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‘The UK is not innocent’: Black Lives Matter, Policing and Abolition in the UK

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On the 25th May 2020, George Floyd died at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer. His death sparked global protests in support of Black Lives Matter. Although Floyd’s brutal killing might be understood as something of a watershed moment, it is essential that we do not allow it to become subsumed within, what Keval (2020) calls, a ‘state of exception’ narrative. Positioning Floyd’s death as exceptional – the actions of one unusually bad police officer – obscures the ‘everydayness’ of deaths following police contact. There were only 27 days in the whole of 2019 where police did not kill someone in the US, with Black people making up three times as many of the 1,098 victims than white people that year (Mapping Police Violence, 2020). Police brutality is, therefore, a normalised feature of the Black American experience, and so too is the “legal impunity, and white endorsement or denial, that accompanies and facilitates such brutality” (Loader, 2020: unpag.). Just as it is important that we refrain from seeing the actions of Floyd’s killer as exceptional, it is important too that we do not position the US as exceptional in its predisposition towards police brutality and disregard for Black lives. Indeed, as the Black Lives Matter protests across the world have sought to highlight, the enactment of state violence against Black bodies is an endemic feature of global modernity, with white supremacy (and its intersections with other inequalities) structuring everyday (inter)actions across the globe.

As UK academics and activists involved in anti-racist organising and police monitoring,¹ we recognise the urgent task of standing in solidarity with Black communities in the United States. We also recognise the importance of shining a critical light on racism and policing in the UK. Too often in the UK, we are met with the refrain that racism and violence are (solely) US problems. ‘Black Lives Matter - isn’t that just a US thing?’, so the conversations go. Whilst recognising the importance of solidarity and internationalism, therefore, we also take seriously Stuart Hall’s call to ‘struggle where you are’ (cited by Gillborn, 2016).

In both the UK and the US, we hold that recognising racism to be structural and deep-rooted reveals the inadequacy of piecemeal reforms. This inadequacy has been highlighted by decades of ‘tweaks’ to the system with little change to the hegemony of white supremacist policing. As such, in this article, we take seriously demands to first *defund* and later *abolish* the police. By defunding, we refer to the systematic redirection of funding (and power) away from the police, and instead towards community and social support mechanism. By abolition, we refer to the prospect of first imagining and then creating futures beyond policing.

Hereafter the article is divided into three substantive sections, and the conclusion. First, we explore *Black Lives Matter protests in the UK*: we show that the protests are not only about solidarity with Black communities in the US, but also about highlighting endemic racism in the UK. Herein, we highlight some of the high-profile events that have come to define those protests. In the second section, we zoom out to look at *the racist landscape of UK policing* more broadly. In so doing, we show that those high-profile cases are not anomalies, but are symptomatic of structural racism. In the third section, *resistance to police racism: abolitionist orientations*, we argue that an understanding of institutional racism must lead us away from piecemeal reforms, and towards the more radical prospects of defunding and abolition. We conclude with a call to seize the window of opportunity that the protests have created.

Black Lives Matter protests in the UK

More than Black Lives Matter protests of the past, this wave of protests have seen UK activists really emphasise the importance of turning our gaze to British racism: ‘the UK is not innocent’ has become a rallying cry. The UK protests should be understood not only as inspired by the US, but as the culmination of growing frustration in recent years. The racisms underpinning the Grenfell Tower fire, the Windrush scandal, and the unequal impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, have all played their role.

Lockdown restrictions in the UK have highlighted and exacerbated the over-policing of Black communities, and the circulating of some truly shocking videos of police brutality have made it more difficult to ignore the harsh realities of racist police violence. Amongst these videos, the tasing of Desmond Ziggy Mombeyarara and of Millard Scott have particularly shown the need to shout Black Lives Matter! Mombeyarara was tasered on a petrol station forecourt in front of his five-year-old son who, unsurprisingly, has reportedly been left traumatised by the incident (BBC News, 2020). Only weeks later, in the days after huge BLM protests across the country, the British rapper Wretch 32 shared a video of his 62-year-old father, Millard Scott,ⁱⁱ being tasered in his own home. The use of taser caused Millard Scott to fall down the stairs. This footage circulated only a day after the ‘Independent’ Office for Police Conductⁱⁱⁱ announced it would be investigating the death of Simeon Francis, a Black man who died in police custody. Showing the Transatlantic continuities in police violence, in video footage of Francis’ arrest he can be heard saying ‘I can’t breathe’: the same words uttered by George Floyd, Javier Ambler, Eric Garner, Cherry Groce and no doubt many more who have died at the hands of the police (Hanna, 2020; White, 2020).

