Do Colonialism and Slavery Belong to the Past? The Racial Politics of COVID-19

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In December 2019, little did anyone know that the hushed discovery of a novel coronavirus in Wuhan, China would wreak global havoc of an unprecedented scale well into the following year and beyond. But what also could not have been foreseen was the way in which the later named 'severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)' or 'COVID-19' would serve as such a ruthless exposé of the systems that underpin today's globalised society. Amongst myriad other social issues, the entrenched economic, cultural, and epistemic structures of Colonialism's legacy, such as examples of contemporary racism and labour exploitation, have become ever clearer with the ongoing trajectory of this pandemic in particular. In answering the question 'Do Colonialism and Slavery Truly Belong to the Past?', this essay uses the empirical context of the COVID-19 pandemic and references postpositivist theory to argue that whilst these practices should undoubtedly be relegated to history, it is profoundly evident that colonial logic is still endemic in the 2020s, making this a less than simple task.

It is important to note that exposing the ongoing nature of colonial projects is always an ambitious undertaking for a number of reasons – not least because racial issues are so widespread and deeply-rooted in a Eurocentric global society such as our own, but also because revealing the symptoms of a colonial legacy is inherently personal and often painfully affecting by the way 'the rage, sorrow, and despair' of those 'whose existence IR has constantly displaced and ignored' (Biswas 2016, p. 229) are examined. Therefore, it must be made clear that this piece draws on "snapshot" evidence to identify only the most pronounced cases of racial violence exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. By systematically exploring three distinct phenomena – the Sinophobic sentiment of the discourse surrounding COVID-19, the disproportionately high COVID-19 risk and death rates in Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) populations, and the realisation of the implications of racial capitalism on People of Colour (POC) during a pandemic – it is intended that the mere extent to which many of colonialism's 'structures and relations of power are still in place' (Abrahamsen 2003, p. 195) is well illustrated.

The Sinophobic Sentiment of COVID-19 Discourse

It is becoming increasingly clear that the COVID-19 virus has caused two distinct outbreaks: the first being the overt threat of deadly disease, but the second being a growing culture of Sinophobic racism directed at Chinese nationals and even people of other Asian descent in Anglo-centric societies. At the time of writing, the American Academy of Pediatrics cited 'almost 1900 reports of discrimination against Asian Americans since March 19th, 2020' (Cheah et al. 2020, p.2). This number is likely a vast underrepresentation of the true scale of the issue. Although the novel coronavirus has directly claimed millions of lives (and counting), this rhetoric of racial discrimination is arguably similarly as virulent in the longstanding legacy it leaves and the damaging binaries and hierarchies of power it centralises. Whilst it may come as a surprise to some that these seemingly outmoded reactions of racialised blame and hatred surface at a time where global togetherness should surely be promoted, Alexandre White, a historian and medical sociologist argues that it is little wonder that such a reaction has arisen given the historical trajectory of 'xenophobic responses to infectious disease threats' (2020, p. 1250).

Whilst the fear and panic generated by a pandemic can somewhat understandably give rise to irrational reactions from impressionable individuals, it must be acknowledged that the racism facilitated on a systemic level, most

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notably by the US, the world's only dominating superpower, is a very deliberate social construct. Trump's inflammatory intentions were made perfectly clear upon his labelling of COVID-19 the 'kung flu' at a rally in Tulsa, not to mention his previous coining of the phrase 'Chinese virus' (The Guardian, 21st June 2020). Such discourse is exactly the type that plays into the longstanding and arguably inevitable trend of colonial logic, one that Césaire goes as far as comparing to a 'boomerang' (2000, p. 41), and one that can be accounted for by the inextricably linked tenets of Poststructuralism's power-knowledge nexus. Foucault is clear in his assertation that the realm of the discursive is one in which identities and regimes of truth are constructed, as is clearly seen with Trump's anti-Chinese sentiment. It is inevitable, however, Foucault argues, that when a discourse like this pervades, certain knowledges become 'subjugated'. That is to say that particular truths are 'buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence or formal systematisation' and cannot be fully insurrected until they exist as 'historical contents' (1980, p. 81). At the time of writing, this pandemic exists at present or as very recent history – and so the discourse of the Chinese people (as opposed to that of their authoritarian government) is yet to be fully realised whilst it remains wholly quashed by the white person's narrative.

