

Changing the Narrative on Race and Racism: The Sewell Report and Culture Wars in the UK

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Abstract

The murder of George Floyd by police officers in the US in 2020 reignited the Black Lives Matter movement and reverberated across the world. In the UK, many young people demonstrated their determination to resist structural racism and some organisations subsequently acknowledged the need to take action to promote race equality and reflect upon their historical role in colonialism and slavery. At the same time, resistance to these challenges mounted, with right-wing news media and the UK government initiating culture wars to disparage attempts to combat structural racism and decolonise the curriculum. This article argues that the campaign to discredit anti-racism culminated in 2021 in the production of the first major report on race for over 20 years, a report chaired by Tony Sewell and commissioned by the government. Drawing on critical discourse analysis, the author deconstructs this report. Far from making a balanced evidence-based contribution to a national conversation about race, as its proponents claim, it is argued that the report draws upon many right-wing tropes and in the process comprises a further weapon in the culture wars.

Keywords

Equality, Race and Racism, Culture Wars, Political Correctness, Anti-Racism, Discourse

1. Introduction

The Black Lives Matter is an antiracist social movement which first emerged in the US in 2013, with the use of the hashtag # BlackLivesMatter. The trigger for the emergence of this movement was the exasperation felt by many over the acquittal of George Zimmerman for shooting dead an unarmed black teenager, Trayvon Martin in 2012. While the movement spread beyond the US in subse-

quent years, with one first emerging in the UK in 2016, what reignited and indeed popularized this movement, and transformed it into a global phenomenon, was the murder (caught on video) of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin in May 2020. Floyd's murder prompted widespread demonstrations in solidarity with victims of racial injustice across the world. In the UK, this entailed protests across the country and in one instance in Bristol the toppling of the statue of a slave trader, Edward Colston. A national conversation ensued with renewed reflection by several cultural institutions about their historic role in colonialism and slavery, increasing numbers of corporations signing up to the Business in the Community Race at Work Charter, and sports teams, especially in football following the precedent first set by Colin Kaepernick of the NFL in 2016 and taking a knee in protest at racism and police brutality. The conversation was inevitably a heated one, with vehement criticism of "baying mobs"; mockery of "virtue signaling" organisations; and booing of footballers taking a knee. The UK government had to respond and in June 2020 announced the creation of a Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. The commission chaired by Tony Sewell produced its report in March 2021, but the report proved just as contentious and polarization has persisted.

In the first part of this chapter, I shall seek to demonstrate how right-wing media in tandem with the government have initiated culture wars and have in the process mounted an anti-woke agenda. In the second part of the chapter, I shall summarise and critique the Sewell report, arguing that the report itself is consonant with the government's anti-woke agenda. While the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement sought to shift the narrative on race, by highlighting the persistence of structural racism and the urgent need to take measures to promote racial justice, the right-wing media and the government have responded with their own attempts to change the narrative, by criticizing the actions of anti-racists acting under the umbrella of BLM as un-British and questioning the significance any longer of race and racism. The report which the government commissioned, though independent, leans I shall argue towards the latter narrative.

2. The State's Reaction to Black Lives Matter in the UK

The Black Lives Matter movement was, as indicated in the introduction, reenergized in 2020 by the murder of George Floyd by a police officer on the streets of an American city. Floyd's dying moments were caught on camera and sparked a global phenomenon, generating popular outrage and renewed pressure for racial justice. My concern here is to examine the response of the UK government.

2.1. The War on "Woke"

Nigel Farage, a central figure in the Brexit campaign, was highly critical from the start of a movement he castigated as a threat to the British way of life. He prodded Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister: "I'm afraid Boris Johnson and the gov-

ernment has gone along with this PC woke agenda” (Farage quoted in [Zindulka, 2020](#)). Provoked by Farage, Johnson used a Conservative conference speech to nail his mast to the wind: “We are proud of this country’s culture and history and traditions; they [Labour] literally want to pull statues down, to rewrite the history of our country, to edit our national CV to make it look more politically correct” (Johnson quoted in [Beckett, 2020](#)). This speech is part of a wider campaign waged by the right-wing press and increasingly by the government against PC/wokeism. The “war on woke” entails identifying different threats to our way of life and lampooning institutions for their virtue signalling capitulation to PC ([Malik, 2020b](#); [Hirsch, 2020](#)). One example relates to the initial decision of the BBC to perform an orchestral rather than choral version of two patriotic songs at the Last night of the Proms:

Right-wing newspapers seized on the story... with the Sun running the story under the headline “Land of woke and glory”. They saw the lack of singing as a surrender—not a practical decision that reflected the difficulties of putting on a prom during a pandemic. Cue the intervention of the prime minister: “I think it’s time we stopped our cringing embarrassment about our history, about our traditions, and about our culture and we stopped this general fight of self-recrimination and wetness” (Johnson quoted in [Waterson & Bakare, 2020](#)).

