From Kelso Cochrane to Brexit – Is Racism Over?

Introduction

This presentation is divided into four main, but short, sections. First, I say something about the nature of race and racism; second, I consider the case of Kelso Cochrane as exhibit number one; third, I consider Brexit as exhibit number two; and fourth, I consider the question, 'is racism over?' In conclusion, I offer four p's for coping with racism, psychology, protection, protest, and power. I take full responsibility for my words, particularly the conclusions I come to. These are however provisional thoughts drawing on desk research utilising online resources and my own limited book library.

Race and Racism

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'race' as the major divisions of humankind, having distinct physical characteristics, qualities and abilities associated with skin colour, culture, creed, history, language, ethnic group, et al. It defines 'racism' as the theory that these distinctive human characteristics, qualities and abilities are determined by race. This has led since the early 16th Century to a belief in racial hierarchy and the superiority of a particular white race over all other races. According to Ivan Hannaford, the root of contemporary racism is linked to African bodies being forcibly shackled, loaded onto ships, put to work in cane and cotton fields, dehumanised and killed, to satisfy the demands of European tastes and economic ambitions.

Hannaford describes how as the Transatlantic Slave Trade progressed, the practice found an ally in philosophical, theological and scientific developments in Europe that sought to justify the right of the 'enlightened' European to conquer and rule over the undeveloped and inferior 'other', including Jews, Moors and Negroes. The process of justifying the European's use of fellow humans as beasts of burden led to 'racism' as 'an idea in the west'. In other words, contemporary race and racism is the birth child of western civilisation.

The work and words of European thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Emmanuel Kant, David Hume, American Abraham Lincoln, and many others became the raw material from which a racist ideology was built insisting that a 'Negro' is not a human. Historian Peter Fryer describes how pseudo-scientific theories were linked to the African dark skin, muscular body, prominent upper jaw, large lips, flat nose, black curly hair, and other features. Slavery was justified on at least three grounds: economic (need for sugar/cotton), moral (objects of pity) and natural (negro inferiority). These enlightened European minds found it hard to be believed that God, who is a wise being, would place a soul, especially a good soul, in a black ugly body. Hannaford argues that it was the discipline of anthropology, in particular, that during the 18th and 19th centuries entrenched the Negro's inferiorization in the European psyche by situating Africans at the bottom of a human hierarchy, with the Caucasian at the top. Over time, the Black Negro has become synonymous in European language and culture with what is degrading, low and sinister, but 'White' has become synonymous with what is pure, high and clean, according to Dr Martin Luther King.

In her book 'Why I'm no longer talking to white people about race', Remi Eddo-Lodge says we need to see racism as 'structural' in order to see its insidiousness (p. 222). Racism, in other words, needs to be understood as something weaved into the very fabric of western society. It was this notion in the McPherson Report into Stephen Lawrence's murder, that evoked most controversy. McPherson called out the Met, and by inference British institutions, as being 'institutionally racist'. McPherson 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 racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.

Another lens through which we understand racism in western society is that of Critical Race Theory, a US initiated sociological framework that examines society and culture as they relate to race, law and power. CRT proposes that white supremacy and racial power are maintained over time, rendering racism engrained and pervasive in the fabric and system of society. Individual racists operate as part of that majority, dominant, culture in which racism is pervasive. According to CRT white supremacy feeds white privilege, which in turns perpetuates the marginalization of people who are not white. Marginalisation manifests in disadvantage of black people in such as their over-representation in the criminal justice system and unemployment, and under-representation in universities, politics and economic advance. This is the status quo in the US, Britain and in all white-majority countries in our world today.

Kelso Cochrane (exhibit one)

Kelso Cochrane was born in the British colony of Antigua[1] in the Caribbean on 26 September 1926. After a basic education, he worked with his father as a trainee carpenter. He emigrated first to neighbouring Dominica, then to the USA before returning to Antigua from where in July 1954, aged 28 he emigrated to the 'mother country', the United Kingdom, settling in Notting Hill, London, where worked as a carpenter. He wanted to save enough money to fund himself to study law.

On 17 May 1959 Kelso suffered a broken thumb at work. It was attended to at Paddington General Hospital. He was walking home from the hospital around midnight, when only a few hundred yards from the flat he shared with his fiancée in Notting Hill, he was attacked by a small group of white youths. They called him nigger, pushed him, thumped him and then one of them stabbed him in the heart with a stiletto knife. Two or three black men came to Kelso's aid and a passing taxi took him to hospital where soon upon arrival, he died from the wound. Someone called a reporter at the Sunday Express and said, 'three white youths have stabbed a darkie named Cochrane'. Less than five years after arriving in Britain, Kelso was dead, being just 32 years and seven months old.

