselves with categories that it has created. The limits it places on our attempts to classify ourselves often seem so deeply ingrained they are often assumed to be an ever-present part of the human condition. Yet the idea of races, and in particular, a hierarchy of races with white people at the top, is a relatively recent phenomenon. In his ground breaking book, *The Invention of the White Race*, Theodore Allen writes that when the first Africans arrived in Virginia in 1619, there were no “white” people there. Nor, according to colonial records, would there be for another 60 years. The Africans who were shipped to the Virginia plantations were slaves, bought and sold by Europeans who went on to colonise all of the Americas. The Europeans did not describe themselves as “white”, instead identifying themselves with the land they had come from — England, Holland, Ireland and

so on. The idea of “whiteness” had yet to be constructed. On the basis of whiteness, came a whole ideology of social division and control. And, in the centuries that followed, it would help generate a “science” of racial difference.

So those racial groups we are asked to choose from, or are allotted, are far from reflections of the “natural order” but instead mirror a system of racial categorisation — after all, if there was no racism the colour of our skin or the texture of our hair would matter little to anyone. While the concept of race is today scientifically discredited, the racism all around is very real. And, that experience of racism leads many to organise in a way that is today known as “identity politics”, in its most basic form an attempt to unite all those who suffer a particular form of oppression in order to struggle for change.

What is meant by “identity politics” is not always clear. It covers many different political approaches, some of which have posed a revolutionary challenge to the system, and others which adopted a more conciliatory position. As a way of organising it has some clear strengths. People can be gathered on the basis of a shared sense of injustice and anger — and being part of a struggle for change helps enhance a sense of unity. That in turn helps mask divisions about aims and strategies in the ranks. The simple act of coming together helps turn oppression from a problem experienced by individuals, who generally feel powerless, into something experienced by a group, which has a greater potential to act. Such collective action is the very basis of solidarity. The huge gains made by women, black and LGBT+ people in the 20th century were the result of mass campaigns begun in the 1960s and 70s that organised among those at the sharp end of prejudice, even if they evolved by drawing in wider layers of support.

But mobilising on the basis of identity has some real weaknesses too — and the struggle against racism provides clear examples of this. The overriding assumption is that there can be unity among all of racism’s victims, or, at the very least, among particular ethnically defined groups that experience it. However, even those who suffer very similar forms of prejudice can interpret their experiences in very different ways.

For some, racism acts as a burning indictment of a system, inspiring rage easily transferred into political action. Many will attend their first political meetings and demonstrations as a result of their own experiences and become open to radical interpretations of the world around them. Racism pushes others to more pessimistic conclusions, believing that little or nothing can be done to stop prejudice because it merely reflects human nature. Still others will make conservative assumptions that blame the victims themselves — if only we worked harder and behaved better, we could disprove racist ideas, they argue. As a British-Asian woman, home secretary Priti Patel undoubtedly experiences racism but her reaction to it seems only to push her ever more to the right in a desperate bid to show she too can be racist. Few anti-racists would argue that a politician who deliberately fans anti-migrant prejudice has a place in the movement.

And from these differences of perspective, all sorts of differences of strategy emerge.



On the one hand, there are black and Asian people who think we should avoid confrontation and concentrate on economic and political success instead. For them, our main aim should be getting more BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) people into positions of power. On the other hand, there are those who argue we need a movement on the streets to target the state and the racists directly. Organising on the basis of identity and the common experience of oppression may hide political divisions, but in the process of doing so it often makes them more pronounced. Campaigns based on race or ethnicity are often dominated by more articulate, middle class people who declare themselves to be “community leaders” but often have their own agenda to advance.

Even where identity-based politics seeks to mobilise collectively it is undermined by the way it encourages us to think of oppression as an individual injury. To gauge the extent of this injury we are to measure our own position in society, and the way we experience the world, against that of a “normal person”. But what is this “normal”? Asad Haider, in his book *Mistaken Identity*, argues that normal is equated with white, middle class and male. “By coding demands that come from marginal or subordinate groups as identity politics, the white male identity is enshrined with the status of the neutral, general, and universal... If it is not questioned, people of colour, along with other oppressed groups, have no choice but to articulate their political demands in terms of inclusion in the bourgeois masculinist ideal,” he says.