In some cases, there have been veiled threats of funding cuts and proposed new laws. The Culture Secretary announced to museums and funding bodies: “The government does not support the removal of statues or other similar objects... You should not be taking actions motivated by activism or politics” (Dowden quoted in [Hicks, 2020](#)). The Communities Secretary has subsequently proposed new laws to protect “statues, plaques, memorials or monuments... from being removed at the hands of the flash mob, or by the decree of... town hall militants and woke worthies” (Jenrick quoted in [Hope, 2021](#)). Meanwhile the Education Secretary summarily dismissed calls for changes to the history curriculum in schools to incorporate Britain’s colonial past and involvement in slavery: “We have an incredibly rich history, and we should be incredibly proud of our history because time and time again, this country has made a difference and changed things for the better, right around the world” (Williamson quoted in [Duffy, 2020](#)). At the same time, he has introduced new legislation on free speech “to counter what he called “unacceptable silencing and censoring” on campuses, despite the paucity of evidence of “no platforming” and repeated reference to a key example of silencing and censoring when in fact “the event went ahead” ([Fazackerley, 2021](#)).

But perhaps the most revealing intervention has come from the Minister for women and equalities in a speech where she set out a new approach to equality “based on ‘Conservative values’ and pledged that equality will now be ‘about individual dignity and humanity, not quotas and targets, or equality of outcome’”. The UK had focused, she argued, too much on “fashionable” race, sexuality and gender issues:

“We will not limit our fight for fairness to the nine protected characteristics laid out in the 2010 Equality Act, which includes sex, race and gender reassignment... the focus on protected characteristics has led to a narrowing of equality debate that overlooks socioeconomic status and geographic inequality. This means some issues—particularly those facing white working-class children—are neglected” (Truss quoted in [Independent Editorial, 2020](#)).

In a year when we had become more aware of racial injustice and ethnic disparities in outcomes, the Minister seemed, as one writer pointed out, to be “play[ing] to the culture wars gallery and to be pitting the needs of minorities against those of the working class, when neither of them have been properly addressed” ([Malik, 2020a](#)). Challenged about this, “Home Secretary Priti Patel [who described the Black Lives Matter protests as “dreadful”] backed Ms Truss’s plans: “We’re focusing on the people’s priorities—we shouldn’t be indulging in fashionable issues of political correctness” ([Bulman & Oppenheim, 2020](#)).

2.2. Culture Wars in the UK

One writer has argued that the campaign “by the conservative right in the US [has been] very successful” in creating a PC bogeyman and stigmatizing the Left ([Lea, 2009: 261](#)) and there is evidence that it is making, as we shall see, significant headway in the UK.

A recent book which expressly looks at culture wars as they are playing out in the UK is very revealing in this context. The authors argue that “culture war issues are those concerned with identity, values and culture which are vulnerable to being weaponised by those concerned with engaging and enraging people on an emotional level” ([McNeill & Harding, 2021: 2](#)). In contrast to the US where groups split the same way on a whole range of issues, the UK witnesses a much broader consensus on many of the issues which most polarize the US. These include climate change, gender equality and, most significantly for the subject of this article, racial justice ([McNeill & Harding, 2021; Kuntz, 2021](#)). One might have anticipated therefore that the UK would have avoided the culture wars waging in the US. This is not the case, however. “There has been a huge surge in media coverage mentioning ‘culture wars’ ... and since 2016 coverage of the UK culture wars has taken off” ([Duffy et al., 2021: 3](#)). The major driver for this is a political calculation: for key Conservative party strategists, the culture wars playbook is seen as a vital ingredient in holding together an electoral coalition which emerged during the Brexit campaign and has subsequently enabled the Conservative party to win a substantial majority of seats in Parliament. It seeks to demonstrate to working class voters in northern England who voted Conservative for the first time at the last election that the government sees the world as they do and it seeks to tempt the Labour opposition to challenge them on territory of their choosing ([Shipman, 2021](#)). And all the while the media fans the flames, incentivized by their algorithms to pursue contentious stories.

Three main criteria indicate that we are witnessing a cultural wars issue: a group is represented as undermining order and tradition; we are depicted as

losing out to the other; and the issue is being blown out of all proportion.

An example of the first criterion is the attack on museums and the most popular heritage body in the UK, the National Trust for having the temerity to reveal their historical links to colonialism and slavery. The ensuing rows feed into a new political battle round, with “government ministers positioning themselves as ‘defenders’ of history and the nations’s pride, thus framing attempt to reconsider museum collections and “expand the historical records as ‘attacks’ on history and by implication, the nation and its people” (McNeill & Harding, 2021: 18).

