

Unity and universalism

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Liz Fekete, director of the Institute of Race Relations focused on the links between state racism, hate crime and resistance when she spoke at the Jewish Socialists' Group's first Annual Meeting by Zoom this year. Jewish Socialist magazine has published her speech.

Too much of the focus in antiracist discussion today is on prejudice, interpersonal relations and “hate crimes”, with hate divorced from the wider processes that foster racism. Even when we finally come to discuss institutional racism, too often it is misdiagnosed – seen almost as a continuation of prejudice and unconscious bias rather than a structural issue in our society that then legitimises prejudice. The issue that we discuss far too seldom in our movements today is the nature of state racism. Back in the 1970s and '80s, tackling state racism was in our antiracist DNA. Then, we talked about state racism in terms of discriminatory immigration laws and police practices, such as stop and search.

In trying to understand where the turn in our movement came about, I realised that part of the problem went back to Macpherson's definition of institutional racism in the Stephen Lawrence Report. At the time, and for very good reason, we saw Macpherson's recognition of institutional racism as a watershed moment in the history of race relations. The UK was the first country in Europe to recognise the phenomenon of institutional racism. This was a victory for so many antiracist and anti-fascist campaigns, particularly around the death of Black and Brown people in police custody, or on the streets at the hands of racists and the far right, with racist deaths compounded by the police response, as we saw in the Stephen Lawrence case.

With hindsight, we can recognise that Macpherson's definition of institutional racism had quite a limited scope. Macpherson defined institutional racism as “The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racial stereotyping.”

This definition was useful in terms of forcing institutions such as the police to change, as well as, thanks to the Race Relations Amendment Act, placing a positive duty on local authorities and public bodies to collect data and combat discrimination. But MacPherson's definition did not address popular racism in the media, for instance (although he did highlight racial stereotyping) and his wider findings failed to consider whether police operations per se were racist.

So that definition, important as it was in providing the first step for necessary institutional change, particularly in terms of the evolution of anti-discrimination laws, did not go nearly far enough. It led us to take our eye off the ball when it came to state racism. It also meant that antiracism was being channelled into managerial goals and mechanical change in ways that divorced the antiracist fight from its historical roots in the struggle against colonialism and imperialism. Our fight was becoming disentangled from a more transformative struggle to fundamentally change our political culture and the brutal nature of state power.

From there on, too, the reduction of racism to attitudes, to prejudice, to unconscious bias and to interpersonal racism, became more prevalent. The intimate links between structural racism, state racism and popular culture were being obscured.

The orthodoxy today – looking at racism as prejudice or hate – flattens and personalises racism, and opens the door to very subjective interpretations. But campaigning against structural racism, including state racism, demands a more rigorous, less subjective approach. We can only talk about state racism when we can identify discriminatory practices enshrined in the law that operates with the overt backing of government.

It would be hard to argue that state racism today – much of which comes out of Hostile Environment policies, or the War on Terror, or the way Black youth are criminalised through educational exclusion and police harassment – is targeted at the Jewish community with the overt backing of government. But just because I cannot detect any evidence of state antisemitism in the UK today, that doesn't mean that Jewish communities in other European contexts are not targeted by state racism.

My friend Rafal Pankowski in the Never Again Association in Warsaw identifies state antisemitism directed towards the Jewish community in both Poland and Hungary. In Hungary the law relating to NGOs receiving foreign funding came after an antisemitic campaign focused on George Soros – the antisemitic narrative against Soros has the overt backing of the Hungarian government. The Polish history law that prohibits criticism of Polish complicity in the Holocaust is another example of state targeted antisemitism against the Jewish community. If we are looking at antisemitism in the UK today we should be more critical of the way the Conservative Party, our government and our state are complicit in antisemitism in Poland and Hungary by supporting these overtly antisemitic governments.

How can we begin to build a unified antiracist struggle today where different communities' experiences have become more particular even as they are derived from the same racist roots? How do we have a struggle that doesn't disappear one community's oppression at the expense of another's? In our fights against antisemitism and Islamophobia, for instance, we have been in danger of disappearing the experiences of Black working-class communities who face a race and class experience of police oppression. But until the advent of Black Lives Matter, that particular history of racist oppression has been disappeared and we have done far too little to expose the brutality that Black communities have faced at the hands of the police and the alarming criminalisation (and incarceration) of young black men.

On IRR News on our website, we maintain a regular digest of the most important developments of racism and resistance in terms of asylum, migrant rights, discrimination, policing, and the far right and so on. Just putting stories together over the last few months, on deaths in custody, stop and search, and the use of Tasers, it's absolutely clear that there is a serious escalation of police racism, mostly aimed at multicultural working class neighbourhoods. The policing in black communities has always been derived from the colonial tradition of policing where black communities tend to be subjected to a kind of militarised response, through the use of specialist squads, SPG in the old days, and through mobile violence reduction units today. And obviously the pandemic and the policing of lockdown has handed over so much power to the police in Europe, and indeed globally, in contexts where police have a reputation for harassing and persecuting ethnic minorities. In the European context, too, so much

terrible stuff is happening to the Roma communities, Gypsies and Travellers and migrant workers, particularly undocumented workers, in France and Italy.