By framing equality in terms of injury, the battle becomes one of gaining inclusion into

the system, and cataloguing the unique ways in which we have been wronged, hence the focus on micro-aggressions. And the questions asked increasingly becomes centred on “me”, such as, why didn’t I get the promotion I’m due? And, why am I excluded from the board room? In these very limited terms, success for anti-racism is measured by the pound. That’s why there seem to be endless lists that tell us about the world’s 10 richest Asians, or the 10 most powerful Africans, and so on.

When Angela Davis, the black US revolutionary, spoke at the Women of the World festival in London in 2019 she pointed out that a number of leading firms running what she terms the “prison-industrial complex” are now headed by women executives. To her horror, a section of the audience thought this was an invitation to applaud, when the point Angela was making was that having a woman at the head of company that gorges on racism and violence is no measure of liberation.

You can see tensions between collective and individual demands for liberation in the history of anti-racist struggle in Britain. More than a narrow, exclusively ethnic identity, the term “black” was used in the 1970s and 80s as an inclusive category to unite all those who suffered racism. Its primary advantage was that it encompassed Asians, Africans and Caribbean peoples, and their British-born children — and it drew behind its banner many others who also wanted to fight racism. It was a category of struggle for those battling against state racism in the form of immigration controls and discriminatory policing, as well as the fight against racism in the street — in particular against the fascists of the National Front, and the gangs they inspired.

In the wake of the 1981 Brixton Riots, and the urban uprisings across Britain that followed, the government sought to create a buffer between itself and black working class people by aiding the expansion of the black middle class — but it also wanted to sow seeds of division among those who had rebelled. It set about trying to co-opt black political leaders and business figures, and to help grease the wheel, it announced state funding for all manner of “ethnic” projects. The competition between self-styled community leaders, and the projects they headed, for funding and official recognition played right into the government’s hands. In the name of equality, it decided to spread funding between the different ethnic groups that had together constituted “black”, and the previous unity began to shatter. Asian groups now competed with Caribbean groups for money to run projects, such as community centres and youth clubs, and soon even these ethnic categories were further broken down into ever more specific, smaller groups.

People who had once stood together increasingly saw each other as competitors and rivals — and many leaders offered themselves as the sole legitimate expression of the community they represented. Meanwhile, the most aspirational and articulate found themselves senior positions in local councils and government-funded bodies, and a select few flew higher still. The Tories, it seems, understood better than most that some adherents to identity politics sought an accommodation with the system, not its abolition.

Marxism has long been attractive to those looking for a more radical approach to the fight against racism. Instead of seeing oppression as rooted in unequal power relations between individuals, communities or ethnicities, Marxists start by arguing that racism is structural — that is built into capitalism. It stems from the way a society, organised into a hierarchy of competing social classes, needs divide and rule to survive.

Racism divides all of society, from the rich to the poor, but crucially it divides workers, and in doing so benefits employers and the rich. A famous study by sociologist Al Szymanski compared the position of black and white workers in 50 US states to examine the impact of racism on earnings. He found that the greater the gap between black and white wages (i.e. the greater the racist pay gap), the lower the wages were for white people relative to other white earnings. In other words, racism drove down wages for everyone. He concludes, “white workers appear to actually lose economically from racial discrimination”. Marxists’ understanding of racism’s origins and function has implications. Most importantly, it means that it is both possible and necessary to win white working class people to the fight against racism.

But race prejudice is much more than income inequality, it permeates every aspect of life for those on the receiving end of it. From the way that black children are repeatedly failed by the education system, to the way the criminal justice system deliberately singles them out for blame and punishment, to the way black stereotypes persist in almost every walk of life — and the way in which citizenship is regarded as a privilege to be withdrawn at a whim. The aim of this relentless assault is to reinforce division, and to separate the “white working class” from the “other”.

For racism to function as a divisive ideology it requires the backing of the most powerful in society, the ruling class, but it also needs to spread into popular consciousness on its own terms, and become a creature in its own right. In order to poison the minds of workers, it has to offer them a false but convincing explanation for the pain and hardship they experience.

The only way to rid ourselves of this wretched state of affairs is to end the system it supports. Marx’s focus on the working class was because he believed them to be the only force with both a material interest and the potential power to overthrow capitalism. But he saw nothing inevitable about this. Marx understood that a divided working class would be unable to meet the challenge. That’s why he described the racism of the British labourer against the Irish labourer as “the secret of the impotence of the English working class”. Struggle, he said, is the key to breaking working class people from backward ideas that tie them to the system.

