



Confronting Racial Injustice in 2020

The events of recent months, sparked off by a global pandemic, and culminating in the brutal killing of George Floyd in Minnesota, have exposed the forces of inequality in stark form. Floyd's killing at the hands of police is part of a systemic pattern, alongside those of numerous other Americans – such as Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, British victims include Jimmy Mubenga, Rashan Charles, Edson Da Costa, Mark Duggan and Sheku Bayoh. His violent death has come at the same time that the impact of coronavirus has amplified structural racial inequalities, in multiple domains including employment, health, education, and housing. The pandemic has deepened economic divisions, putting millions out of work, whilst affluent households have been able to save money at an unprecedented rate, and exposing how for some, even lockdown was a luxury. Meanwhile, there has been major variation in the capacity of governments to manage the crisis, but in far too many nations - including the US, the UK, and Brazil – complacent governments led by self-interested elites have presided over unnecessary deaths and devastation.

As outgoing Director of the LSE's International Inequalities Institute, these developments present no surprises to me. I don't need any convincing that inequality matters. Nonetheless, to see such tragedies rendered so vividly, and in ways which concertina off each other, has been overpowering. The resonance of #BlackLivesMatter in the wake of Floyd's brutal killing offers a powerful opportunity to shift entrenched inequalities. I hope that my work, and that of the III, may be able to offer resources to support anti-racist struggles and the campaigns of all those fighting inequality in its myriad forms across the globe.

I recognise that hitherto the III has not sufficiently addressed racial inequality in our work to date and as Director I take full responsibility for this failing and apologise most importantly to those from black and ethnic minority communities affected by it. The III needs to improve its teaching and research to make race and racism more central to our mission. I hope the work of the III can be an important resource in the struggles to come and in this spirit, I offer a few thoughts on the current moment.

There is a danger of seeing the racism so evident in the killing of Floyd and the reaction of the Trump administration to the resulting protests as only a perpetuation of long-term institutional racism. It certainly is this, but it is also part of a wider resurgence of an Anglophone imperial project which is serving to legitimate the resurgence of racism. I became interested in this phenomenon following the UK Brexit referendum, which was something more than a popular reaction against the political establishment. It was also driven by a neo-imperial ideology amongst wealthy business elites who wanted to restore a vision of British superiority, embodied in a white Anglophone diaspora, allied to global trading and financial networks.

Recognising the pernicious influence of wealth inequality on current affairs brings out a more

dystopian awareness of the full scale of inequality compared to income inequality, as the distribution of wealth is much more skewed, with very few people owning vast amounts of wealth, and many billions owning no wealth at all, or indeed negative wealth if they are in debt. The racial wealth gap in the US is staggering – with black households having a mere 15% of the net worth of white households, and this share has been falling in recent times. In 2016, black child households had just one cent for every dollar held by non-Hispanic white child households. When Rev Al Sharpton called in the Minneapolis memorial service for George Floyd, for White America “to get your knee off our necks”, the weight of this knee is heavy with accumulated wealth.

Racism is bound up with the power of resurgent wealthy elites, who have become effective in winning popular elections on the basis that they are outsiders who can shake up the system. There are now so many of these - Berlusconi, Trump, Bolsonaro – that they can’t be seen simply as aberrations. Understanding how these wealthy elites have become so prominent is vital. We need also to pay attention to fractures and oppositions within elites. The breakdown of cohesive “power elites”, and the peeling away of “progressive” elites so that they are more attuned to social movements and popular action has been a vital precursor to radical change in the past, and it can be again.

In these awful times, we have to find sustenance by looking to exemplars which have “done things better”. In the III we are doing this through a concern to bring out the variability in the nature, drivers, and experience of inequality in different parts of the world. Historians will surely comment – and in the not too distant future – that one of the most revealing features of the 2020 crisis is that the United States and the United Kingdom, who between them have been dominant global powers for the past two centuries, have now lost global stature as coherent nation states with the capacity to offer any kind of moral and political model. It is the breakdown of coherent national projects in both these nations which may feed into the resurgence of Anglophone imperial power. However, examples from numerous other parts of the world are more encouraging, and we need to extend the debate on inequality towards the global south so that we can learn from these models. We will be doing more to explore equity and justice in the global South in the new programme of research to be led by Chico Ferreira, the incoming III Director will directly address these issues, as well as the theme led by Armine Ishkanian, Executive Director of the Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity programme and Ellen Helsper, Department of Media and Communications, on the Politics of Inequality, which includes a direct focus on justice and equity.

Although, as I have stated above, I am painfully aware that the III has not focused enough on racial inequality as much as it needs to have done, I hope we can be an important positive force in the future. We are currently discussing internally how we can develop a strategy to go forward and will communicate our plans as these become firmed up.

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