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Racism Never Went Away in the UK - It Simply Changed Shape

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To tackle racism, a widening of focus is needed. As long as the structural factors remain in place, subtle forms of racism will continue to hide in plain sight and exert a corrosive influence on the wellbeing of those it targets. This is a lesson for the UK & wherever racism lurks under the surface.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer thinks that racism is returning to British society. He has accused Nigel Farage's Reform UK of sowing "toxic division" with its "racist rhetoric".

Starmer's comments follow a trend that has seen senior Labour party officials portray their political opponents on the far-right as sowing division with racist rhetoric.

Recently, Wes Streeting, the Labour health secretary, warned that an "ugly" racism is on the rise again, pointing to worrying figures showing an increase of race-based abuse of NHS staff.

And in October, senior Labour officials attacked Farage's plans to strip millions of legal migrants of their Indefinite Leave to Remain status as a racist policy. Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood said that Farage's plans sounded like a "very loud dog whistle to every racist in the country".

Labour officials portray the rise in racist incidents and rhetoric as the return of attitudes that had all but disappeared from British society. Streeting expressed his worry that "1970s, 1980s-style racism has apparently become permissible again in this country". Starmer similarly stated that "frankly I thought we had dealt with" the problem of racist abuse "decades ago".

This is an appealing story because it conveys a neat and simple message: racism was defeated decades ago and it is now being revived by racist agitators. But in truth, the history of post-war racism is much more complex.

In my new book, I investigate how ideas of race and racism have changed since the second world war. History shows that racism never disappeared from public life. Rather, it assumed different shapes, some of which are harder to discern than others.

The experience of fascism

The defeat of Nazism in 1945 marked a key moment in the history of racism. Prior to the second world war, ideas of racial difference and even racial hierarchy were firmly entrenched in elite society.

In Victorian Britain, for example, a belief in the racial superiority of Europeans was decisive to maintaining colonial rule across large parts of central and east Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. This sentiment was famously captured in Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem, The White Man's Burden, which depicted colonial rule as the moral duty of white nations.

> Racism causes certain individuals or communities to be more vulnerable to violence, exclusion, marginalisation, poverty, and other harmful outcomes on the basis of their membership of a particular racial, cultural, or religious group.

Likewise, pseudosciences like eugenics and physical anthropology enjoyed significant prestige among British elites well into the 20th century. The British Eugenics Society, dedicated to improving the genetic stock of the British population, flourished in the interwar period. At this time the eugenics movement was an ideological broad church, appealing to progressive as much as conservative elites.

But the second world war irrevocably changed this landscape. The experience of fascism made it clear for all to see just how dangerous the concept of racial superiority was. Ideas of racial purity, racial hierarchy, and eugenics had driven the Nazis to commit genocide. It had led to a world war that many experienced as a straightforward conflict between good and evil.

At the same time, anti-colonial movements were gaining momentum all over the world. In south-east Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, there emerged powerful critiques of European colonialism and the racist views that supported it. Some of these critiques linked fascism

to colonialism, arguing that Nazism represented the "boomerang effect" of colonial violence curving back onto the people of Europe.

The great sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois worded this view powerfully in 1947:

> There was no Nazi atrocity - concentration camps, wholesale maiming and murder, defilement of women or ghastly blasphemy of childhood - which Christian civilization or Europe had not long been practicing against colored folk in all parts of the world in the name of and for the defense of a Superior Race born to rule the world [sic].

The cumulative effect of these experiences was that ideas of racial superiority came to be seen an unscientific relic of the past.

Squashing 'scientific racism'

This was exemplified by the United Nations, which in November of 1945 established Unesco (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) with the explicit aim of battling racism. Unesco's constitution, adopted on November 16 of that year, drew a direct connection between racism and the second world war:

> The great and terrible war which has now ended was a war made possible by the denial of the democratic principles of the dignity, equality and mutual respect of men, and by the propagation, in their place, through ignorance and prejudice, of the doctrine of the inequality of men and races.

In 1949, Unesco appointed a panel of prominent scientists to formulate a critique of scientific racism. Reporting in 1950, the panel concluded that there is no scientific basis for any claims of racial superiority of one group over another. As the panel wrote, "the likenesses among men are far greater than their differences".

While a small number of academics remained committed to race science and eugenics, they were forced into the margins of the academic world. The Eugenics Society, though it continued to exist, lost much of its prestige.

Going forward, race science or political appeals to racial superiority were no longer deemed acceptable, even among ruling elites. The language of race lost the scientific legitimacy and political purchase it once had.

This did not mean that racism disappeared, however. Rather, it changed shape.

Immigration and culture

Explicit appeals to race remained politically unacceptable for many decades after the war. This forced intellectuals and politicians on the right, especially those with divisive views about racial and ethnic differences, to develop an alternative language in which to express their ideas.