Often that struggle takes the form of campaigns, strikes and demonstrations that raise people’s confidence in their own abilities and leaves them less open to arguments that scapegoat others. But while class combativity of this sort opens up enormous potential, it will not automatically resolve the problem of racism. For that to happen there has to be a conscious attempt to break the hold of prejudice, particularly among workers, and this requires that action be combined with a relentless battle of ideas. That task falls squarely on the shoulders of socialists.

Who decides if culture is authentic?

Ken Olende

A British brewer caused controversy in early 2020, when it named its new Indian Pale Ale Veda — a name for Hindu religious texts. It also appropriated Hindu imagery for the beer.

But ideas of appropriation can get tangled. So at the beginning of 2020, African American rapper Lizzo appeared in a photospread for Rolling Stone in various costumes and poses featuring cliched stereotypes of Chinese and Japanese women. This raised issues of cultural appropriation about whether a black woman can appropriate the culture of another oppressed group.

The same month Latinx singer Shakira courted controversy with her halftime show for the National Football League Superbowl. Some see her and J-Lo who performed with her as Latin stars who are treated as white. They concluded the show with “Waka Waka”, which Shakira had originally performed in 2010 as the theme song for the World Cup in South Africa. Some South Africans in 2010 had called for a boycott given the choice of Shakira over an African performer.

Shakira said at the time, “I am a fusion. That’s my persona. I’m a fusion between black and white, between pop and rock, between cultures — between my Lebanese father and my mother’s Spanish blood, the Colombian folklore and Arab dance I love and American music.”

That is a good sentiment, but it is not a call to purity that made the 2020 Superbowl so contentious. Most black singers were boycotting it, particularly because of the NFL’s treatment of Colin Kaepernick, the player who took the knee during the national anthem because of deaths in police custody. Even the Washington Post noted, “Shakira and Lopez missed an important opportunity to ally themselves with black communities, including Afro-Latino ones”.

But the story was more complex than that as the show’s dance routine was very political, celebrating Latinx identity, featuring children in cages to directly reference the Trump administration’s imprisonment of migrant children. The incident shows how complicated presentations of identity can be.

As one of each year's biggest national events the Superbowl courts publicity and Beyoncé managed to both delight and offend with her 2016 tribute to the Black Panther Party in her half-time performance. Fox News got a police sergeant to say it was the equivalent to a white act coming out in "hoods and white sheets". She was attacked both by the right for politicising a sports event and by some on the left for trivialising a political movement, by turning a revolutionary struggle into a sexualised dance routine.

This came as part of a row on race and representation. Who has the right to speak for or represent different cultures?

In practice the issue is about the way elements of the culture of an oppressed minority are adopted by members of a dominant culture. In the process it is distorted. It's true that racism distorts popular culture. Black music is dismissed and black people are often marginalised in the industry.

But while it's right to point out levels of racism, dangers lie in looking to individual responses. At its most straightforward cultural appropriation is about negative stereotypes. The obvious example is minstrel shows where white people dressed up in blackface to present a sentimentalised and usually viciously racist view of how black people behaved.

In the 1840s a whole industry of presenting black people to white audiences as lazy, happy and stupid was in place. With time, mocking slaves' tattered clothes shifted to laughing at the "dandified coon" dressed in fine clothes above his station. But an irony of this was that it made "negro jigs" popular and popularised the banjo, previously an exclusively black instrument. Black US singer Rhiannon Giddens has set out to reclaim it, evolved from African instruments, the "banjer" or "banza". The banjo was used exclusively by slaves until it became part of the first white popular music in blackface minstrel shows in the 19th century. This is an extreme example of cultural appropriation, but also of problems with this way of looking at things, that has led to a largely black music being ignored and forgotten.

Minstrel culture demeaned and debased all black people. Alternative traditions of black people proudly celebrating their culture emerged in the years of Reconstruction after slavery was abolished at the end of the Civil War. The Fisk Jubilee Singers toured the US and Britain in the 1870s. The tour started by following the path of the Underground Railroad, the secret route used to smuggle slaves from the Southern US states to freedom in the North. One reviewer wrote, "Those who have only heard the burnt cork caricatures of negro minstrelsy have not the slightest conception of what it really is".