An example of the second criterion of a culture wars issue is the attack on the concept of “white privilege”, a concept coined to point to the fact that White people, by virtue of being White do not experience racism. Racism is exemplified by the massively disproportionate use of stop and search on Black people relative to White people and is illustrated graphically in the experience of Bianca Williams, the British sprinter who was handcuffed during a stop and search operation in July 2020. Kemi Badenoch, Equalities Minister criticized the concept in Parliament in October 2020: “We do not want to see teachers teaching their white pupils about white privilege and inherited racial guilt”. And the same refrain was evident in the conservative dominated education report in June 2021 which claimed that white privilege may have contributed towards the systematic neglect of white working class pupils. The report juxtaposes poor white pupils and poor racialised pupils, and thus pits different groups against each other. This example constitutes “the latest step in an ongoing campaign to use the underachievement of poor white people as a weapon to demonise antiracism and keep the same people angry at the wrong target” (Gillborn, 2021).

A recent example of the third criterion of a culture wars issue is the condemnation of the decision by students at Magdalen College, Oxford to remove a portrait of the Queen from their middle common room. The Education Secretary branded the move absurd: “Oxford University students removing a picture of the Queen is simply absurd. She is Head of State and a symbol of what is best about the UK. During her long reign she has worked tirelessly to promote British values of tolerance, inclusivity and respect around the world” (Williamson quoted in Tingle & Pyman, 2021). In the same week, the Culture Secretary also had recourse to Twitter, arguing that the decision of the English Cricket Board to suspend an English cricketer for a series of racist and sexist tweets when he was 18 had gone over the top. And the Home Secretary, initially supported by the Prime Minister, dismissed the decision by the England football team to take a knee during the Euros as “gesture politics” and refused to condemn a section of the crowd for booing the team when they did take a knee (Olusoga, 2021a).

The consequences of culture wars are disturbing in three ways. Firstly, they distract attention from substantive issues. The Black lives movement highlighted the importance of addressing structural racism, but the impact of stories about Rule Britannia being played but not sung at the Proms and pulling down historical monuments with racist links “is to reframe the whole Black Lives Matter

movement as being primarily about issues like this, leaving the casual observer thinking “all these street protests because you don’t like old songs or statues?” (McNeill & Harding, 2021: 23). Secondly culture wars are divisive, stoking the idea that if a minority benefit, the majority must lose out. This is evident when for example the interests of minority ethnic groups and the white working class are deemed to be divergent. Thirdly culture wars produce an increasingly toxic public sphere, demoralizing people pushing, say, for racial justice. And they can backfire, with the comments of senior politicians arguably facilitating the racist abuse Black footballers faced after England lost in the final of the Euros. A senior Conservative politician puts it well: “If we whistle and the dog reacts, we can’t be shocked if it barks and bites. Dog whistles win votes but destroy nations... It shames me that in 2021 some in politics are still playing fast and loose with issues of race” (Warsi quoted in Mason, 2021).

3. Changing the Narrative and the Sewell Report

The confluence of widespread support for Black Lives Matter and the evident ethnic disparities in COVID-19 related mortality in a pandemic propelled Boris Johnson as Prime Minister to announce the setting up of a Commission on racial and ethnic disparities in June 2020. “It was no use just saying that we have made huge progress in tackling racism... There is much more we need to do... We have to look at discrimination but what has slightly been lost in this is the story of success... What I want to do as prime minister is to **change the narrative so we stop the sense of victimhood and discrimination**... and we start to have a real expectation of success” (Johnson quoted in Watson & Scott, 2021). A month later, the membership was announced, with Tony Sewell as Chair and all the commissioners bar one being from an Asian, African or Caribbean background. The Commission was enjoined to inform a national conversation on race led by the evidence and build on the Race disparity audit launched in 2016. The key objectives were to identify persistent disparities in four priority areas, notably education, employment, criminal justice and health; to provide explanations for such persistent disparities; and to make appropriate recommendations to address them. The commission was asked to produce its report by the end of the year.

The decision to set up the Commission was greeted by many antiracists with scepticism, given the plethora of previous race inquiries, including seven since 2010, and “no fewer than 200 unimplemented recommendations made by reports ordered by the Government” (Greene, 2020). This disquiet was magnified by the fact that Munira Mirza, Head of the No 10 policy unit was placed in charge of organizing the commission and Tony Sewell was subsequently asked to be Chair. Both were on record as sceptical of racism as a causal factor for ethnic disparities generally (Mirza, 2017) and education in particular (Sewell, 2010). Particular venom was expressed towards the concept of institutional racism, which in their eyes has become the “new orthodoxy” (Mirza, 2017) and for which the “evidence... is flimsy” (Sewell, 2010) but whose pervasiveness has “corroded BAME communities’ trust in public services” (Mirza, 2017) and re-

sulted in some of them inculcating “the discourse of the victim” (Sewell, 2010). It is revealing as we shall see that the positions adopted earlier by Mirza and Sewell are not only consonant with those of Johnson but also permeate the final report. The latter eventually saw the light of day at the end of March 2021.

I shall present an extensive summary of the report (*Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021*) below, reproducing as much as possible the actual words of the report with the page references identified in brackets. I shall then in the following section subject the report to critical analysis.

