

Race, Colonialism, Resistance and Denial

The death of George Floyd in July 2020 shook the world. It brought many people to face to face with the reality of the institutional state violence that is an integral part of the racism that Black communities face in the Western world and sparked Black Lives Matter movements around the world.

In the UK, George Floyd's death sparked demonstrations involving young Black and white activists resulting in direct action that challenged the national historical narrative about Britain's involvement in slavery and the nature of the British Empire. During a Black Lives Matter protest in Bristol in June 2021, the protesters toppled a statue of Edward Colston, a figure presented as a philanthropist and municipal benefactor in Bristol's history and sank it in the harbour.

The reaction from the State was one of fury. The Prime Ministers Officer issued a statement saying that the tearing down of a Bristol statue was a 'criminal act' and the people responsible should be 'held to account'. The Home Secretary responded to a question about the incident in the Parliament stated, 'What we witnessed yesterday was mob rule, which is completely out of kilter with the rule of law and unacceptable'.

There was no acknowledgement in the Government response that the toppling of Colston's statue was influenced by the fact that from 1669 – 1692, Colston was the Deputy Governor of the Royal Africa Company. During his tenure as deputy governor, he effectively ran the company; an estimated 84,000 African people were transported to the Caribbean and Americas, with an estimated 20,000 deaths during transportations. No echoes of the sentiments expressed by Marvin Rees, the Mayor of Bristol, who said, 'I can not pretend that the statue is anything but an affront to me. Not just as a Jamaican heritage man but as a human being'.

The government response reflected a well-established white-washing of British history. A narrative that says that even though Britain was involved in the slave trade, the British were the good guys because they were the first to abolish it. A narrative that barely mentions the period of colonialism and Empire other than promoting the racist view that Britain brought civilisation and values to the world.

The desire to ignore the realities of past the has not only emerged in the context of a refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Black lives matter protest but in a more sustained attempt by leading British politicians to rehabilitate the Empire over the past two decades.

In 2002, former Labour Party Prime Minister Gordon Brown stated that Britain must stop apologising for its colonial past and recognise that it has produced some of the greatest ideas in history. He also stated I think we should celebrate much of our past rather than apologise for it, that we should talk, rightly so, about British values, and called for the 'great British values' - freedom, tolerance, civic duty - to be admired as some of our most successful exports.

Similarly, in 2013 former Prime Minister David Cameron, when visiting the memorial in India to the 1919 Amritsar Massacre where hundreds of Sikh protesters were gunned down by troops under British command, declared, 'I think there is an enormous amount to be proud of in what the British Empire did and was responsible for – but, of course, there were bad events as well as good. 'The bad events we should learn from – and the good events we should celebrate'.

The State reaction resulting from the toppling of the Colston statue typified this. A feeling of national panic was engendered by the claim that Black Lives matters protesters were likely to topple a statue of Winston Churchill as part of a protest in London. A narrative was constructed that extremists had taken over the Black Lives Matter protests. In a series of tweets in the run-up to the BLM London protest, Prime Minister Boris Johnson asserted 'We cannot now try to edit or censor our past', 'We cannot pretend to have a different history', 'Those statues teach us about our past, with all its faults. To tear them down would be to lie about our history and impoverish the education of generations to come'.

The underlying message was clear. The British Empire's dominant narrative was not to be challenged. The dominant historical narrative was to remain in place, and the physical representations of British power in the form of statues honouring slavers and colonisers were going to be defended.

The instance in glossing over this history denies the reality of exploitation, massacres and genocide that resulted from the British and European colonial project. It ignores the history of struggle and organised resistance of the colonised and the systematic attempts of the British State to silence the oppressed. It hides the history of divide and rule narratives popularised through racist and nationalist discourse. It also disguises how this framework of power still resonates today in the State's attitude to those who challenge that narrative and resist its legacy of institutional racism.

British colonialism, i.e. the practice or control by one people or power over other people with the aim

Narratives of Empire and colonialism have excluded acts of resistance and the emergence of trade unionism in the Empire

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of economic dominance, was an internal as well external project. It dates back to the 1530s with the colonisation of Ireland. Irish colonisation was accompanied by the racialisation and demonisation of the Irish. The establishment of the plantation system, a form of industrial agriculture subsequently established in the Americas. Ireland became the food producer for an expanding English urban working-class internally colonised through the Enclosures Acts. The enclosure of common land removed the ability of the people to have any control over the means of production and created the foundations of today's labour market. Due to this process, impoverished people were demonised through the poor laws, the forerunner of today's welfare to work systems. It was, in effect, the internal colonisation of Britain and culmination in the General Enclosures Act of 1845. This Act handed a general power to enclose land over to the landowner. The legacy of this in England today is that less than one percent of the population still own half the land.