As Jim Crow segregation grew in the late 19th century, black people increasingly found that they could only appear as caricatures.

Many people see something similar in the way white acts pick up styles from black music, such as twerking. US commentator bell hooks suggested in a critique of Madonna, "Ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture".

And there is the issue that while white people can be celebrated for diversity for wearing cornrows, it can still be a problem for black people. Some schools have a policy against

“non-standard” hairstyles. St John’s Senior School in Enfield, North London, was forced into a U-turn just after the start of the school year in September 2019. It had sent a letter to parents saying that there was a new rule which banned “fashion” hairstyles including cornrows and braids. The aim was to make sure “every child looks neat, tidy and presentable”. It took just a day of protests from parents and pupils to force them to reverse the decision. Black author Hannah Lee was right to say, “Cornrows are the personification of skill and control and to suggest banning them and other black hairstyles is anti-black”.

Mainstream commentators often suggest it is ridiculous to make a fuss about “small” issues such as hairstyles.

But this forgets the relentless barrage of propaganda for hundreds of years saying that black features, and specifically tightly curled African hair, are in some way inferior. Generations of black people have used skin lighteners and hair straighteners to look less “black”. In the 1960s it was a major step in black pride when people started to wear their hair naturally in afros.

Yet there is an implication that all people of African descent share the same culture.

But not all African societies traditionally used cornrows and not all people of African descent have the same tightly curled hair or features. For instance, one of the most important leaders of the Black Panther Party, Kathleen Cleaver, was light skinned and had blue eyes.

In the world of culture there has long been a slippage that made ideas of race more complicated. One example was the musician Mezz Mezzrow. He was a white jazz musician who married a black woman and lived in the Harlem area of New York. He called himself a “voluntary Negro”. When he was imprisoned in the 1940s he asked to be put in the segregated black wing. He told the prison governor, “I’m coloured, even if I don’t look it. I don’t think I’d get along in the white blocks”.

The other and more significant side to this is the many black people who have passed for white. For instance, NAACP leader Walter Francis White passed as white under the South’s racist Jim Crow laws in the 1920s and reported on lynchings. He could have lived as white but chose not to.

A row broke out in 2018 over British actor and theatre director Anthony Ekundayo Lennon, who has faced racism all his life because he appears to be of mixed heritage, but whose parents identify as white. He took a DNA test that said his background was 32 percent West African — but those who accused him of faking said that he knew he was not brought up as “black”. He points out that when he first appeared as an actor and said his parents were white some black actors told him he was “in denial about his blackness”. This is an unusual example, but in an increasingly multicultural country it is one that is likely to become more common. In the end all it shows is that this is not an issue about individuals and their isolated experience, but about groups.

Being black is a constructed identity for black people — but that does not make the experience any less real. It is associated with real physical characteristics such as dark skin or

tightly curled hair. The experience of being black in the modern world is inseparable from a history of slavery, imperialism and racism. So these ideas of culture and stolen culture link to wider ideas about civilisation.

Such disputes may come across as trivial or misguided, but those complaining about “cultural appropriation” start from the right place — a hatred of racism. The issue is complicated by the fact that distinct cultures do not really exist, and attempts to divide up ways people behave into simple dichotomies — say black culture versus white culture — soon run into problems of definition.

What tends to get left out of the argument is class and solidarity. Often what people want to appropriate is a sense of rebellion and fighting back. Many white artists take aspects of black culture to identify with rebellion.

In the same way poor Rastafarians facing oppression in Jamaica took to wearing dreadlocks in admiration for the Mau Mau fighters who had worn them fighting for Kenyan independence in the 1950s. In his book *Rasta & Resistance* author Horace Campbell explained how, “When the struggle of the Land and Freedom Army (called Mau Mau) in Kenya exploded, and the Rastas saw pictures of the freedom fighters with their natural hair, long and matted, the Rastas positively identified with these fighters and began to wear their hair in ‘locks’”

The fact that British urban street culture is influenced by black rebellion has outraged people such as right-wing historian David Starkey. After the 2011 riots across Britain he whined, “The problem is that the whites have become black. A particular sort of violent, destructive, nihilistic, gangster culture has become the fashion”. He made this comment on television without serious comeback. However, after Black Lives Matter took off in 2020, when Starkey said that the slave trade could not have been genocidal because if it was there wouldn’t be “so many damn blacks in Africa or in Britain” the result was very different. He lost his publisher and was forced to resign from his academic post.

