

# GLOBAL STRATEGY FORUM

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*The 25th in our series of expert comment and analysis, by Jeffrey Boakye, a writer and teacher originally from Brixton, London. He has a particular interest in issues surrounding education, race and popular culture. He is the author of 'Hold Tight: Black Masculinity, Millennials, and the Meaning of Grime' and 'Black, Listed: Black British Culture Explored'. His next book, 'I Heard What You Said', is an exploration of race in education. Jeffrey lives in Yorkshire with his wife and two sons. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.*

## Beyond The Blind Spot: Tackling Racism In A Postcolonial Society

There's something very comfortable about a blind spot.

It sounds perverse, and it's an obviously cryptic way to start a comment piece like this one, but it's true. Think about it. Think about how comforting it is to not know something. How contentedly you can exist without the knowledge of impending doom, or potential disaster, or even mild inconvenience. How nice the journey is until you hit the traffic. How enthusiastically the cereal is poured before you realise there's no milk. As the old cliché goes: ignorance is bliss.

For most of us, a blind spot is not only comfortable but it can be a necessary part of functioning normally on a day to day basis. Every day, we wake up in a world that is riddled with injustice and despair, complicit in a global system of inequality and inequity. We busy ourselves with our dramas of life and work, money and leisure,

not permitting ourselves to really stop and consider how bad it is out there. We burn fossil fuels and buy clothes that have been stitched together by exploited hands. We sleep in warm beds while people without homes shiver in the streets. In the extreme, we live, while others die.

I won't apologise if this article has already taken a gloomy left turn. All I'm doing is peeling away the veneer and exposing, in dramatic sentences, the reality of some of the things that we willingly make ourselves blind to.

In an ironic sort of way, you could say it's survival. Imagine waking up with the full extent of the world's problems in your head all in one go. You couldn't handle it. You would break out into an instant panic, perhaps immobilised by the extent of your own bewilderment. It would be an empathetic overload that, if you acted upon it, would send you into a frenzy of activity.

This is why we keep the blinkers on. Removing them is at best destabilising and at worst, completely disorientating. It's far easier, and



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far more emotionally manageable, to narrow our perspectives and live in a fabrication of normality that allows us to go to sleep at night with a relatively clear conscience.

The world is currently entangled in conversations that will decide our collective future as a global community. One of these conversations is centred around race, racism and racial injustice. It just happens to be one of the most potent debates of the year but it's far from a new conversation. The social inequalities stemming from race politics have been at play for centuries, manifested in all manner of social problems: institutional racism across a range of institutions, the economic stifling of marginalised, so called 'minority' groups in the so called 'developed' west, ongoing tensions between black communities and the criminal justice system, and, of course, instances of police brutality against certain minority groups.

That last one proved to be touchpaper for change earlier this year. When a black man called George Floyd was killed by a police officer who kneeled on his neck, choking him in an act of brutality, the world suddenly seemed to be woken up to the extent of racial inequality in the USA. The incident was filmed on camera and sent viral across social media, highlighting the ugliest truth of racism in US policing. Soon, narratives of similar acts in US history were being brought to the fore, both recent and historic. Meanwhile, countries across the globe, including the UK, began spotlighting their own tragic histories of police racism. Within days, an international movement of anti-racist protests were rippling through towns and cities. The blind spot had been revealed and many people, particularly those groups who had not been affected by racism, found themselves looking at the truth of the problem for the first time.

As I suggested earlier, it was an uncomfortable time. Many white people who had previously been unaware of the realities of racism were now being forced to see it. Black Lives Matter became a galvanising force for change, and its first demand for the dominant white majority was simple: accept that racism exists. In the weeks that followed I saw a full spectrum of emotional responses: bewilderment, fear, guilt, sympathy, anger, frustration, pain, confusion, sometimes all at once. With the blinkers removed and the coronavirus lockdown making sure there was nothing else to focus on (not even work) a mild panic seemed to ensue. Action was taken, statues of slaveowners were ripped off their pedestals, social media was awash with hashtags and big questions were being asked of the future.

But.

Normality is compelling and the status quo is comfortable. And after a time, things started to drift back to how they were.

Already, a matter of months after the first BLM protests, attentions have shifted. The media is fixated on other things and anti-racism seems to have been pushed back into society's collective blind spot, where it can be ignored by anyone who doesn't want the discomfort of racial injustice to destroy their sense of reality. Another metaphor might help: It's like what would happen if you switched off gravity for an hour then turned it back on. The chaos was alarming, disorientating and maybe even quite novel for a while, but what a relief to get back down to earth.

You can hear my cynicism. Apologies. I only say this because I know how big and how dark the racial blind spot really is. If you know anything about the last 500 years, so do you. There will



always be those who choose to assert this is a tearing down of history - they are entirely missing the point.