Like the death of Floyd in the US, the death of Francis – and the experiences of Scott and Mombeyarara – are only the tip of the iceberg. UK protesters have urged us to speak the names of the many Black lives lost following police contact in the UK: Rashan Charles, Edson da Costa, Sarah Reed, David Oluwale, Sean Rigg, Sheku Bayoh, Christopher Alder, Mark Duggan, Leon Briggs, Joy Gardner, Cynthia Jarrett, Smiley Culture, Dorothy ‘Cherry’ Groce, Derek Bennett, Stephen Lawrence, Alton

Manning, Mikey Powell, Kingsley Burrell, Roger Sylvester, Azelle Rodney, Adrian McDonald, Demetre Fraser, Aston McLean, Olaseni Lewis, Dalian Atkinson, David 'Rocky' Bennett, Mark Nunes, the list goes on.

There are two other names that have come to define the UK protests too. Across the country, the names of Shukri Abdi and Belly Mujinga have appeared on placards and been chanted by crowds of protesters. The centring of Abdi and Mujinga demonstrates an effort to make visible and audible the names of Black women who, at the intersection of racism and sexism, are too often ignored: #SayHerName.

In the summer of 2019, Shukri Abdi – a 12-year-old refugee from Somalia – was found drowned in Greater Manchester's River Irwell. Whilst the police were quick to deny any foul-play, Shukri's family remained adamant that things did not 'stack up'. They drew attention to Shukri's experiences of bullying at school, the fact that she could not swim, and the distance she had travelled away from her home. Despite the efforts of the police to deny any suspicious circumstances, an Inquest has since begun to reveal that Shukri's family were right to be concerned. The case not only reveals issues with regard to policing, but also points to the failures of the wider criminal justice system and of an education system that does not do enough to prevent or challenge racist bullying. As a Black Muslim girl and a refugee, it is clear that Shukri was rendered particularly vulnerable by her positionality at the intersection of race, gender, migration status and religion (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020).

Working in her role as a railway ticket office worker, Mujinga was spat at by a person claiming to have coronavirus. She fell ill with the virus days later, before dying on the 5th April 2020. Her colleague and her sister have both explained how Mujinga had begged not to work on the concourse, especially without Personal Protective Equipment. Given her respiratory problems, Mujinga and her colleague had told their employers: 'our lives are in danger'. Rather than heeding her warning, Mujinga's employers sent her back out to work on the concourse, even after she was spat at (Weaver and Dodd, 2020). Reflecting longstanding concerns about police failures when Black people are the victims of crime (Long, 2018), British Transport Police's decision to take 'no further action', and their quick closure of the case, has fanned the flames of protest. Whilst these two cases point to the passivity and inaction of the police, it would be a misnomer to read this as a suggestion that Black women's experiences of police violence are confined to such inactions. Rather, cases like those of Sarah Reed^{iv} and Cherry Groce^v show that Black women's experiences of police violence can also be both direct and brutal. Behind the names and stories that have come to symbolise the BLM movement, there lies a much wider and deeper picture of racism in UK policing.

The racist landscape of UK policing

At every level, racism defines UK policing. Perhaps owing to its symbolism of wider police racisms, stop and search has been, and continues to be, a key focus of anti-racist resistance in the UK. It was racist stop and search that sparked the Brixton uprisings of 1981, and it played a key role too in the uprisings of 2011. Despite apparent efforts to ‘reform’ stop and search, the latest available evidence shows that Black people are almost ten times more likely to be stopped than white people (Gov.uk, 2020). Even with a plethora of evidence that stop and search is ineffective in reducing violent crime (Bradford and Tiratelli, 2019), little has been done to reduce the state-sanctioned harassment of Black communities (StopWatch, 2013). Under certain powers, this harassment becomes even worse. For instance, under “Section 60”^{vi} – which allows police officers to search anyone in a defined area for a limited period of time without the requirement of ‘reasonable suspicion’ – Black people outside of London are 43 times more likely to be stopped and searched than white people (Liberty, 2020).

Racist disproportionalities are not confined to stop and search but continue in the use of Conducted Energy Devices (CEDs e.g. tasers), where Black people are, on average, 7.7 times more likely to have the weapons used against them than white people (Busby, 2020). The disparities can also be seen in the use of force more generally, in arrest rates, and in deaths following use of force. According to Inquest – a charity established in 1981 to provide expertise on state-related deaths – the proportion of ‘Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic’ deaths in police custody where restraint or use of force was a feature is over two times greater than it is for other deaths in police custody (Inquest, 2020). Whilst the US police may be responsible for more deaths than the UK police, the same hegemony of impunity exists in both contexts. In the US, 99% of killings by police officers have resulted in no conviction (Mapping Police Violence, 2020), whilst in the UK only one officer has been convicted – receiving a suspended sentence (BBC, 2007) – over a death in police custody since 1969.