So when people talk about decolonialising the universities, I remind them about the need to decolonialise the police. This is very urgent because the police colonial tradition kills people.

I explained earlier that Macpherson did not explore the links between state racism and popular racism. This is an area where we can begin to think about how we unite in a broad universal antiracist struggle that doesn't disappear antisemitism even as it makes visible other racisms.

State racism operates in the UK primarily through the Hostile Environment and colonial policing but there is a bifurcated race policy that keeps state racism, the Hostile Environment and militarised policing in place through a divide and rule approach. This bifurcated race policy operates in two ways: firstly by redefining racism as bigotry, hate and prejudice, and therefore disappearing all racisms that derive from the actions of the state; secondly by building in a system of structural denial of racism. In this bifurcated race policy antisemitism is seen as a racism that the Conservative government is concerned about, but at the same time there is structural denial of other forms of racism. This is not good in all sorts of ways, not least in terms of the government's responsibility to maintain good race relations.

We see this institutionalised denial of structural racism in the way that Trevor Phillips was brought in to the Public Health England inquiry, or Munira Mirza or Tony Sewell to shore up the Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparities. There is now a pattern where the government appoints people to head commissions and inquiries on racism against BME communities who have a track record of denying institutional racism – while at the same time they do not deny that BME communities have certain feelings and perceptions and grievances. But perceptions and grievances are easy to dismiss (they can also be used to prove that BME people have developed a victim mentality which leaves them incapable of pulling themselves up by their bootstraps). Once again we return to racism as something entirely subjective and therefore, in terms of communities labelled “unaspirational”, easy to dismiss.

I want to conclude by talking about where there is hope, where there is possibility for progress and how we can build on this. We need to build unity, and this is a challenge. I think the lesson is: we need to be seen in places where we're not expected to be seen. It is quite threatening for those in power when there is a visible presence of young Jewish people on a Black Lives Matter movement protest – or, for instance, as we have seen in the US when young Jews opposed Trump in ways that were rather brave, making it clear they will not be part of the oppression of Black and Latino communities. It is a visual riposte to bifurcated race policies intent on pitching us against each other.

Sadly, as ever, it is the horrible invasive nature of racism that can unite us. When racism is targeted at one community, it normally spills out towards another. So much of popular racism is organised around xeno-racism (racism directed against people perceived as “foreign”). This kind of othering always spills over. We really saw xeno-racism come into being around the war on refugees and migrants. We see the same principles in play when it comes to Muslims, Gypsies and Travellers. While this is not understood by communal leaders (who tend to emphasise the exceptional nature of the racism in the community from which they derive experiences) it is well understood by ordinary people at a community level who always come together under attack. We've seen this in the way that Jewish and Muslim communities

have supported each other when mosques or synagogues, are attacked. And in this way, we also see that antisemitism is still very central to a common fight against the far right which again gains legitimacy from state racism, the overt backing of governments for racist laws.

But what is the nature of this antiracism we want to build – is it punitive or is it transformative, does it educate or does it seek to shame and blame? We should not see institutional racism as an amalgamation of individual prejudices. The relationship is actually the other way round, and it is the state and the laws of the land and the popular culture which educate for racism. People are not naturally born prejudiced, naturally born hating. We are educated into hostility and racism. One of the problems we have in the antiracist movement is that we have lost the educational aspect of antiracism. There is too much focus on penalisation and law and order, too much emphasis on punishment, humiliation and shaming (not least on social media) in place of patient and dedicated educational and community-based work.

It may be out of fashion to look at state race policies, but if we do look at the state's race policies it is clear that race relations is seen as something to be managed via communal authorities and that is true across the board. And we have seen in recent years that it is the communal authorities who are most punitive, almost delighting in an inhumane “cancel culture”. The kinds of critiques that the Jewish Socialists' Group has mounted against communal authority are also being mounted in the Asian community. We are also part of a much broader fight against communal appropriation of antiracism and for a struggle that transcends the limited politics of identity. We are in a fight for universal values so that we can come together in a broad fight against racism, in all its structured avatars, and by so doing, undermine the state and communal basis of how racism and antiracism are managed.

Although I might have argued that state racism is not directed towards Jews in the UK context today, I am deeply concerned that the government's bifurcated race policy, embraced by Labour and shored up by communal authorities, will leave ordinary people in communities exposed to interracial tensions as well as the racism that kills. There are so many opportunities to build wider communities of resistance. This is already happening in the USA. We urgently need to go back to an approach based on a universal antiracism fight if we are to stop antisemitism, racism and antiracism being used as footballs kicked around by politicians, journalists and other disreputable people in a very manipulative and malevolent way.

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