This is not an isolated occurrence, either. There is a palpable trickle-down effect as the racial otherisation rooted in official governmental discourse transfers to a media system capitalising on fear and binary presentations of nuanced situations, eventually reaching citizens who are motivated to act violently on their individual prejudices. This phenomenon has been seen before, most notably during the 2014 Ebola crisis. Sarah Monson writes of how 'the media triggered Americans' fear and conceptualization of Ebola as "other" and "African", sparking a discourse of panic and propelling the otherization of Africa and Africans' (2017, p. 3). In the same way that Western 'otherization reproduced and perpetuated the Ebola-is-African, Ebola-is-all-over-Africa, and Africa-is-a-country narratives' (Monson 2017, p. 3) in 2014, orientalist stigmatisations of China depicted it as a 'backwards', 'horribly overpopulated' country whose people and their 'archaic' culture were to blame for the COVID-19 outbreak (Borja et al., 2020). It cannot be ignored that historical international management of infectious disease 'has largely been shaped by a distinctly European perspective, prioritising epidemic threats that arose from colonial (or now post-colonial) sites that threatened to spread disease and affect trade', which has transformed into an exclusionary and stereotyping 'Eurocentric or US-centric view' of modern pandemics that does 'much more harm than good' (White 2020, p.1251). Put simply, the public discourse surrounding COVID-19 proves that colonialism's legacy is unfortunately still very much alive and well in contemporary Anglo-centric society, thanks to fundamental belief of the 'white middle-class Westerner' that the Chinese are 'not quite as human as we are' (Saïd 1978, p.108).

Heightened COVID-19 Risk in BAME Populations

Colonialism's legacy is not just affecting the discourse around COVID-19, either: there are pronounced and highly publicised figures that point towards the disproportionate health impacts of the virus on people from BAME groups. Public Health England records in their 'Disparities in the Risk and Outcomes of COVID-19' report that 'the highest age standardised diagnosis rates of COVID-19 per 100,000 population were in people of Black ethnic groups (486 in females and 649 in males) and the lowest were in people of White ethnic groups (220 in females and 224 in males)'. Furthermore, POC in the UK present with a 10% to 50% higher chance of dying from COVID-19 than people of a White British background ([1] 2020. p. 39). NHS staff death rates are particularly telling of this trend: BAME individuals account for only 44% of medical staff, whilst approximately 95% of deaths in this staff group by April 2020 were members of BAME populations (Cook, Kursumovic, and Lennane 2020). Above all else, it is important to note that this is by no means due to any sort of biological predisposition to the virus in certain races. Even Public Health England is willing to admit in a further analytical report that 'the pandemic exposed and exacerbated longstanding inequalities affecting BAME groups in the UK' ([2] 2020, p. 6), once again bringing into sharp focus the structurally entrenched racial disparities that operate on a day-to-day basis in white-majority society, and that can be traced back to inherently discriminatory colonial logic.

Evidence that points to specific risk factors that put people of BAME communities at increased risk of acquiring the infection makes it blatantly clear that colonial trends are completely internalised within the UK's consciousness (and most probably that of other white-majority nations). Often attributed to the liberal notion of the "class divide", cited determinants of heightened infection risk include the increased likelihood of BAME individuals living in 'urban areas', 'overcrowded households', 'deprived areas' and having 'jobs that expose them to higher risk' (Public Health England

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[1] 2020, p. 40). The problem with this logic, however, is that it makes the issue at hand seem easily fixable, when in reality, this such "class divide" exists as a hangover from a much deeper-rooted mode of perpetual racialised thought that continues to cast POC as the 'modern barbarian' (Césaire 2000, p. 76).

The same systemically divisive logic that played a part in legislative failures such as Theresa May's "Hostile Environment" policy and the resulting Windrush scandal, and other more deadly catastrophes, such as the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, is making a resurgence once more during this pandemic. BAME immigrants to the UK, and indeed the West in general, are seemingly considered just as they were in the 20th Century: 'an unfortunate but necessary by-product of maintaining the relationship between Britain and the Old (white) Dominions' (El-Enany 2019, p. 52). Behind every Black or Asian person forced to function in a 'closely interconnected social network[s]' during a deadly pandemic is a legacy that considers their 'households with extended kinship' as "uncivilised" and thus undeserving of specialised support, and an economic structure that lumbers them with 'reduced opportunity to work from home' amongst many, many other burdens (Mathur 2020, p. 1866). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the welfare systems of the West continue to fail ethnic minorities time and time again. Non-white populations are consistently treated as an afterthought, relying for survival on systems that do not function with them in mind. Once again, the latent existence of colonial practices in the modern Western world is very apparent – and, whilst there are attempts to resolve the problems exacerbated by this, the 'mechanisms of power' (Foucault 1980, p. 99) that bring these symptoms about have not yet been addressed in the necessary way required in order to eradicate them entirely.

The Implications of Racial Capitalism on POC during the Pandemic

By the same token, the modern capitalist system cannot be overlooked for its existence as an inherently and cyclically racist phenomenon that has put BAME populations at particular risk during the COVID-19 pandemic. Cedric J. Robinson, a black Marxist and founder of the notion of racial capitalism, asserts that capital 'can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups' (Melamed 2015, p. 77). It is more than clear that ethnicity is one of the most predominant forms of this 'severe inequality' in the 21st Century, meaning that the 'central features of white supremacist capitalist development' give rise to 'slavery, colonialism, genocide, incarceration regimes, migrant exploitation, and contemporary racial warfare' (Melamed 2015, p. 77) that particularly encumber POC. In other words, the very same colonial logic that perpetuates the belief that the 'western consumer' is 'entitled to own or expand (or both) the majority of world resources' (Saïd 1978, p.108) casts BAME populations to the bottom of ladder of neoliberal progress, casting them as victims, rather than victors, of Capitalism.