The racial disproportionalities we see in the data emerge as a consequence of deep-seated and institutionally embedded ideas about race and criminality. The police (and societal) ‘intelligence’ that precedes police interactions is racialized in such a way as to produce racist outcomes. This is evident in the ways in which knife crime and the contemporary moral panic over ‘serious youth violence’ have been racialized in the national imagination, just as the spectre of the mugger was before them (Hall *et al.*, 1978). This racialization can also be seen in the construction of the ‘gang’, with Black people being massively over-represented on police gang databases. In Greater Manchester, for example, whilst ‘Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic’ young people are responsible for only 23% of serious youth violence (according to official data), they make up 89% of the force’s gang database (Williams and Clarke, 2016). As Williams and Clarke (2016: 4) argue then, “it is difficult not to conclude that young black and minority ethnic people end up on gang databases as a result of racialized policing practices, not because of the objective risk they pose”.

The police are increasingly widening their reach, too. For instance, the last few years have seen significant moves to increase the presence of schools-based police officers. All of the indicators above, as well as evidence from the US (ACLU, 2017) and from the UK (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020; Wallace, 2018), show that activists are right to be concerned about the ways school-based police officers exacerbate the existing racial inequalities of schooling and policing. The wide reach of the police can also be seen in the increasing overlap with policing, migration and counter-terror, and the UK government's PREVENT duty is at the heart of this. A strand of the government's counter terror strategy (CONTEST), PREVENT places a duty on specific bodies – including schools, universities, and NHS staff – to give due regard to “prevent people from being drawn into terrorism” (Home Office, 2019). In doing so, it draws non-police public service providers into the “process of gathering intelligence on those suspected of radicalism” (Kundnani, 2014: 279). The national rollout of mobile biometric fingerprint scanners sees the police redeployed as immigration enforcement officers, and an extension of the government's hostile environment agenda. Linking with Home Office immigration databases for the first time, the practice of stop and scan subjects racially minoritized communities to the interlocking threats of detention, criminalisation, incarceration and deportation (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019).^{vii}

As scholars and activists have long since argued, the depth of racism in UK policing points to a problem that is *institutional*, and deeply locked into policing. The issue, therefore, is not a few bad apples, but a rotten apple cart. As Black Lives Matter protesters have argued, the solutions need to look beyond piecemeal change. Now is a time for radical demands to be heard.

Resistance to police racism: Abolitionist orientations

Just as policing has long since been a site of oppression for Black people in the UK and elsewhere (Long and Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Vitale, 2017; Williams and Clarke, 2018), it has also been a site of anti-racist resistance (Chowdhury, 2017; Elliot Cooper, 2019). Indeed, alongside schooling, Warmington (2014) argues that policing has been the *key* site of Black struggle in the UK and particularly recently, this struggle has brought forth questions about the abolition of the police.

Put simply, police abolitionist arguments are based on the idea that reform is not enough and that instead, we must adopt a transformative orientation. Reforms have been tried and tested, and, time and again, they have failed. They have failed both to address the deeply entrenched institutional racism in the police, and to meaningfully improve public safety. Calls for abolition are made in a context where the UK police have, for example, failed to address the rise in knife crime in recent years (ONS, 2019), despite being given extended powers of ‘suspicionless’ (Section 60) stop and search. And have failed to protect victims of domestic violence and prevent two women being murdered by a partner or ex-partner each week (ONS, 2019). Conviction rates for rape are abysmally low (3%), as police refer increasingly fewer cases to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS, 2020). It is abundantly clear then that

despite the dominant narrative being that the police are needed to keep the public safe, it is only certain publics that are kept safe *by* the police. And, as we have suggested above, it is only certain publics that are kept safe *from* the police. As David Scott (in El-Faizy, 2020: unpag.) reminds us, “if the police are not only failing to address the needs of the community but are also generating harm for members of those communities... then surely it doesn’t take a big step in the imagination to say let’s not give them the money.”