3.1. The Sewell Report: Main Findings in the Preface

The tone of the report is set in the foreword written by the Chair. “Put simply we no longer see a Britain where the system is deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities. The impediments and disparities do exist, they are varied, and ironically very few of them are directly to do with racism... The evidence shows that geography, family influence, socio-economic background, culture and religion have more significant impact on life chances than the existence of racism” (8). Indeed, it needs to be recognized that some White groups are also faring badly. While it is acknowledged that “racism” is still “a real force in the UK, all too often “historic experience of racism still haunts the present” and this perception inhibits acknowledgement “that the UK [has] become open and fairer”, with the data pointing in fact to “many instances of success among minority communities (6). In the Commission’s view, an unexplored approach to closing disparity gaps [is] to examine the extent individuals and their communities [can] help themselves through their own agency, rather than wait for invisible external forces to assemble to do the job” (7). It is crucial in this context that we do not use concepts such as institutional racism loosely and in the process generate among members of minority communities “a fatalistic narrative that says the deck is permanently stacked against them” (8). Although “the UK is open to all its communities... the door may be only half open to some, including the White working class” (7). The report hence makes a number of recommendations in each of the priority areas examined in the report These include measures to encourage the police to be “a more welcoming organization and Black communities... to overcome the legacy of mistrust”; and the creation of a “new Office for Health Disparities... to respond to the specific health and wellbeing of ethnic groups” (7). In education, “the ‘Making of Modern Britain’ teaching resource, is [the] response to negative calls for ‘decolonizing’ the curriculum. Neither the banning of White authors or token expressions of Black achievement will help to broaden young minds”. Rather than “bringing down statues” it is important that “all children reclaim their British heritage”. In employment, it is important that measures are adopted which “foster talent from a wide range of backgrounds’ rather than engage in virtue signaling measures targeted at White people such as ‘unconscious bias’ training”. Conscious of the fact that different communities have very different experiences, it is also argued that the term BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) has past its sell date. Implementation of these (and

other) recommendations “will give a further burst of momentum to the story of our country’s progress to a successful multicultural community—a beacon to the rest of Europe and the world” (8).

3.2. Sewell Report: Main Themes in the Introduction

The introduction reinforces the themes outlined in the foreword. We do not live in a post-racial society. Racism still exists but we have come a long way as the success of ethnic minorities in education and to a lesser extent employment testifies. In addition, the roots of disadvantage are complex and as much to do with social class, family culture and geography as ethnicity. Indeed, the disparities found often do not have their origins in racism, a concept that has become inflated. Contrary to “an increasingly strident form of anti-racism that seeks to explain all minority disadvantage through the prism of White discrimination”, minority success and failure is often nothing to do with discrimination but stems instead from the cultures and attitudes of minorities, especially “family life and structure” (11). The report seeks to be balanced, paying attention to minority successes in say overall health as well as the impediments to full participation. On this basis, it makes 24 recommendations around 4 themes (building trust; promoting fairness; creating agency; and achieving inclusivity) to address disparities.

“BLM marches” the report argues sought change in the UK as well as the US, but the narrative of many young people, focused on the belief that “nothing has changed for the better” as a result of “institutional racism and White privilege”, alienates “the decent centre ground... The big challenge of our age is not overt racial prejudice. It is building on and advancing the progress won by the struggles of the past 50 years... The more recent instances where minority communities have felt rightly let down” such as “the Grenfel tragedy or the Windrush scandal” or “the disproportionate impact of COVID-19” did “not come about because of design, and [were] certainly not deliberately targeted” (27). We are as a society more open than 50 years ago, as the evidence of a commissioned study of social mobility demonstrates (Li, 2021). This study indicates that “ethnic minority children with parents in routine manual jobs were much more likely to achieve upward mobility compared with their White peers” and that, in spite of variations, “there have been more signs of social progress than regress... with some groups, like those from the Indian and Chinese ethnic groups doing even better than the White ethnic group, and other groups catching up” (112). We need therefore to look beyond race, especially given that in education, “White working class children trail behind their peers in almost all ethnic minority groups” (29).

“Overt and outright racism” still persists and is particularly severe in social media. We should be careful, however, not to be swayed by overly “pessimistic narratives about race” generated by the “rise of identity politics”, which is in turn characterized by lobby groups with “a pessimism bias” who highlight lived experience rather than objective reality (31): hate crime is not in fact rising; and