The big question here is the least obvious. Who exactly does a blind spot benefit? A third metaphor will be of use. I've never ridden but I know that blinkers are not really for the horse. The whole point of the blinker is to help the rider to steer, obscuring the horse's vision to avoid distractions. To complete the metaphor, I would argue that modern society is being steered by dominant whiteness.

It's not controversial to state that white supremacy is responsible for actions that have had an irredeemable impact on the globe. The looting and carving up of Africa in the late 19th century set in play a series of events that would embed racial inequality into the central nervous system of the modern global economy. The enslavement of African people for free labour is what much of western society is built upon, a strategy that was designed and enacted at the 1885 Berlin Conference by the leaders of a clutch of European nations including Spain, France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Portugal, Denmark and the UK as well as the more recently formed United States of America. For the citizens of all these nations to be complicit in acts of kidnapping, terrorism, murder and forced labour against black Africans, the blinkers of racist ideology had to be put in place. This is where scientific racism played a key role, providing 'evidence' of the inferiority of the African and innate superiority of white people, thus justifying abhorrent acts against black bodies and the wilful destruction of black communities. In all of this, white ethnocentric patriarchy was steering the horse.

When it comes to leadership and social control, white men are a hugely overrepresented tribe.

The modern world has been crafted by white men, hence why they were at the table in 1885 and continue to sit atop every triangle of power in 2020. Boardrooms, governments and leadership groups in every sector are dominated by white men, despite the fact that there is nothing innate to this group that makes them any better suited to governance than anyone else. Accepting this fact is a huge step towards understanding how structural racism works. Society has been designed in the interests of particular groups, and one of the key defining factors is ethnic background. This is how different nations, united only by greed and skin colour, could cooperate so smoothly on the looting of the African continent.

The UK is deeply complicit in this, having built itself out of a colonial past. The shadows of colonialism are both long and dark, reaching far back into this country's past and continuing to obscure the present. After the Second World War, when the British Empire began to disintegrate, British officials realised they were on the wrong side of history. The first job was rebranding the 'Colonial Office' with the less imperial sounding 'Foreign Office'. Done. Then in the 1950s, the UK government went further and set about destroying evidence of Britain's colonial wrongdoings. Files that could implicate Britain in colonial atrocities were hidden, buried, burned, even dumped at sea, in what would be known as Operation Legacy. In doing this, the UK was effectively creating a national blind spot for its future citizens to snuggle into, safe in the knowledge that their mother nation had a clean conscience.

It's difficult to say if this is merely cowardly or pointedly malicious but, either way, it is clearly dishonest. The UK must face the truth of its past and itself. It must look into the mirror and hold its own gaze. It has to stop pretending that what



has been presented as normality is in any way normal. It's anything but. It's a dystopia of pain, trauma, exploitation and forced displacement, in which the African diaspora are centuries-long victims. This is not hyperbole. Right now, 135 years after the Berlin Conference originally met to decide the fate of a continent, black people remain oppressed, stifled and at global economic disadvantage, vulnerable to everything from social poverty to police brutality.

In the UK the statistics are an echo of historically racist attitudes to black communities. Black children are more likely to be excluded from school than their white peers. Black men and women are disproportionately likely to end up ensnared in the criminal justice system compared to the white majority. Black women are five times more likely to die during childbirth than white women. According to the Child Poverty Action Group, children from black and minority ethnic groups are more likely to be in poverty than white British families. And so on.

Meanwhile African nations, many of which were only freed from colonial rule in the latter half of the 20th century, continue to struggle with debt and economic deceleration, forever tethered to hardship created by exploitative, predatory nations. Figures from 2012 showed that the UK was owed over £2.3 billion by 24 nations, including some of the poorest in Africa, of which £825 million was interest alone. Ignoring these facts and what they reveal about economic inequity takes us to a comfortable ignorance that allows injustice to prevail, but at some point the truth must be addressed and progress in the name of humanity must be made.

Racism isn't just explicit acts of prejudice, abuse and oppression. It's the inherent structuring of everything we have come to accept as normal.

It's in the very gravity of modern society, pinning us to the past. It's a virus that was born into the postcolonial present, incubated in a colonial past. It's in the riverbed of history, steering the undercurrents and continuing to dictate the direction of travel. And the common factor in all three of the metaphors I've just thrown at you is this: racism is invisible, unseen to blind eyes, but powerful and compelling, regardless. This year, we might have seen the greater power of insight, what happens when the blindfolds are removed and everyone starts to see the truth, together, for the first time. In a matter of days, statues of racist figures from history were being toppled and removed, all over the world - statues that had stood unchallenged for generations, plural. This is not a simple case of 'cancel culture' writ large across history. This is evidence of how revelation, the revealing of truth, can spark revolution, or at least the beginnings of impactful change.

By failing to teach the truth of its past, the UK is not only holding blinkers against the eyes of its citizens but is also blindfolding itself. If it could only remove the bandage and bear the glare of history, continued social injustice and the legacy of structural racism that persists to this day, then we might have a chance of working out where to look and, ultimately, which direction to start travelling in.

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