

## Race and Racism(s): Current Debates in Global and UK Theorisation and Empiricism

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/soc](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/soc)**Chinelo L. Njaka** 

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Alana Lentin

*Why Race Still Matters*

Cambridge: Polity, 2020, £14.99 pbk (ISBN: 9781509535705), 184 pp.

Bridget Byrne, Claire Alexander, Omar Khan, James Nazroo and William Shankley

*Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK: State of the Nation*

Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020, £19.99 pbk (ISBN: 9781447351252), 320 pp.

The global responses to recent current events drawing attention to systemic racial equality in the spring of 2020 highlight the continued salience and importance of race and racism in contemporary societies. *Why Race Still Matters* and *Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK: State of the Nation* are thusly timely publications as many individuals, organisations, and institutions are beginning to question their own roles in upholding racist systems, making public declarations stating this acknowledgement, and – as time will tell – putting antiracist practices into action to counteract systemic racism. Although the killing of George Floyd at the hands of law enforcement in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA on 25 May 2020 sparked the latest global protests, the underlying issues of systemic racism are not uniquely US problems. Both race and racism persist, reproducing legacies of colonialism that are present in societies all over the world. Decentering the USA, *Why Race Still Matters* applies a global lens to theorisation on race and racism, while *Ethnicity, Race and Inequality* examines the subjects empirically within the UK context. Taken together, these two works add important sociological perspectives to global race scholarship in their examinations of the discourses and practices of race and racism in the present day.

*Why Race Still Matters* uses a transnationally informed race-critical lens to provide forensic analyses of why and how race has been and continues to be globally significant. Alana Lentin's main thesis is that race 'matters' because those who are racialised as non-White are harmed by the power wielded in its name via ideas and operationalisation.

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Lentin examines race alongside White-centric denials of racism in organising capitalism, the state, and society. Confronting such denials, she recognises that the concept of race precedes 18th- and 19th-century 'race science' and that racism did not end after the Holocaust, Jim Crow era, or Apartheid. Lentin innovatively conceptualises the notion of 'not racism', another statement of denial; the use of which enacts discursive violence through its function to restrict the definition of racism. 'Real racism', then, becomes only extreme and marginalised 'misguided' or pathological events removed from their societal and systemic contexts and relegated to the past, rather than as outcomes consistent with the race-political projects within which they happened. Lentin also critiques the charge of 'making it about race', whereby race functions to cast Whiteness as default. Race is only largely ascribed to minoritised groups whose very presence alongside Whiteness is perpetually questioned. Linking with the misconceptualisation that only 'real racism' counts, western society erroneously considers itself antiracist or non-racist as a matter of course. Subsequently, recognising race and its technological power is dismissed as 'overreaching' or 'making about race' such issues as immigration, Islamophobia, and Indigenous sovereignty.

*Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK: State of the Nation* explores contemporary racialised inequalities in a UK that is currently more ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse than at any other point in its history. The book begins by mapping the trajectories of racial and ethnic inequality from when Caribbean migrants arrived on the *SS Empire Windrush* in 1948 to the present day. Recounting this history serves largely to expose the fiction of the national '(fairy)tale' of arrival, struggle, and assimilation into UK society for migrants and racialised groups in the UK. For Bridget Byrne et al., this fiction obscures three main issues. The first is the UK's part in the global history of European enslavement, colonisation, and imperialism that preceded Black migration and settlement. The second is the 2000 years of UK migration history before the *Windrush* period, which serves to support ahistorical nativist discourses. The third is the full and contested histories of Black communities within the UK, which are denied their proper part in the broader history of the nation. The overall conclusion is that rather than national acceptance, racism, discrimination, and inequality are endemic in UK society for all ethnic minorities across all social areas of life.

Although both books are different in approach, scope, and application, when read together, there are points of overlap that invite questions of and provide enrichment for current race scholarship. One important point is that of race, racism, and their relationships with each other. Byrne et al. describe race as socially constructed and changeable, formed through both racist structures and community-building. Lentin focuses her book on race, (re)conceptualising it through challenging the oft-cited 'race as a social construction' refrain as overly simplistic and insufficient for challenging persistent biologised notions of race. She poses the question: race is a social construction of *what?* For Lentin, race is better conceptualised as a political project that functions as a technology for managing human difference for the purposes of upholding White supremacy.

Lentin conceptualises racism as the violent result of racial rule, which shapes social structures and lived experiences and goes beyond prejudicial attitudes and murderous ideology. However, she argues that her conception of 'real racism' is a dominant Eurocentric conception of racism that fails to encapsulate its colonial constitution and

the anti-Blackness embedded within it. Byrne et al. focus on racisms and their outcomes of inequalities throughout their book. Underscoring the plurality, the authors describe racisms as heterogeneous and shifting within and through contexts, which form part of larger racialisation processes. The authors highlight racisms as systemically embedded in domination and function to exclude, marginalise, and inferiorise ethnic minority populations. Racisms are conceptualised as the result of racial categories being used to cause psychological and material harm through the linking of racist ideologies and structures.