higher mortality from COVID-19 is not a function of racism but socio-economic status and other factors. Ethnic minorities clearly are able to overcome obstacles and achieve success as is evident in a commissioned study by Strand on educational achievement. This study demonstrates “that attainment is closely related to socio-economic status—once this is controlled for, all major ethnic groups perform better than White British pupils except for Black Caribbean pupils” (Strand, 2021). There are significant differences, however, between minority groups and this means that the concept of BAME “is no longer helpful” (32) and we need a more nuanced approach. The same goes with the language of race and racism. There is a tendency to conflate discrimination and disparities and to employ racism (especially institutional racism) in an inflated way. Macpherson’s definition of institutional racism (MacPherson, 1999: para 6.34), which recognizes that organisations can be indirectly discriminatory, the report argues, “has stood the test of time” but “given that reporting hate crime and race-related incidents is now largely encouraged by police forces... and “there is much greater awareness and willingness to record and monitor such incidents”, the police can no longer be characterized, as the Macpherson report did, in these terms (34-5). The perception that racism is increasing is facilitated by social media and is not helped by “the subjective definition of a racist incident... To limit the widening charge of racism” we should assess “the intent of the perpetrator as well as the perception of the victim” (35). We also need clear definitions of different kinds of racism and distinguish different “forms of racial disparity”: explained (by other “factors such as geography, class or sex”) and unexplained racial disparities. We need to dispense with the notion of white privilege (as opposed to affinity bias) because it “fails to identify the real causes of disparities, and... is divisive” (36). Nonetheless racism persists and the report recommends strengthening the Equality and Human Rights Commission with additional resources to drive it out.

The UK suffers from “acute geographical inequality” which “in simple numerical terms” (but not proportionate terms) is “overwhelmingly a White British problem” (37). This reinforces the Commission’s view that “its recommendations should focus on improving outcomes for all—not centre on specific ethnic groups alone”. Nonetheless racial disadvantage often overlaps with social class disadvantage, with “people from minority communities... more likely to live in households with persistent low income” (39). Some groups have “transcended that disadvantage more swiftly than others”, with Indian and Chinese ethnic groups being significantly more successful than Black Caribbean and Pakistani/Bangladeshi ethnic groups (41). The commission identifies two factors which militate against success: family breakdown and limited cultural integration. Family breakdown is higher among Black Caribbeans and a lack of cultural integration is evident among Pakistani/Bangladeshis who tend to abide by different social norms, especially in relation to gender, with low economic activity and lack of English speaking among women evident. The commission is adamant that this is not about allocating blame.

When it comes to what we think about race, the Commission, while recognizing the continuing presence of discrimination, is optimistic both in the direction of travel and by comparison with other countries. What is crucial is that “we respect ethnic identities but also share a common, unifying, civic identity as British citizens” (47).

3.3. The Sewell Report: Main Findings and Themes in Four Key Areas

The four chapters focused on education, employment, crime and policing, and health covers a lot of detailed ground. My summary of these chapters performance will need to be selective and below I shall focus on those parts which have not been mentioned earlier.

The education chapter focuses predominantly on schooling but does briefly allude to higher education. “Most ethnic minorities do relatively well in accessing higher education, including those from lower socio-economic backgrounds” (94) with “White students... the least likely to go to university” (93). At the same time, the report acknowledges that students from the minority groups are less likely than their White peers “to “progress to the more elite high tariff universities” (95) and that “once at university ethnic minority students—with the exception of Asian students—are more likely to drop out, have lower levels of attainment, and lower earnings after graduating” (96). In the light of this, the Commission recommends better careers advice and “stronger guidance from the “Office for Students” (99).

The employment chapter argues that “there has been a gradual convergence on the White average in employment, pay and entry to the middle class, with some groups overtaking the White majority and others somewhat underperforming” (106). The picture is not quite as bright when it comes to advancement “into the very top positions in professional, business and public life” (112). It is acknowledged that “bias, at least in hiring, exists as “job application field experiments... carried out in the UK since the late 1960s” demonstrate. The report warns us, however, to be circumspect: “We know that discrimination occurs, but these field experiments cannot be relied upon to provide clarity on the extent that it happens in everyday life” (121). Varying promotion rates may also signify discrimination. Certainly “there is a perception that people at the top tend to have affinity bias, appointing people in their own image” (123). We are all prone to affinity bias but the bias of those who “tend to dominate the top positions... matters more... Many companies have been prompted into intense soul-searching with regard to race, prompted by the Black Lives Matter movement”. They have as a result adopted various diversity and inclusion initiatives. Unfortunately, “most researchers remain sceptical about the impact of unconscious bias training, quotas and diversity specialists” (124). The answer is certainly not unconscious bias training, which is counterproductive, discriminatory and “alienating”. Far more useful are “nudge’-style procedures” (125).