This pattern of appropriation, racialisation, and demonisation was replicated through British colonisation expansion, initially of the Americas and then Africa and India. European colonial expansion did not gather pace until the nineteenth century. In 1800 less than 10 percent of Africa was in European hands. By 1900, 90 percent of the continent was colonised. This process was accelerated by the Berlin Conference of 1884, where the creation of spheres of control created modern African states locked in internal conflicts that still blight the continent today.

The importance of resistance

The history of resistance to this process of internal and external colonisation is buried. The narrative excludes acts of resistance, such as the nine years of war waged by the Irish against English colonialism in 1543. The enclosure riots of the 1530s and 1540s. The struggles of the Levellers and Diggers against internal colonisation during the first and second English civil war in the 1640s and 1650s. The Indian mutiny of 1857, the Xhosa wars against European colonialism were fought from 1779 -1836. The Anglo Ashanti wars 1823-1902, the Matabele war of 1893 and many more acts of resistance are not part of the narratives of Empire and colonialism. So too is the emergence of trade unionism in the British Empire.

Unfortunately, the story of the working-class history in Britain has been confined to the struggles of the industrial working class in the British Isles. This narrative is based on the conceptualisation of the nation-state based on state institutions and notions of citizenship. But, the British Empire was an imperial monarchy, with people in the Empire having the same status: crown subjects. Excluding the histories of workers outside the British Isles conceals the intertwined histories of workers from across the Empire. The exclusion of British overseas workers from the story of the emergence of

organised working-class struggle has only served to strengthen divide and rule and provide a basis for nationalist based narratives in current debates on immigration and asylum.

In reality, the story of anti-colonialism and the struggle for democracy and against exploitation is an integral part of the history of trade unionism. In 1830s Britain, the Chartists, a working-class movement for universal suffrage, provided a catalyst for early trade unions. One of its most prominent leaders was a man of African origin. William Cuffay, leader of the London chartists, was the son of a freed slave, a tailor and an active trade unionist.

In India, the first trade unions emerged in the textile industry in Bombay in 1851 and Calcutta in 1854. In 1890 Narayan Meghji Lokhande arranged a mass rally of 10,000 workers. This action led to the 1891 factories act and is recognised as the first trade union victory in the country. It also gave confidence to Indian workers resulting in enormous growth in new unions in the late 1890s and early 1900s. In Africa, trade unions began to appear in British territories, firstly among European workers in the 1880s and 90s and subsequently, trade unions of African workers began appearing in the 1920s and 30. From 1920 onwards, strikes and mass nationalist protests took place across much of Africa. In 1922 a general strike took place in Kenya. Part of the workers' demands was a call for Africans to be elected to the legislative council.

In the British Caribbean, immediately following the First World War, workers began to organise. In December 1919, striking dockworkers in Trinidad and Tobago took to the streets for over three weeks because of rising living costs, subsistence wages and under-employment. The British warship HMS Calcutta was dispatched to Trinidad to help deal with the strike. Ironically this was the same year that 12,000 English troops were sent to Glasgow to suppress a mass strike by 40,000 engineers, shipbuilders and engineers on Clyde. The strike in Trinidad was not an isolated incident. Strikes and riots also rocked Jamaica, Belize and British Honduras and continued until systems of self-rule were established in British Caribbean territories.

These are just fragments of the history of resistance across the Empire, but ensuring that workers know and celebrate their stories of resistance and victory plays an essential part in building confidence, solidarity, and realising that organised resistance can bring fundamental change.

Ultimately, it is this realisation that the British State is seeking to hide. By insisting that the dominant historical narrative remains in place.

To underline this message, the UK Government is introducing provisions in a new Police Crime and Sentencing Bill attempting to regulate further and silence dissent. If passed, previous limits on prison sentences and fines for criminal damage costing under £5000 would be lifted for memorials and protesters who topple statues like Edward Colston's could receive up to ten years in prison.