One of the main racist dynamics we face in Britain is the continuing encroachment of Islamophobia, which is often dismissed as an issue of culture. All the history and complexity of all of Islam’s various historical cultures becomes simplified into a caricature of a society of backward misogynists who are prone to terrorism.

Fundamentalist atheist Richard Dawkins has claimed in the past to be equally against all religion, but now concentrates on Islam. In 2018 he tweeted, “Listening to the lovely bells of Winchester, one of our great medieval cathedrals. So much nicer than the aggressive-sounding ‘Allahu Akhbar’. Or is that just my cultural upbringing?” In 2015 he had said “To hell with their culture” and claimed Muslims get a “free pass” because people in the West live in “terror of being thought racist”.

This nonsense echoes those people who claim that no one has been allowed to discuss immigration since the 1960s because of their fear of being thought racist. In reality some sections of society seem to discuss little else. This argument reverses reality, turning racists into the victims.

Cultures do not exist in the abstract. In the modern world they are all part of societies defined by capitalism and imperialism. The same stereotypes are often applied to different groups of people — the childish, musical, lazy and stupid Africans and Irish. Chinese, Jewish and Arabic people have all been stereotyped as crafty and untrustworthy.

Cultures are created, but they are not uniform. When people talk of British culture and values they mix together a range of different ideas. The values and experience of Eton educated members of the ruling class and a call centre worker have nothing in common, even if they do speak the same language. The experience of struggling to survive means that poor workers from different backgrounds, Jewish, Indian, Nigerian or Romanian, have much more in common with each other. Billionaires such as Lakshmi Mittal or the Hinduja brothers, though from an Asian background, have nothing in common with ordinary British Asians.

In the 1950s US record companies wanted whites who sang like black people, because the establishment feared segregation breaking down.

The White Citizens Council of Birmingham, Alabama, said rock 'n' roll was a "plot to mongrelise America". Unity between blacks and whites was linked in their minds to the Civil Rights Movement, communism and moral breakdown.

Before rock 'n' roll a similar scare had been linked to jazz. US Catholic archbishop Francis Beckman warned in 1938, "Jam sessions, jitterbugs, and cannibalistic rhythm orgies are wooing our youth along the primrose path to hell". Part of the music business's purpose was to make music safe for capitalism. They wanted conservative companies to carry their adverts and play their records without feeling threatened.

The music industry has always been about controlling rebellion and turning it into profit. But outside of establishment fear and corporate greed, two other things are going on. First there is the genuine admiration or respect white artists feel for a black-led style or art form — sometimes naively. Second there is often a kind of stereotyping, perhaps that black people are better dancers, more sexual or more dangerous. Of course, black musicians sometimes exploit these stereotypes themselves.

For years singers in Britain have adopted US styles and accents — sometimes copying black artists and other times white ones. Often culture is presented as something that should be treated with purity and reverence. But blues, jazz, R&B and hip-hop are all forms of music marked by restless innovation and taking up influences from other sources. Questlove, from the seminal hip hop group The Roots, spoke out in 2014 during the controversy over white Australian rapper Iggy Azalea. "We as black people have to come to grips that hip-hop is a contagious culture," he said.

Resistance is about cultures in motion that constantly reinvent themselves. In his book *Appropriating Blackness*, US academic E Patrick Johnson looks at ideas of black culture. He argues that being black is itself a performance and one that happens in the context of relations with racist culture. This approach can give profound insights, though Johnson tends to see the issue as primarily a cultural one.



He notes that the idea of cultural authenticity implies the existence of its opposite. And that affects how people from the culture feel they should behave. He adds, “When black Americans have employed the rhetoric of black authenticity, the outcome has often been a political agenda that has excluded more voices than it has included”. He talks about how “blackness” is constructed both by black people and white and that in both cases it is contested. So black people disagree on what it means to be black.

The idea of blackness can be used to deny distinctions such as class among oppressed people — as in the hip hop idea that only the most alienated ghetto experience is in any way authentic, so the only “black” voice is that of the ghetto.