Broadly, Lentin and Byrne et al. are in agreement about the systemic and detrimental aspects of racism(s). However, they depart when considering race and its role within racism(s). The nuances within their arguments expose wider, ongoing dialogues within race scholarship about how race and racism are defined, the implications of which point to areas for further development in race theorisation. Lentin argues that it is essential to make obvious the connection between race and racism. For her, it is imperative to name race and what it does when discussing racism, which is a technology of power to support and maintain White supremacy. She argues that the disaggregation of race and racism functions to obscure wider factors of racialisation (e.g. geography, culture, faith, and phenotype). She also questions conceptions of race that position it both negatively when connected to racism and positively when connected to racial identity, as 'positive' race is incompatible with her theorisation of race as a technology of power. Byrne et al. do not explicitly link racisms to their definition of race. Further, in contrast to Lentin, Byrne et al. include what Lentin calls 'positive' race, acknowledging agency among racialised groups to resist dominant structures and create communities.

Creating further tension within each argument, both books mention identity politics as part of racialisation processes. Despite referencing resistance and community-building in their conception of race, Byrne et al. critique identity politics as a narrow and politically solipsistic hindrance to combatting racial inequality. The authors recognise that racial inequalities vary between and among ethnic groups, especially when intersectional considerations of gender and class are considered, but argue that increasingly complex conceptions of inequality 'fracture' antiracism. Lentin provides an overview of identity politics from its coining by the Combahee Rivers Collective in the late 1970s, through reflections on its efficacy in antiracism during the 1980s, to the present day. She refutes 'positive' race, but rather than framing identity politics as a distraction, suggests that continued discussions about identity politics (and how 'the personal is the political' (Combahee Rivers Collective, 1977)) can be better thought of as part of the larger struggle against racism and the examination of how race is operationalised as an instrument of power. The extent to which Lentin and Byrne et al. grapple with race, racism(s), and their relationship with each other, as well as the simultaneous similarities and contrasts in their conclusions highlight the current areas of dialogue and theorisation within race scholarship on national and global levels.

Lentin and Byrne et al. also both discuss links between racism and political ideologies. Both draw extensive connections between the rise and mainstreaming of the political right; for example, vis-a-vis xenophobia, Islamophobia, and the UK referendum to leave the European Union. However, the authors take different approaches to racism from the political left. Lentin spends the majority of a chapter on this, and elsewhere notes that the UK Labour Party's response to accusations of antisemitism fall into the

outrage of ‘not racism’ by defending themselves as ‘the antiracist party’ and implying the accusations are a smear from the political right. Byrne et al. spend little time on racism from the political left and describe Labour antisemitism as ‘alleged’, despite directly attributing racist ideology to groups on the right. Both books were published before the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission report on Labour antisemitism, which found Labour responsible for ‘unlawful acts of harassment and discrimination’ (EHRC, 2020: 6). The findings of the report serve to corroborate a need for further interrogation of racism from the political left in race theorisation, bearing in mind the pitfalls of ‘not racism’.

The most prominent strength of *Why Race Still Matters* is the breadth and depth of analyses, pulling from diverse sources from multiple national contexts to build upon and challenge contemporary discourses on race and racism. Lentin provides critiques of both the political right and left in the ways that both minimise the continued significance of race in the structuring of societies around the world. She also does not shy away from naming White supremacy and its role in maintaining race and racism throughout the world. Despite these strengths, the research could further increase its global relevance with the inclusion of additional nations representing South American, African, and Asian contexts to explore the ways race is used as a technology of power in locations with more varied connections to European imperialism and colonisation. Incorporating these explorations and critiques would enrich Lentin’s relational transnational analyses by exploring how race functions among more economically, ethnically, and politically diverse national contexts, how they are informed by Eurocentric notions of race, and how they are distinct in operationalising racialised differences.

*Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK: State of the Nation* creates a general picture of the contemporary UK, while considering and connecting the important social, historical, and political events and policies that paved the way to the present state of racialised inequality. The various chapters flow well from one to the next, creating an overall and in-depth snapshot of the state of the UK today. However, despite the research aiming to cover the entire UK, the data sets and discussion – as acknowledged by the authors – are largely specific to England. The authors make attempts to include data from Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland where possible; however, the effect of the lack of centralised data collection for the whole nation means that aggregating similar types of data is not always achievable. For researching ethnic minority populations, where the numbers and proportions of individuals can be quite small compared to the ethnic majority, the lack of representative data from outside of England can obscure the very trends the book attempts to highlight. England – with its major cities alongside exurban and rural areas – may have different patterns of inequality than Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland – which have smaller overall populations, fewer urban centres, and lower proportions of ethnic minority populations, among various other socio-economic differences. Therefore, generalised conclusions based on England data may fail to address fully what patterns of inequality may look like in the other regions and countries of the UK.

Both *Why Race Still Matters* and *Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK: State of the Nation* offer important insights into the body of research on contemporary race, racism, and racialisation. Lentin contributes to the canon on global race research through her thoughtful approach to analysing race through challenging discourses denying its

continuing salience and use as a technological power. Byrne et al. provide consolidated empirical research on persistent racial and ethnic inequality, providing evidence of the salience of race in the UK and exposing the ways the state has created and reified race through its policies and governance over time. As seen all over the world in recent times, race and racism are and continue to be forces that create and maintain social inequality at both interpersonal and institutional levels. These two timely publications help to draw attention to the ways that race and racism manifest both around the world and within the UK.

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