The case of London transport worker Belly Mujinga is a prime example of the outcomes of the entrenched structures of Racial Capitalism. According to The Guardian, the details surrounding the events that ultimately led to her death on the 5th April 2020 are hazy: it is unclear whether the man that spat on her whilst she was undertaking her duties on the station concourse had actually been positive for COVID-19, and whether it was a direct consequence of his actions that she later tested positive herself and died in hospital from complications of the disease (Kale 2020). In this analytical context, however, these details are not of particular relevance. What was brought to light in the aftermath of this tragic event was the fact that a 47-year-old Congolese mother with underlying respiratory issues was put at unnecessary risk as a frontline worker during a pandemic deadly to vulnerable people like herself. Belly Mujinga was murdered by a system that disproportionately relegates people of non-white origin to blue-collar industries and then tells 'those who still have low-wage service jobs to lay down their lives in order to afford for groceries' (Boodman 2020).

Another story that made global headlines for similar reasons to the Belly Mujinga case was that of the Amazon workers at the JFK8 warehouse in New York City who went on strike after multiple staff tested positive for COVID-19. The strikers demanded 'increased protective gear and hazard pay' for the duration of the pandemic (Evelyn 2020). This comes after data was released in 2014 and 2015 that demonstrated that nearly a quarter of the company's 77,179-person-strong US workforce was either Black or Hispanic, with a respective 24% and 12% share of Black and Hispanic workers in the 'labourers and helpers' category, yet only 5% Black and 5% Hispanic in the 'non-labourer' workforce (Greene 2015). It certainly seems that by compelling disproportionate numbers of POC to

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work in such poor conditions during a pandemic whilst the white-majority middle classes 'stay safely at home with their online jobs' (Boodman 2020), relying on the services of these multinational corporations, the neoliberal capitalist system exerts somewhat of the 'violence, control, and economic exploitation' (Bales, cited in Manzo 2018, p. 300) common to practices of labour exploitation and some cases of modern slavery. Indeed, according to Manzo, if all forms of 'violence, control, and economic exploitation are labeled as slavery, then the millions of illegal and badly-paid migrant workers in the world necessarily belong in that category' (2018, p. 300-301), highlighting the unnerving and oft concealed common factors shared by capitalism and colonialism.

Not only are the structural effects of ongoing colonial projects facilitated by neoliberal Capitalism felt in the Western world, but of course their influence extends globally, challenging the biopolitical notion of the universal right to breathe. Achille Mbembe writes of an ensuing period of 'tension' and 'brutality' that will arise post pandemic. The after-effects of COVID-19 will catalyse an ever more 'vicious partitioning of the globe' at the hands of the modern division of wealth and resources where the 'dividing lines will become even more entrenched' (2020). Naturally then, heeding Robinson's authority, POC worldwide shall suffer most as a result of this – not only will practices such as 'energy-intensive extraction, agricultural expansion, predatory sales of land and destruction of forests' continue 'unabated', principally targeting the 'Global South' (Mbembe 2020), but the norm of exploiting the "Third World" will be redefined once again, locking the globe into a new era of banishing non-white citizens to their 'jungles' (Fanon 2008, p. 121).

Conclusion

Overall, the pronounced level at which colonial logic operates in the contemporary context is clear from this analysis, even if it is oftentimes facilitated by covert systemic norms. Despite that, calls to permanently consign it and its adverse implications to the past are growing more insistent: a petition calling for justice for Belly Mujinga has been signed by over 2 million people (Kale 2020), and there have been numerous movements since the death of George Floyd that demand the structural decolonisation of formally imperialist Western nations via reforming curricula and other social, cultural, and economic phenomena. Others go a step further and claim that Abolitionism is the only way forward – drawing on the black Marxist notion that all capitalism is racial capitalism, this movement seeks 'a vision that refers to the realities exposed by the pandemic', aiming to build 'a new mode of collective care' that supports 'mobilization and mutual aid' (Boodman 2020). Either way, these are both examples of methods that seek to 'cut off the King's head' (Foucault 1980, p. 121) and readdress the current relations of power, something that is more than necessary in a system in which 'the end of formal colonial rule has not ended historic patterns of economic control and exploitation any more than the abolition of slavery has eradicated enslavement' (Manzo 2018, p. 316), whether we refer to it as a postcolonial or neocolonial society. Ultimately, neither colonialism nor slavery truly yet belong to the past, even if that is the current will of ever-larger swathes of society. Will is not enough with practices so ingrained as these: only a fundamental restructuring of society as we know it will bring truly significant change about.

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