As an active, gay anti-racist Johnson notes the way that much of the movement in the 1960s was enormously anti-LGBT+. Resistance to the kind of crude racism that belittled black men by designating them “boy” made many black men respond by showing they were determinedly “manly”, often by rejecting as anti-black anything they felt was effeminate. In Africa this can still be seen in the way that homosexuality is often dismissed as non-African, though the real import was the colonial Victorian laws on sex that are still enacted in countries including Kenya and Uganda. In the US, it encouraged a feeling that LGBT+ politics were a white implant in the black movement. Johnson points to sometime Panther Eldridge Cleaver who epitomised this attitude. But other Panthers saw the importance of uniting the oppressed in struggle. In a 1970 speech the party’s co-founder Huey Newton argued that gays “might be the

most oppressed people in the society”.

Newton was very suspicious of people who looked towards some sort of fixed culture as an alternative to struggle for liberation. In one interview he argued:

“

Cultural nationalism, or pork-chop nationalism as I sometimes call it, is basically a problem of having the wrong political perspective. It seems to be a reaction instead of responding to political oppression. The cultural nationalists are concerned with returning to the old African culture and thereby regaining their identity and freedom. In other words, they feel that the African culture will automatically bring political freedom. Many cultural nationalists fall into line as reactionary nationalists. Papa Doc [Duvalier] in Haiti is an excellent example of reactionary nationalism. He oppresses the people but he does promote African culture.

Newton was clear about how to liberate culture: “We have to destroy both racism and capitalism”.

Lauren Michele Jackson, author of *White Negroes: When Cornrows Were in Vogue...and Other Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation* argues: “Hip hop emerged out of cross-generational, cross-cultural, cross-racial, and cross-national forms of cultural appropriation, mixing, and acculturation. We don’t tend to think about appropriation in those contexts. We usually only talk about appropriation in flagrant cases, but in and of itself appropriation is not the big bad. It is something that cannot be stopped, prevented, or fought against. As long as people are living, breathing, and talking, making, and creating things, appropriation will happen and it ought to happen. That’s the way art evolves”.

She is right to say that the real problem in society is racism: “when you look at the imbalance in power in society and start to observe who gets to call claim to a certain intellectual property, who gets to be credited for things that they make or innovate”. She concludes that the key problem, “is the de facto inequality that suffuses the American landscape and a global context as well”.

In some areas, people who talk of cultural appropriation can end up simplifying issues themselves. There is an argument over who should wear cornrows, yet black people in the West who wear cornrows usually have little idea of their social significance among the African groups who originally wore them. For many African peoples braiding is an art form taught by the senior female member of the family to her daughters and close friends. But in many situations it has an enormous social significance that varies from one ethnic group to the next. It is not essentially fixed because people have tightly curled hair.

Sometimes styles of hair are a method of ethnic identification. Among the Yoruba and Temne peoples in West Africa young men have their heads shaved before they are initiated into new hairstyles of adulthood. Similarly Akan women traditionally wear new hairstyles from puberty.

Lalasho, a Masaai from Western Kenya, made the news a few years back because he was working as a hairdresser in the city of Mombasa, using the intricate braiding styles he had learned for his initiation into manhood. However, using the styles on wealthy women was totally taboo and he would be outcast if people from his region found out. This example shows the dynamic of class and race coming together. The women who want Masaai styles are not concerned with perpetuating traditional culture, but are taking pride in their African hair.

It was certainly the case that the shift to natural black hair styles in the 1960s and the rejection of the idea that African hair or features were in any way inferior was a major cultural breakthrough. But the dynamic is more complex than simply “authentic” and “inauthentic” ways of being.

There are similar problems with arguments that white people should just engage with “white” culture. In the 1940s and 50s black people in the US had developed rhythm and blues, which became popular among young white people in Britain. Songs such as Bo Diddley’s “I’m a Man” and Muddy Waters’ “Mannish Boy” caught on and inspired the beat groups that would go on to develop rock music.

White teenagers could identify with people standing up and demanding to be taken seriously. But did they understand the cultural significance of these songs to black men in the US who were called “boy” on the street? In most cases they didn’t. Yet the world would not have been musically better if white young people hadn’t taken up R&B, and developed it as a musical form that expressed their own experience. Their understanding and appreciation were often partial or inappropriate, but what was outrageous about the treatment of the black musicians was not the people appropriating parts of their music; it was a music industry that set out to turn talent and rebellion into money as part of a racist system.