The crime and policing chapter expends considerable energy examining the

“disparities in rates of stop and search between Black and White people”. In the Commission’s view, these disparities need to be placed in the context of “disparities in crime, and often violent crime, that lie behind stop and search” (144). We need “to acknowledge other factors, in addition to racism, when considering disproportionality” especially given that “great strides have been made towards becoming a service that can fairly police a multi-ethnic society” (144). There is a mismatch between government and police narratives over the drivers for the use of stop and search, with knife crime highlighted by politicians and drug offences by the police. While there are indeed significant national disparities in stop and search, they need to be analysed at “smaller geographic areas” with “relatively high crime rates where stop and search is used more” (151-153). Both the communities and the police need to take action; there need to be community based initiatives to divert young people away from criminal activity, but at the same time the police need to ensure that stop and search is “used fairly and properly” to prevent encounters with a few “rogue elements within [the police]” reinforcing historical mistrust generated by “unfair and excessive policing in the past” (163). In addition to disproportionality in stop and search, there is also evidence of disproportionality in the use of restraint, sometimes with tragic consequences. While we cannot be sure “that racism was a factor in deaths in police custody”, there needs to be increased “training in de-escalation techniques” (167) and more monitoring by senior officers. In addition, the legitimacy and accountability of stop and search need to be reinforced through the use of body worn video. And there needs to be a more uniform approach to promote transparency, community involvement and scrutiny. There is also in the Commission’s view “a case for treating low-level class B drug possession through alternative pathways outside of the criminal justice system” (181). While progress has been made in creating “a more diverse police force ... policing remains a cold spot, especially at the top” (186). This is partly because “police from ethnic minority backgrounds” often experience “shocking abuse” from “other ethnic minority citizens in the communities they serve” (188). The commission found “no available data on charges of racism in the police workforce” though it does mention “significant differences between White and ethnic minority officers in the amount of internal conduct allegations and the severity assessments made by professional standards departments” (191). Despite the progress towards a more diverse workforce, the Commission nonetheless acknowledges that “progress remains frustratingly slow” (196).

The health chapter argues that for many key health outcomes, “ethnic minority groups have better outcomes than the White populations... Ethnicity is not the major driver of health inequalities” (199). Although the evidence is that deprivation, geography and differential exposure to key risk factors are far more important, it is acknowledged that we need further research to understand differences between ethnic groups, given that this was beyond the remit of the major review of health inequalities, the Marmot review. It is acknowledged that there are significant ethnic disparities in mortality arising from COVID-19, but

it is stressed that this is “driven by risk of infection”, occasioned by living in densely populated areas/households and comorbidities, “as opposed to ethnicity alone being a risk” (221). Unlike other reports, the Commission found “no overwhelming evidence of racism in the treatment of and diagnosis of mental health conditions” (200). There is disparity in community treatment orders and detention, but this is not necessarily evidence of racism since there is a difference in the prevalence of mental illness, though albeit a key risk factor here is racism.

The conclusion to the report stresses that we should abandon “the old idea of BAME versus White Britain” and be optimistic. Yes, there are disparities but they are not always negative and cannot be understood purely in terms of “race based discrimination” We need also to consider “the role of cultural traditions” and social class, and recognize the importance of agency (223).

The BLM movement has put the race issues back on the agenda, but we should not be fatalistic, accentuate differences and offer solutions based on the binary divides of the past. Instead we should be infused with the spirit of British optimism, fairness and national purpose that was captured by that 2012 Olympic opening ceremony, and has animated this report (224).

4. Challenging the Narrative of the Sewell Report

The report purports to be balanced and provide an evidence-based contribution to the national conversation over race inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement. And there is indeed much of merit in the report which is consonant with the academic literature in this field:

- Britain is characterized by “racial disadvantage and ethnic diversity” (Pilkington, 2003). Minority ethnic groups continue to face some common disadvantages in comparison to the majority ethnic group, partly because of racial discrimination (racial disadvantage) but at the same time there is considerable diversity in the socio-economic position of different minority ethnic groups (ethnic diversity).
- Racism persists and has a significant impact on individuals and families in minority communities.
- We cannot assume that racial disadvantage/ethnic disparities stem from racism or racial discrimination, but need instead to examine the evidence carefully and employ key concepts in an analytical way.
- There is considerable evidence that minority ethnic groups have made considerable strides in education and to some extent in employment.
- We need to recognize the agency of minority ethnic groups who continue to invest in education and draw on the cultural capital of their own communities to resist discriminatory practices and thus improve their situation.
- Britain has been less reluctant than many other countries to collect data on people’s ethnic identity and has been at the forefront in Europe in developing anti-discrimination/equality legislation.
- Further measures need to be taken for Britain to become a vibrant multi-cultural society which strikes an appropriate balance between the need to

treat people equally, to respect different ethnic identities, and maintain shared values and social cohesion.

Despite these merits, any hopes that the report would shift the national conversation away from “culture wars” towards a balanced informed discussion about race were quickly dashed, with the same antagonists in the culture wars at each other’s throats again. The resignation on the day of publication of No 10’s race advisor, Samuel Kasumu, who had earlier expressed dismay at the government for pursuing a “politics steeped in division”, was an early portent. Some commentators welcomed the report seeing it as a powerful challenge to “the pessimistic identity-politics-based race narrative that has become so influential in recent years” (Goodhardt, 2021), but most were highly critical, with one journalist describing the report as “shoddy... littered with mistakes and outright mangling of sources, alongside... selective quoting” (Chakraborty, 2021) and one academic describing it as “poisonously patronising” and “historically illiterate” (Olusoga, 2021b).