An ethnically mixed crowd of more than 1,200 mostly white people, attended his funeral on 6 June 1959 at St Michael and All Angels Church, and he was buried at Kensal Green Cemetery. 'It was like to a state occasion', one report said. On Sunday, 17 May 2009, to mark the 50th anniversary of Kelso's death, a blue plaque was unveiled at the 'West Thirty-Six Bar & Restaurant', 36 Golborne Road, London W10, just opposite the place where Kelso was attacked.

At least four responses to Kelso's death are worth mentioning here. First, the killer. Two men were arrested, held overnight and then released without charge, one of them, Patrick Digby, a 20-year-old catering boy in the Merchant Navy, and later a painter and decorator, was named by writer and author Mark Olden, as the suspected murderer. According to Olden, Digby confessed to the murder, but boasted to friends: 'They'll never get me.' Although Digby was still alive in 2003 when the Metropolitan Police conducted a cold case review at the request of Kelso's brother, Stanley, the police did not question him. Digby, lived and died of a heart attack in 2007, age 69, a few miles from the murder scene.

Second, the community. There was outrage among the black community, a few of whom marched down Whitehall holding protest banners. There was widespread community alarm as indicated by the number and ethnic mix at the funeral. Yet fear, not least of the Teddy Boys operating at the time, seeped into the community so that of the 905 people police spoke to, only 9 were willing or able to tell them anything useful. An enquiry was chaired by Amy Ashwood Garvey, first wife of Marcus Garvey. Defiantly, activist Claudia Jones[2], a friend of Mrs Garvey's, organised events to celebrate Caribbean culture, 'in the face of the hate from the white racists'. These events led to the first Notting Hill Carnival in 1964.

Third, the police. Police investigations assumed the white youths' motive for the attack was robbery, despite the obvious racial element and the prevailing racialised mood in the local area and the country. Detective Superintendent Ian Forbes-Leith, who led the investigation, told a newspaper at the time: 'We are satisfied that it was the work of a group of about six anti-law white teenagers who had only one motive in

view – robbery or attempted robbery' (Searchlight magazine). The police gave the appearance of investigating the crime, but did so in ways that were destined to fail. For some, this was due to a) lack of interest in the death of a black man, b) a misguided attempt to ensure calm in the area, or c) both.

Fourth, the government. Rab Butler, the then Home Secretary, appealed in Parliament for witnesses to come forward. He set up a public inquiry into race relations. Resonances with the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 almost forty years later are unmistakable. Metropolitan Commissioner Sir Paul Condon, speaking in 1998 said, 'I deeply regret that we have not brought Stephen's racist murderers to justice and I would like to personally apologise again today to Mr and Mrs Lawrence for our failures'.

Sadly, the death of Kelso Cochrane is emblematic of hundreds more over the years. So too are the responses of outrage, enquiries, community, police and government actions.

Brexit (exhibit two)

Is Brexit about 'race'? Why did the UK vote for something that in the views of many is hugely politically and economically disruptive? It may be disingenuous to suggest there is a single reason, but some say race has a lot to do with it. There is a view that a key reason this country voted to leave the European Union in 2016 was to stop freedom of movement, i.e. control immigration, by reclaiming sovereignty over who can come into the country. Since as a member of the EU the only immigration Britain doesn't control is immigration from within the EU, Brexit may be seen as an

attempt to stem the flow of mainly Eastern Europeans coming into the country and beyond the control of the British government. However, it is not a huge conceptual leap to observe that Brexit as a means of controlling immigration may equally be a result of pent up feelings among the majority white populous responding to the multiculturalisation of Britain in the Windrush era, about which they have never been consulted. While it is not reasonable to ascribe a sole reason for the decision for the UK to leave the EU it is highly probable that within that decision are seeds of the continuing realities of race with negative consequences for the UK's BME communities.

Is immigration a real problem though? Or is the problem the fear of being 'swamped' (to borrow a phrase) by the kind of immigrants the country doesn't want? In 2015, 630,000 foreign national migrants came to the UK from both inside and outside the EU. But offsetting immigration is emigration, including what some call the phenomenon of 'white flight' with thousands migrating to parts of Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere. Latest figures show that in 2018, 625,000 people moved to the UK and 351,000 people left; a net migration of 274,000. According to one source, between 2004 and 2017 the foreign-born population in the UK nearly doubled from 5.3 million to around 9.4 million. In 2017, 39% of the foreign-born population came from EU countries, the rest from outside the EU are disproportionately Asian and African.