To the racist establishment, Iggy Azalea may seem safer and more marketable than black artists, while still sounding a bit black, and this is true of far greater talents from Elvis, through Janis Joplin to Amy Winehouse. But they also face a backlash for introducing the evils of jazz, rock or hip hop into wider society.

And the cultures that have created rap and black street culture were not universal, even among black Americans. Anthony Thomas, former Chicago DJ, said, “Like the blues and gospel, house is very Chicago. Like rap out of New York and go-go out of DC, house is evidence of the regionalisation of black American music. Like its predecessors, disco and club, house is a scene as well as a music, black as well as gay”.

So it is not simply a matter of coming to understand oppressed cultures better. These are not fixed. People’s experiences change as they interact with the globalised capitalist world. Culture is constantly evolving. Under capitalism everything is pushed towards becoming a commodity that can be marketed and made safe for money, but within the contradictions areas continue to emerge where resistance is possible.

Many British fans were angry when US rapper Drake appropriated Grime forms. Britain’s leading Grime artist, Stormzy, said: “Listen, what Drake has done in terms of getting eyes



locked on our culture, that's a massive light onto what we do. You can't deny that. But with that comes its natural negatives... you get your purists who are never gonna like the idea of a massive artist getting involved with a niche thing".

This does make respect for the cultures of oppressed people something to value. But respect can take a number of forms. Pablo Picasso's admiration of African art, which was central to the development of Cubism and modern art, was combined with an orientalist view of African societies. He later said that on seeing African art in a museum in Paris, "I understood what the Negroes used their sculpture for. Why sculpt like that and not some other way? After all they are not Cubists! Since Cubism did not exist... They were weapons. To help people avoid coming under the influence of spirits again, to help them become independent".

The idea that "primitive" people create, but sophisticated ones understand is not unusual. It has been common in the history of popular music, where innovations by black people are seen as instinctive, while white musicians are seen as more cerebral.

Another recent controversy in Hollywood shows that showing respect is not simple. *Nina*, the biopic of jazz singer Nina Simone, has run into cultural appropriation issues that reflect wider contradictions. Zoe Saldana, who is relatively light skinned, plays Simone. Though she is "black" she had her skin darkened for the role and wore a prosthetic nose. Critics have suggested she is not really black because she has mixed Puerto Rican and Lebanese ancestry.

There is a real issue. Many darker skinned black actors with broader noses have difficulty

getting work. But all this does is emphasise that “blackness” can only be understood in the context of racism. It was the racists and slavers who introduced the concept of “just one drop” of “black” blood making someone black.

The radical black writer Ta-Nehisi Coates commented of Nina, “It’s here that the term ‘appropriation’ bears some usage. We’re not talking about someone inspired by the deeper lessons of Simone’s life and her music. We are talking about people who think it’s fine to profit off her music while heedlessly contributing to the kind of pain that brought that music into being”. And this is a useful way of looking at it because it points to a systemic problem rather than one of misguided people.

For instance, some have complained that the film *12 Years a Slave* showed suffering rather than resistance — and indeed it concentrated on Solomon Northup’s years as a slave rather than his later anti-slavery activities. But it was a major step to force Hollywood to confront issues it has been relentlessly ignoring through its history. And the film’s commercial success made it easier for the likes of Kasi Lemmons to fund her drama *Harriet* about the resistance of anti-slavery hero Harriet Tubman. Though this in turn faced some criticism, casting British actor Cynthia Erivo as Tubman. Some African Americans argue that only American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS) can understand the experience of slaves in the US, and other black people — even if also descended from slaves — should not be allowed to appropriate a cultural heritage they do not share.

Hollywood’s previous interest in black lives came as a response to the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, not the growing liberalism of the academy. The right like to dismiss “cultural appropriation” as political correctness gone mad. They are wrong. In the end the criticisms in “cultural appropriation” are too specific. As the mass struggles of the 1960s hinted, it will take a bigger fight to end racism and oppression.

Anti-blackness and the fight against racism

Yuri Prasad

Should Black Lives Matter protests focus solely on one type of racism? It is a question being posed by some in the movement — and one eagerly supported by a layer of academics focused on questions of ethnicity.

There is, they argue, something so specific about the way African-Caribbean people are treated that their struggles should not be “subsumed” into broader categories, such as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) or even into “anti-racism” more generally.