In Britain, one such language crystallised in the 1960s. During this period, tensions grew over the number of migrants coming to Britain from Commonwealth countries. Migration from former colonial areas had been on the rise in preceding years, made possible by the 1948 British Nationality Act, which conferred citizenship on all former imperial subjects.

> Our conception of racism cannot be restricted to instances of individual prejudice but must also include these structural effects.

The backlash against these migration trends was exemplified by Enoch Powell, a Conservative MP and former Minister of Health. In the late 1960s, Powell developed a vocal critique of immigration numbers.

Powell's rhetoric was inflammatory and racially charged. In his infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech, delivered in 1968 in Birmingham, Powell claimed that unless immigration was restricted, people of colour would soon have "the whip hand over the white man". In another speech, from 1970, Powell complained that it was no longer politically acceptable to say that "the English are a white nation".

Powell made no appeal to the idea of biological difference. Instead, his emphasis was on cultural difference. He claimed that migrants and white British people were culturally too dissimilar for assimilation to be possible in large numbers.

Powell's speeches on immigration cost him his political career. He was dismissed from the Shadow Cabinet following his "Rivers of Blood" comments. Yet his views were soon echoed by other political figures.

In 1976, Ivor Stanbrook, a Conservative MP, said in the House of Commons: "Let there be no beating about the bush. The average coloured immigrant has a different culture, a different religion and a different language. That is what creates the problem."

And in 1978, Margaret Thatcher said in a TV interview that British "people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture". Migration was a threat to Britain's national identity.

Thatcher added: "We are a British nation with British characteristics. Every country can take some small minorities and in many ways they add to the richness and variety of this country. The moment the minority threatens to become a big one, people get frightened."

In the 1979 general election, which Thatcher won with a landslide, the Conservative party manifesto pledged to tighten immigration controls and restrict citizenship. This pledge was enacted in 1981.

The denial of racism

The rhetoric of people like Powell, Stanbrook, and Thatcher represented a new kind of racial vocabulary. What is striking about this rhetoric is that it pretended not to concern race at all. Each of them explicitly denied that their rhetoric appealed to racist sentiment.

Powell often distanced his critique of immigration from concerns over race. In a 1970 interview, Powell said:

> I'm not talking about race at all. I am talking about those differences, some of which are related to race, between the members of different nations which make the assimilation of the members of one nation into another nation more difficult or less difficult.

Stanbrook also denied that his comments about "coloured immigrants" were racist. In a parliamentary debate, he insisted that to highlight problems with cultural integration "is not racialism, if by that one means, as I do, an active hostility to another race". This was because, in his view, "a preference for one's own race is as natural as a preference for one's own family". A dislike of immigration, therefore, is not based on racist animosity. "It is simply human nature," Stanbrook added.

Even Thatcher complained that whenever she tried to address concerns about immigration she was "falsely accused of racial prejudice" by her political opponents. She claimed that because mainstream political parties were not willing to talk about immigration, voters were instead turning to the far-right National Front. "If we do not want people to go to extremes, and I do not, we ourselves must talk about this problem and we must show that we are prepared to deal with it," she said.

These denials of racism indicate that during this period, the language of race itself remained socially unacceptable. Powell, Stanbrook and Thatcher all felt the need to distance themselves from it.

This helps to explain why they preferred to focus on ideas of cultural difference and national identity. These ideas did not carry the same negative connotations as race, yet could be used to convey a similar message - namely that some groups did not belong in Britain.

Researchers have called these ideas "cultural racism". This is a form of racism that discriminates between groups on the basis of cultural or religious traditions rather than biological traits.

Though it can be harder to pin down, cultural racism can be just as harmful to marginalised groups.

Normalisation of racist rhetoric

The rise of inflammatory rhetoric surrounding immigration in the 1960s and 70s had an immediate impact on policy. During this period, successive governments responded to the growing clamour over immigration by selectively tightening migration controls and nationality legislation.

However, this rhetoric has also had a more gradual, long-term effect on racism's place in society. Powell's and Thatcher's views on immigration have been echoed again and again, often framed in the same vocabulary. This continues to this day.

> Cultural racism remains poorly understood. In most media reporting and political discourse, the term 'racism' continues to refer primarily to individual prejudice based on outward appearance or group belonging.

Last month, Katie Lam, the shadow home office minister, appeared to argue that Ukrainian and Gazan refugees should be treated differently because the former are better able to assimilate to British culture, as well as being more likely to go back to rebuild their country of origin.

And earlier this month, nationalist writer and academic Matthew Goodwin, who is formally linked to Reform, wrote in his personal newsletter that the "cultures that our hapless politicians are now importing into our country at speed are not just radically different and incompatible to our own; they are inferior, primitive, stuck in cultural codes and practices we moved on from centuries ago".