Whilst abolition has a long and rich history (see McDowell and Fernandez, 2018), calls to defund the police have grown louder in recent weeks. In the US, these calls draw attention to how police budgets have increased dramatically in recent decades and to how “police spending vastly outpaces expenditures in vital community resources and services” (The Centre for Popular Democracy, 2020: unpag.). Those advocating for the defunding of the police in the US have achieved some success: Minneapolis City Council has pledged to divert money from the police and towards community-based programmes for public safety, and proposals have been put forward by lawmakers in at least 16 other cities to divest some resources from the police. But the reduction of police budgets is not abolition, by any stretch of the imagination. It might be understood as a step in the right direction but only *if* those in power are committed to delivering non-reformist reforms (Gorz, 1967). Writing in the context of prison abolition, Angela Davis (2011) recognizes that we may have to make incremental improvement in the short-term but implores us, in the process, to never lose sight of our longer-term abolitionist goals.

In the UK, calls for the abolition of the police are made in a context where the Conservative Government’s callous austerity agenda – in addition to being responsible for an estimated 130,000 preventable deaths (Hochlaf *et al.*, 2019) – has overseen the drastic cuts in funding to public services. In turn, a whole range of social problems, once dealt with by trained specialists, have become subsumed within the remit of the police – homelessness, addiction, domestic violence, discipline in schools, and mental health, to name but a few. The death of Marc Cole in 2017 following taser deployment attests to what can happen when the police are called to respond to someone experiencing a mental health crisis. The police have proven, time and again, that they are ill-equipped to deal with situations that require de-escalation.

For this, and other reasons, it is concerning that the Conservative government pledged in early 2020 to increase the funding available for policing, having already pledged to increase police numbers, enhance police powers, place more police in schools, and to increase prison places. Some initial small steps towards abolition, therefore, will come via our resistance to the widening remit of the police: their encroachment into schools, for example, and their involvement in immigration control. Incremental steps towards abolition might also come in the form of ending police use of CEDs and the reinvestment of that budget elsewhere. Abolition therefore involves removing power and influence from the police and handing it to communities instead. On all of these fronts, we should recognize that this work is

already being done at the level of community activism. That is to say, the seeds of abolition are already planted. The challenge, however, is enabling those seeds to grow.

As urgent and necessary as these more reactive moves are, we must also adopt more proactive, visionary positions that centres alternatives to policing. As Professor Rodriguez of the University of California (in El-Faizy, 2020: unpag.) suggests, “we could begin, perhaps, by redistributing resources away from militarised domestic warfare (policing) and toward housing, feeding, educating, and nourishing the most vulnerable and disenfranchised people in our midst.” We must reimagine what society might look like if we did not resort to the police as a one-stop-shop emergency response. Abolition, as Angela Davis (2005) clarifies, is not “a negative process of tearing down” but rather, one of “re-imagining institutions, ideas, and strategies, and creating new institutions.” Abolition, therefore, is about *dismantling* oppressive structures, including policing, whilst simultaneously *building* new ways of responding to harm and inequality and enacting new forms of justice (McDowell and Fernandez, 2018). Viewed through this lens, the abolition of the police is not only about bringing about radical changes to policing but also about the transformation of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal society (hooks, 2013) as we know it.

Conclusion

The Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 can be understood as an articulation of the mounting frustration of the dispossessed and their allies. As well as anger, these protests have been characterised by a great hope that a different future is possible. More and more people are prepared to say that ‘Black Lives Matter’, to join anti-racist movements, and to raise the alarm about unjust racist policing. There is also an ever-growing chorus of people prepared to bear witness to the fact that ‘the UK is not innocent’. With talk of defunding the police entering mainstream discourse, and abolitionism not far behind, these times present a real window of opportunity to radically reimagine our societies. The challenge now is for us to seize this opportunity and stay true to the calls for radical structural change. No Justice, No Peace.

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ⁱ Laura and Remi with the Northern Police Monitoring Project (www.npmp.co.uk), and Peninah and Remi with the Racial Justice Network (www.racialjusticenetwork.co.uk).

ⁱⁱ Millard Scott is also the brother of Stafford Scott - a longstanding campaigner against police violence and racism.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) is purportedly set up as an independent body for investigating police complaints. Whilst giving the illusion of accountability, it (like its predecessors) has long since been criticised for its ineffectiveness (Taylor, 2020). Its independence has been questioned due to its proximity to the state, and the significant number of former police officers employed by the organisation.

^{iv} Sarah Reed died in 2016 in a prison cell. She was the victim of a series of gross institutional failures, which caused severe mental health issues. She had previously been subject to police brutality when she was ‘thrown to the ground, grabbed by the hair and punched three times’ by an officer (Bibi, 2016: np).

^v In 1985, Cherry Groce was shot by the police in her home in Brixton. She was paralysed from the waist down, and though she died 26 years later, her son (who was 11-years-old at the time she was shot) said she suffered ‘a long slow death, she started dying the day she was shot’ (White, 2020: np).

^{vi} Section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act

^{vii} See: <https://stopthescan.co.uk/>