So Lebanese-Australian professor Ghassan Hage wrote in the *Guardian* in June 2020 that, “anti-black racism is historically one of the most lethal racism there is. No one has to inherit the combined traumatic history of colonialism, slavery and racial exclusion the way black people do.”

They are right to point out that black history and identity has been largely erased from history. And it is certainly true that racism does not impact all groups affected by it in the same way — and that prejudices have different social and historical roots.

But to argue that black people are the primary victims of racism, while the experiences of all other ethnic minorities are somehow secondary, is a major error.

First, and most importantly, it divides the opposition.

Playing one group off against another was the hallmark of the British Empire. In India they pitted Muslim against Hindu. In what became Nigeria they engineered conflict between the Igbo and Hausa people. To engender hatred they would grant relatively petty advantages to one group while denying them to the other. So successful was their tactic that a relatively small occupying force of white Britons could sit atop of nations of millions of black and brown people.

Boris Johnson would be delighted if the Black Lives Matter movement shrunk to narrowing itself to only fighting forms of discrimination that primarily affect black people.

Second, creating a league table of oppression and placing black people at the top of it does not acknowledge the way that racism is constantly shifting and prioritising new targets.

Think of Muslims in Britain in the era since 9/11. Since 2001 that state has targeted them as the “enemy within” and given itself hitherto unheard of powers to oppress. Muslim houses are raided and innocent people are shot by police. And one misunderstood word can result in even Muslim children being informed upon, designated as “in danger of radicalisation”, and forced into the Prevent re-education programme.

To suggest that the experiences of British Muslims, who are overwhelmingly South Asian in background, are less tangible than those of black people is blinkered at best.

This points to another problem within the argument for a black-centred movement. The notion of who is black is contested.

Professor Kehinde Andrews pictures a black “nation” that spreads from America to Europe to Africa. But his conception does not include those African Muslim populations he says were conquered by the Arabs.

What does that mean for the black Muslim people of Mali, Niger, Chad, Sudan and Somalia? Have they in some imagined way surrendered their blackness?

There is a way to overcome these infernal divisions, and that is to seek to unite all those who face racism with all those committed to fighting it. Most importantly, we must understand that racism, in whatever form, has a single point of origin — the capitalist system and its need for divide and rule.

Socialists understand that oppressed people don’t make common cause automatically — and that people’s experiences of racism are not all the same. And when we push back racism in any form it greatly improves the lives of our class as a whole. Socialists say that unless we find ways to struggle together the oppressor will defeat us all.

Further reading

Say It Loud: Marxism and the Fight Against Racism

edited by *Brian Richardson*

A collection of articles on the history of struggles against racism, drawing out the lessons for the struggle today.

Superior: The Return of Race Science

by *Angela Saini*

Based on interviews with experts, Saini argues that some fields of biology are still influenced by the discredited scientific racism theories of the 19th century.

Women, Race and Class

by *Angela Davis*

A study of the women's liberation movement in the US, from abolitionist days to the present, that demonstrates how it has always been hampered by the politics of its leaders.

Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump

by *Asad Haider*

Drawing on the words and deeds of black revolutionary theorists, Haider argues that identity politics is not synonymous with anti-racism, but instead amounts to the neutralisation of its movements.

Race on the Brain: What Implicit Bias Gets Wrong About the Struggle for Racial Justice

by *Jonathan Kahn*.

Kahn argues that implicit bias has grown into a master narrative of race relations, one with profound, if unintended, negative consequences for law, science, and society.

Communities of resistance: Writings on Black Struggles for Socialism

by *A. Sivanandan*

A series of powerful articles which covers many of the issues which have confronted radical politics since the 1980s.

Here to Stay, Here to Fight: How Asians Transformed the British Working Class

by *Yuri Prasad*

A history of Asian workers' struggles since the Grunwick dispute in 1976 and how they have transformed the working class movement.

<https://isj.org.uk/here-to-stay-here-to-fight/>

The crisis of black leadership

by *Esme Choonara* and *Yuri Prasad*

Written in the aftermath of the Tottenham riots of 2011, this article examines the weakness of black nationalist and black reformist strategies.

<https://isj.org.uk/the-crisis-of-black-leadership/>

Marx and race: a Eurocentric analysis?

by *Ken Olende*

A powerful refutation of the charge that Marxism is eurocentric, showing Marx's commitment and ongoing relevance to the fight against racism.

<https://isj.org.uk/marx-and-race/>

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