Over time, public debate on immigration has soured, and dehumanising language has become more commonplace. In 2015, The Sun columnist Katie Hopkins compared migrants to "cockroaches", while Farage refers to migration as a "flood".

In 2022, the then home secretary Suella Braverman spoke of an "invasion" of Channel migrants, directly echoing Thatcher's rhetoric 50 years earlier. Strikingly, again echoing Thatcher, Braverman also denies that her anti-immigration rhetoric is racist. Instead, she describes the word "racist" as a "slur" used by the left "to silence debate".

The gradual normalisation of this kind of rhetoric has allowed it to re-enter mainstream public discourse. This has caused the erosion of the anti-racist norms established in the wake of the second world war. For many years after the war, these social norms meant that public figures who expressed views that were considered racist paid a high social or professional cost. Powell's dismissal from the shadow cabinet following his Rivers of Blood speech is a forceful example of this.

Today, these anti-racist norms are under increasing pressure. To be sure, they have not fully disappeared. In recent years, anti-racist movements like the Black Lives Matter have enjoyed broad popular support in Britain and elsewhere.

Likewise, officials who express inflammatory rhetoric can still expect to be challenged. Politicians including Starmer, Robert Jenrick and Katie Lam have recently been met with criticism for divisive comments or policies on race, migration, and culture.

Starmer, for instance, was criticised for saying that migration numbers are turning Britain into an "island of strangers". This comment was likened to Powell's rhetoric on immigration, who also said that immigration left Britons feeling like "strangers in their own country". When confronted with criticism, Starmer said he deeply regretted using that phrase.

Meanwhile, Farage has faced pressure to distance himself from racist comments he is alleged to have made in the past - allegations which he has strongly denied.

Yet, the prospect of a politician being dismissed from a cabinet role for racially inflammatory comments is very remote today. Neither Jenrick nor Lam has been dismissed from the shadow cabinet for their comments, with Conservative Party leader Kemi Badenoch expressly defending Jenrick.

> Derogatory and stereotyped views on cultural differences and national identity are now an everyday feature of public discourse, especially in debates over immigration.

More worryingly, on the fringes of public debate, the erosion of anti-racist norms has created conditions in which racist rhetoric can flourish. Researchers have shown that on online platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Parler, racist abuse has sharply increased in recent years. Under the ownership of Elon Musk, himself notorious for his right-wing views, X has systematically amplified right-wing messaging.

In some circles, racist rhetoric not only receives little to no challenge but is actively incentivised. Far-right groups constitute a lucrative market for racist ideas. Authors expressing right-wing ideas, for example English nationalist Tommy Robinson, have access to large speaker circuits, podcasts, digital publishers, and many other markets.

Even in academia, recent years have seen a resurgence in race theory and eugenics. While mostly restricted to fringe groups, some authors have been able to publish work with prestigious university presses admiring the ideas of Francis Galton - the man who has been called the "father of eugenics".

Hiding in plain sight

Various forms of racism persist. Today, cultural racism is the most widespread and politically consequential kind. Derogatory and stereotyped views on cultural differences and national identity are now an everyday feature of public discourse, especially in debates over immigration.

Yet cultural racism remains poorly understood. In most media reporting and political discourse, the term "racism" continues to refer primarily to individual prejudice based on outward appearance or group belonging. When Streeting talks about "1970s, 1980s-style racism" he specifically means "abuse based on people's skin colour".

While it is undeniably a good thing that racist abuse is being vocally challenged by politicians, this narrow definition of racism obscures as much as it reveals. It fails to challenge forms of racism that do not appeal to physical traits but to cultural traditions. And it gives political agitators intent on sowing division on themes like immigration the opportunity to deflect criticism by denying that their ideas are racist.

Similarly, the notion that racism was already dealt with "decades ago", in Starmer's words, ignores the fact that racism never went away. It also downplays the extent to which the harm of past racism lives on in the present in structural issues like wealth and income gaps, uneven access to work or housing, unequal health outcomes, and police profiling.

To tackle racism, a widening of focus is needed. Our conception of racism cannot be restricted to instances of individual prejudice but must also include these structural effects.

At the structural level, racism causes certain individuals or communities to be more vulnerable to violence, exclusion, marginalisation, poverty, and other harmful outcomes on the basis of their membership of a particular racial, cultural, or religious group. Rhetoric that intensifies this vulnerability feeds racism, even when it is not expressed in the language of "race" or when there is no prejudicial intent.

So long as these structural factors are not taken into consideration, more subtle forms of racism will continue to hide in plain sight and exert a corrosive influence on the health and wellbeing of those it targets.

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