4.1. The Optimism Bias in the Sewell Narrative

What is evident when we examine the report is that the central thrust of its narrative has an “optimism bias”, which, while recognising racism and racial discrimination, tends to downplay their prevalence (as evidenced in attitude surveys and field experiments), significance (as illustrated not only by racist abuse but also micro-aggressions) and systematic nature (with organisations across the board producing unequal outcomes). There is some justification in seeing education as a success story, but the world of work is another matter. Here the report’s optimism bias glosses over what is for many members of minority communities a difficult transition. Field experiments clearly demonstrate racial discrimination in the labour market. Such discrimination is associated with ethnic penalties, but the latter varies by group, with some groups having more resourceful social networks so that they are able to be relatively successful in spite of discrimination (Zwysen et al., 2021). Investment in education pays off, but the return for minorities is less than that for their White peers. Ethnic minority graduates are thus much less likely to be employed than their White peers six months after graduation, even after controlling for class and education, and an earnings gap apparent in the early career of British graduates persists long after graduation (Doward, 2016). Ethnic pay gaps are in fact large and stable once suitable controls are put in place, and it’s by no means clear that things are actually getting better. Comparison of disparities in pay, employment and unemployment among different ethnic groups shows that there has been little change over the past 25 years. Indeed, for black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi men and women pay gaps with white men and women have widened. While “there are some groups for some labour market outcomes where there is clear evidence of reducing ethnic penalties, the overriding impression is of stasis” (Manning & Rose, 2021).

4.2. Methodological Flaws in the Analysis of Disparities

The report rightly says that the system is no longer rigged against ethnic minorities, but when commentators attribute disadvantage to racism or racial discrimination, they are not typically arguing that the racism or racial discrimination is intentional. Indeed, the contention in the report that racism requires “the intent of the perpetrator as well as the perception of the victim” contravenes the tenor of equality legislation which does not require proof of intention when a judgement as to whether discrimination has occurred is made. The report frequently focuses on racism at the individual level and here it rightly acknowledges its toxic nature on social media. Much less attention is paid, however, to the historical roots of racism or the structural forces that sustain it, or (as we shall see below) racism at the institutional level.

The Commission is clearly correct in recognizing that race and ethnic disparities do not in themselves demonstrate racism or discrimination. Correlation is not the same as causation. The commission’s approach in seeking to explain disparities is, however, deeply flawed. It divides disparities into two kinds, explained and unexplained, as we saw earlier. This means that disparities “are either explained by factors other than racism—or there is no evidence so they are unexplained”... there is [thus] no way, within its framework, to demonstrate that racism or discrimination... is actually causing the observed disparities in outcomes’ (Portes, 2021). Even worse is its use of regression analysis from which it commonly infers in the report that racism is a less significant factor than other factors. This is a statistical error. “The impact of someone’s race on their health cannot be dismissed by saying ‘well, actually, poverty’ is the ‘real’ cause, if poverty and race are—as they are in the UK—inextricably linked... Structural inequality is a complex interplay of causes and outcomes—and one variable can be both at once. Sticking in as many variables as possible on one side of a regression and claiming you’ve ‘explained’ away race and racism... is not a credible analysis” (Portes, 2021). This has been labelled “‘the garbage can’ approach to statistics: the calculations appear to be scientific, but in reality they are meaningless”. What is more, this approach “displays a basic misunderstanding of how racism works. Often various statistical factors, such as people’s socioeconomic status or geographic location, are themselves products of racism” (Bhopal, 2021). The higher mortality rate of ethnic minorities from COVID-19 for example “can be attributed to living in deprived areas, crowded housing, and being more exposed to the virus at work and at home—these conditions themselves the result of longstanding inequalities and structural racism” (Marmot, 2021).

4.3. Institutional Racism, a Critical Lacuna in the Report

At the launch of the report and in the press release, Tony Sewell stated that the report found no evidence of institutional racism. This was a significant and incendiary claim because the Macpherson report had argued in 1999 that institutional racism was rife in Britain. The Commission’s report itself, however, is

more circumspect, in acknowledging the existence of institutional (as well as individual) discrimination and even recognising merit in MacPherson's definition of the term. And yet when we examine the report, there is an extreme reluctance to point to any examples of institutional racism. An obvious example is the Windrush scandal in 2018 which saw significant numbers of Black Caribbeans being wrongly detained and in some cases deported by the Home Office. The Commission mentions the scandal but emphasizes that it was not intentionally designed or deliberately targeted. What it does not mention is that an independent review led by Wendy Williams found that the Home Office had displayed "institutional ignorance and thoughtlessness" on race issues, "consistent with some elements of the definition of institutional racism". Interestingly, she adds a coda which is pertinent to the authors of the Sewell report: "There seems to be a misconception that racism is confined to decisions made with racist motivations... This is a misunderstanding of both the law and racism generally" (Williams quoted in [Gentleman, 2021](#)). The extreme reluctance to identify any examples of institutional racism is further evidenced by the one occasion when the question of an organization being institutionally racist is addressed. The charge that the police remain institutionally racist is dismissed on the flimsy grounds that there is more reporting and recording of racist incidents. It seems remarkable that the report did not examine, as previous research has done (see for example [Pilkington, 2011](#)), whether prevailing cultural assumptions and routine practices in the police continue to have a discriminatory impact, before reaching its judgement. The crime and policing chapter, while providing some pertinent data which arguably point to institutional racism, ultimately shies away from acknowledging institutional discrimination, preferring instead to believe that there are a few "bad apples".