Zack Beauchamp, senior correspondent at Vox, observes that over the course of the past 20 years, the percentage of Britons ranking 'immigration/race relations' as among the country's most important issues has gone from near zero percent to

about 45 percent. Seventy-seven percent of Brits today believe that immigration levels should be reduced. Beauchamp also states that UKIP has spent the past 10 years focusing obsessively on the threat from immigrants, from both inside the EU and out. With the advent of Brexit, that work seems to have been fruitful.

Kehinde Andrews points out that in the 2016 referendum, black and brown people were the biggest single group vote against leaving the EU, with 73 percent of Black and 67 per cent of Asian voters opting to remain. He points out that the UK's 7.5 million people from ethnic minorities represent a larger population than Scotland and Northern Ireland combined. Yet, the biggest dissenting voices against Brexit, the Black voice, is scarcely heard in the Brexit debate. Andrews thinks this irony means that when politicians say they are carrying out the will of the British people by delivering Brexit, they are only delivering the will of the 'white' British people. So, whilst Brexit is multifaceted, race is arguably a significant strand in the fabric of the vote to leave the EU.

Is racism over?

Is racism over? In a word, no. The recent tweet by white broadcaster Danny Baker depicting the new royal baby as a chimp is instructive. There is at least one plausible reason for the question 'is racism over?' What we might call the chameleon nature of racism. The metanarratives about racism can camouflage the way it expresses itself and is experienced differently by people in different contexts, as individuals and groups. For example, even during the horrific period of chattel slavery, including kidnap, a triangular sea trade, the middle passage, plantation killing zones, et al., not all African experiences were the same. Some Africans profited from selling their

own, some were field slaves, some were house slaves, who though still slaves, had different life experiences and greater privileges, relatively speaking. During colonialism, experiences were different between those who were favoured, usually of lighter skin, and those less favoured and therefore unworthy of education and delegated authority. Like the centuries before it, during the relatively short period under discussion here, circa 1950s to 2016, racism has been experienced differently too.

A way of understanding the chameleon nature or racism is to see its expressions as explicit and implicit even as it is experienced differently by its victims in the changing attitudes of white British people towards people with darker skin. Early Windrush migrants faced signs saying 'no Irish, no dogs, no blacks'. Landlords refused to rent to African and Caribbean people, and the 'colour bar' existed in some pubs, dance-halls, and many other places leading to them being refused admittance. Estate agents operated exclusion zones into which blacks could not purchase houses or start businesses because of a lack of mortgages and bank loans. Explicitly, bananas being thrown, monkey noises and armpit scratching are aimed at black people in the streets and footballers in stadiums, have never gone away.

Explicit racism in the mid-1950s included 'teddy boys' roaming the streets of British major cities, their prime targets being black people. Reports say they roamed the streets at night, hunting for 'niggers' who, they claimed, were seducing their women. But the impact of explicit racism often morphs into implicit racism such as the manner in which authorities deal with racist activities. For example, in the Kelso case in 1959, it is reported that the police may have been fearful of reprisals and of

further disturbances if a white man were to be tried and hanged for murdering a black man less than a year after the Notting Hill race riots in 1958.

Implicit racism is insidious in that sometimes it is difficult to identify. It is the equivalent of the chameleon turning to the same colour of the leaves when among leaves, or the tree bark when on the bark of the tree. For example, driving the political unrest in Notting Hill and elsewhere since were operatives belonging to what appeared legitimate political parties. Groups like the National Labour Party, a forerunner to the British National Party (BNP), benignly named groups like the League of Empire Loyalists and the Union Movement were less obviously racist in intent. Not so the White Defence League, the Ku Klux Klan, or later the White Wolves and others.

Around the time of Kelso's murder, Harold Moseley's Union Movement distributed a pamphlet saying 'Take action now. Protect your jobs. Stop coloured immigration. Houses for white people – not coloured immigrants.' Yet, some operating within proper political parties like the Liberal Party, Labour Party and Conservative Party practiced covert racism, like the group of Labour politicians who campaigned to have the Empire Windrush sent back with its black passengers. Then we had the Tebbit cricket test and reference to Britain being swamped clearly aimed at dark skin immigrants.

In recent times writers like Afua Hirsh and others, have interrogated microaggression and white privilege to add to the unending ways in which racism manifests in Machiavellian ways. Every time it appears that the racist atmosphere is changing for

the better something occurs to demonstrate that the scripture is correct to suggest a leopard doesn't change its spots. So, beware the prophets who keep telling you all is well, as Jeremiah warned the Jewish exiles in Babylonian captivity. The promise of false dawns can be a dangerous delusion. To ask if racism is over in the west is to enquire into the absurd or the rhetorical.