4.4. The Sewell Report's Reluctance to Be Critical

Rather than flirting with the notion that powerful organisations may be institutionally racist, the report tends to be uncritical towards them. While I recognize that it may be politic to assert that the government which has commissioned the report takes race equality seriously and has sought to implement the recommendations of previous reports, both claims are highly questionable. Arguably, the recommendation to the government to strengthen the body responsible for enforcing anti-discrimination legislation is a brave one, but it is notable that it eschews any comment on the EHRC's steady emasculation since 2010 and does not incorporate a recommendation to the government to activate the socio-economic duty, Section 1 of the Equality Act and in this way address the socio-economic disadvantage highlighted in the report. What is more evident is that the issue of race inequality, which was propelled into the limelight by the Macpherson report and for a period was taken seriously by the Labour government, dropped off the agenda until the Black Lives Movement resuscitated it. The consequence of the neglect to address race equality in the intervening period

is that many of the recommendations the report makes have been made before. Examples are manifold: in education, improving data collection, monitoring and quality of analysis, and providing better careers guidance; in employment, advancing “nudge”-style procedures such as name blind CVs, transparent performance metrics, proactive mentoring and networking procedures; in policing, training in de-escalation techniques, increased monitoring by senior officers, more community involvement, measures to increase police diversity; and in health, more research. There is only one occasion when the Commission shows some exasperation when it fulminates that “the gap in achieving the right workforce mix has been driven by a lack of consistent political and police leadership focus on this issue over the last 40 years” (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021: 196).

4.5. The Sewell Report’s Cultural Bias

The report rightly acknowledges the agency of ethnic minorities who have indeed been resourceful despite facing unique hurdles. Although the Commissioners acknowledge the importance of structural factors such as socio-economic position in influencing outcomes, their emphasis on agency means that they are often concerned to emphasise what people can do for themselves. This is important, but to produce significant change in, say, employment or health outcomes, we need to address the structural factors responsible. And there is a danger in honing in on individuals, families and communities rather than structural factors. The danger is that the responsibility for disadvantage is seen to lie within those individuals, families and communities. This is evident when the report explains why some minority groups have been less successful in transcending class disadvantage than others. “Its answer is “family structures” and “cultural traditions” (Malik, 2021a). Family breakdown, which is in fact an attribute of poverty, entails it is argued negative outcomes for Black Caribbeans, while lack of fluency in English, among a small number of older women, purportedly holds back the economic advancement of Pakistani/Bangaladeshis. The report is at pains to point out that it is not blaming the communities in question, but in arguing that the causes of disadvantage lie primarily within those groups, “social issues... are reframed as moral choices and the behaviour of individuals” (Malik, 2021a).

5. Conclusion

Black Lives Matters (BLM) have put structural racism back on the agenda, but the initial optimism felt by many anti-racists that at last action would be taken to promote racial justice has been somewhat dashed by the backlash to this agenda. This backlash needs to be seen in the context of a campaign waged by right wing media and a populist government in fermenting culture wars and pursuing an anti-woke agenda which they believe play well with their readers/constituents.

My major concern in this article has been to explore, against this background, the first major official report on race for over twenty years. The Sewell report

was commissioned by the government in the UK because it needed, given the popularity of the BLM movement, to be seen to be responding. Using a form of critical discourse analysis, I have deconstructed the report to identify its dominant narrative. This narrative turned out to be one which, while not slavishly reproducing the government line, nonetheless exhibits more sympathy to it than the anti-racist position of many of the young people who marched under the umbrella of the Black Lives Matter movement. This is not altogether surprising.

The government was careful in its choice of Chair and choice of Commissioners, and we should not therefore be too taken aback by the fact that the final report draws upon many right wing tropes and was consonant with the positions earlier taken by Boris Johnson, Munira Mirza and Tony Sewell: challenging the pertinence of key concepts such as institutional racism, white privilege and decolonizing; questioning the purportedly subjective definition of a racist incident; stressing what people can do for themselves; critiquing diversity specialists, unconscious bias training and quotas; downplaying racism, especially institutional racism, and playing up geography and the White working class; presenting a caricature of antiracism as pulling down statues, excising White authors etc.; and extolling Britain as a beacon to the world. Far from the report moving us beyond the culture wars, it has itself become employed as a weapon in these wars. “The report strikes a major blow against institutional wokeness” shouts one academic (Kaufmann, 2021). In the process, the report has become the latest manifestation of a strategy to delegitimize antiracism. As one writer puts it, this strategy claims that “anyone who talks about racism is simply doing Britain down, smearing white people, forcing a woke agenda ‘down our throats’” (Malik, 2021b). We should not despair, however, since this discourse is by no means uncontested as the popularity of BLM testifies and the critical reaction to the Sewell report demonstrates.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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