Conclusion

So then, I do not foresee a country or a world free from racism and I do not believe Black people can afford to indulge in the dream of such a world this side of heaven, where rumour has it there have been historic difficulties with pride and insurgency. Our liberation cannot wait for such a delusional pipe dream that has become the nightmare for so many. How then might black people respond to the perennial racism of the west?

First, let us note that black people have never been submissive to racial terror, exploitation and dehumanisation. Bob Marley got it right when he sang about us as buffalo soldiers, 'fighting on arrival, fighting for survival'. But, practically, do we ignore it? Deny it? Tolerate it? Protest against it? Leave the room quietly? Live above it? Kehinde Andrews in his excellent book 'Back to Black', concludes that we must reject the racist system of western imperialism and as we leave the house we must bring it crashing down in order to truly liberate not only the black race but all oppressed people (298). For me, his is a gloriously idealistic proposal, not least because it is not clear what the strategy is behind the rhetoric. Also, those who are comfortably situated in empire (read socially and economically secure) appear ever willing to challenge empire against a history of no empire having ever been brought

crashing to the ground by their oppressed who become fodder in the idealistic gameplaying of the comfortably situated. My preferred option is to create space in empire, or as Muir puts it, 'we need to transform, and transcend one of the dominant themes arising out of diasporian consciousness, racism…we need to see racism, like other forms of 'mind forged manacles', as not so much a full stop, foreclosing opportunities but rather as a comma to be negotiated (p25, Aldred & Ogbo, 2010). I want to suggest a four 'P's strategy for doing so that involves psychology, protection, protest, and power.

Psychology. In my book Thinking outside the box on race, faith and life I propose that black people need to find a way of responding to racism that does not perpetuate vulnerability. When your colour becomes your Achilles heel so that the most intelligent black person can be reduced to a trembling shamble, a bag of vulnerable nerves, by the most unintelligent white racist with the ability only to scratch their armpit, make monkey noise, say the word nigger especially with an expletive or two to accompany it, or throw a banana, we have come to a bad place. The world we must inhabit is one where the person who makes the monkey noise is the monkey. The person who scratches their armpit like a monkey is the monkey. There are, as a participant in a lecture reminded me, more subtle of ways in which white signifies to black that black is not quite good enough; by the job black didn't get, the promotion black didn't get, and much more for no other reason than that being black in a white world made black not good enough. In whatever way racism expresses itself, part of the response is psychological.

Protection. The country in which we live in the west must have strong anti-racism laws. By and large, thanks to the death of the likes of Kelso Cochrane and Stephen Lawrence and the campaigning work of many we have in Britain what are arguably the strongest anti-racism laws of any European country. The price has been high and it divides opinion whether British laws are strong enough.

Protest. Black people must never passively suffer racism. The place for protest must remain sacrosanct even if at times protest seems an aggravation, even to some of us on whose behalf the protest is made. We need a rottweiler spirit among us to bare teeth as well as the pussycats.

Power. Black people urgently must become strong and powerful economically, socially, politically and spiritually. This is true of us as individuals, families and communities. We absolutely take power seriously and for example the crippling effect of generational poverty that can be countered by education, entrepreneurialism and life insurance for example. How we become powerful must be the subject of ongoing conversation and action. Weakness don't mess with power! Simples.

These four strands are important if we are to be the self-determinants of our way in the world. Since racism in the west is entrenched in the fabric of the system, black people cannot afford to predicate black flourishing on the pity or generosity of the originators and perpetrators of a racist ideology. As the Ancient One tells Dr Strange in the Bond sci-fi movie of the same name, 'we never lose our demons, we learn to live above them'. My friends, the death of our martyrs must not be in vain. How long

will they kill our prophets while we stand aside and look? Theirs are the shoulders upon which we stand, and with faith in the one Creator God of justice in whose image we all are made, Black people must take responsibility for our own self-determination in the midst of a racist culture and world.

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[1] Antigua was inhabited by Amerindians for centuries before being cited by Christopher Columbus on his second voyage to the region in 1493. European attempts to colonise the islands were thwarted until 1632 when the British. Although slavery was abolished in 1834, the islands did not achieve independence until 1981. Antigua is positioned where the Atlantic and Caribbean meet.

[2] Born in Trinidad, Claudia grew up in New York but after four terms of imprisonment for her political activities, as a result of McCarthyism, was deported from the USA in 1955 and given asylum in Britain