



Conquering White Privilege: A Pyrrhic Victory?

By:

ABDUL HAQQ BAKER PhD

In collaboration with:



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About the author

Dr. Abdul Haqq Baker is the founder and Managing Director of the 2009 award winning youth initiative, Strategy To Reach Empower & Educate Teenagers (STREET) UK, a former Lecturer in Terrorism Studies at the Centre of Studies in Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) in the University of St Andrews and Research Fellow for the University of Exeter's European Muslim Research Centre. He was also chairman of Brixton Mosque, London between 1994 and 2009 where he successfully countered external extremist threats to the local Muslim community and successfully challenged the destructive propaganda that accompanied it.

His strategic focus involves intervention frameworks that enable strategic community based and statutory collaborations/partnerships to address the multifaceted challenges faced by violent extremism and environments at risk of developing them. His STREET programme was subsequently cited by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and British think- tank DEMOS, among others, as a model case study. Its effective approach towards youth engagement and intervention led to it winning the Preventing Violent Extremism Innovation award (17th February 2009) for the most innovative youth programme in 2008.

Abdul Haqq's insight, experiences and expertise in successfully challenging violent radicalisation has led to him being widely acknowledged as an authority on violent extremism and counter-radicalisation in the UK as well as an expert in the field of youth intervention projects. He has acted in the capacity of adviser and on occasion, expert witness regarding international terrorism cases.



Dr. Anthony (Abdul Haqq) Baker MBA [Ed.], PhD

Strategic Director

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This article has been reproduced due its importance to the Black Identity Nexus, something I will be elaborating upon in the coming weeks. Dr Anthony’s piece remains a timely reminder of the challenges minorities - especially the black diaspora - continue to face in view of deep rooted systemic racism.

Baroness Doreen Lawrence’s tireless campaign for justice on behalf of her son, Stephen is now much more than that: it is a movement, and we stand in solidarity with it.

”



Dr. Shaun Danquah

Founder and CEO, Centric



The Purpose

The purpose of this article is not to examine the extent to which progress has been made vis-à-vis institutionalised racism. Indeed, far-reaching changes have been made to the manner in which aspects of policing etc. are now conducted. Rather, the focus of this piece will centre on the apparatus that supports Structural Racism and White Privilege, and whether political and/or societal mechanisms exist to effectively overhaul this essentially colonial system. Myriam Francois' recent article laid bare the reality of White Privilege when noting:

For centuries, white people have believed the entire world is ours – and for the best part of the last century, it pretty much was. We have internalised that everything within that world should be subservient to our whims: of course you should serve bacon at my hotel in Muslim-majority Morocco. Why don't you speak English in Spain?" [5]

She continued to elucidate upon how:

"We often believe that white culture alone forged notions of universal rights and justice, which we benevolently shared with the world: we abolished racism out of the goodness of our enlightened hearts and things like democracy, equality and art are simply products of our "advanced" civilisation.

Whiteness today may not be as visible as it was under systems of apartheid or slavery..." and that; "...We're swimming in toxic whiteness but take offence at anyone pointing it out." [6]

Whiteness – and any reference to it today – has been weaponised as intimated in Francois' article. Her ensuing discussion regarding Theodore Allen's work, 'The Invention of the White Race', highlights his observance of **"...the "white race" being a notion of the ruling class in 17th Century America as a means of exerting control."** [7]

This concurs with Achille Mbembe's discernment regarding the western concept of race:

"We must understand the principle of race as a spectral form of division and human difference that can be mobilized to stigmatize and exclude, or as a process of segregation through which people seek to isolate, eliminate, or physically destroy a particular human group." [8]

We needn't catalogue colonial Europe's exploits at this stage, where the above-mentioned strategies were deployed – often to the extent of genocide – on indigenous populations across the world. Instead, it is necessary to revisit Structural Racism within a more localised national context in order to address the 2nd question from the recent Stephen Lawrence event; namely, what still needs to be done? In order to address this question, it is necessary to provide another historic account and juxtapose it with more prevalent examples today.



In Pursuit of Justice or Just-Us?

A personal experience

Almost 30 years ago, my friends and I attended the Notting Hill Carnival. After participating in festivities throughout the day, we departed and boarded an underground train destined for home. We immediately became aware of a large number of police officers also embarking the same carriage. My case file containing official statements, counsel briefs and court judgements will be cited from this point as verification for the rest of the narrative. Names have been omitted for the purpose of confidentiality. My counsel provided a brief, outlining the circumstances of what transpired on this fateful day:

"It is my opinion that on the papers before me, Mr Baker has an arguable cause of action in assault, false imprisonment and malicious prosecution...The facts of this matter are simple and straightforward, they make disturbing reading..." [9]

After providing his assessment of my character and veracity as a witness, he continued to describe the events that unfolded as I departed from the carnival:

"...on Bank Holiday, Monday 28th August 1989, he was returning home in company with friends at or around 9pm. He was on an east bound underground train travelling on the Metropolitan Line...Also present were a large number of police officers...in the course of the journey, he was unlawfully arrested and assaulted, taken from the train at Royal Oak station and from there taken to Paddington Green Police Station where he was detained for several hours." [10]



The primary allegation of the police was that I had threatened a particular officer and challenged his colleagues with the number of friends accompanying me. In the event, this resulted in a serious altercation where the police forcibly removed me from the train and a number of arrests were made.

I was charged according to Section 2 of the Public Order Act 1986. The above incident and ensuing circumstances are not unique, as police treatment of ethnic minorities; particularly African-Caribbean young men was and remains well established. However, the reason for recounting this incident is to highlight how, as a result of structural and systemic racism, the police felt a degree of assurance to initiate an assault and arrest before conspiring in their evidence to ensure criminal convictions were achieved. What they failed to anticipate was a challenge to their allegations, behaviour and assumption that their positions, rank and whiteness would achieve the usual result – the stereotypical criminalisation of a black man.

My request for a jury trial at crown court was rejected and charges commuted to lesser, section 4 offences which could only be heard under the jurisdiction of a magistrates court. During the two day trial, my colleagues were either acquitted or fined. The judge opted to postpone my sentencing to a later date as he concluded that, due to my position in the legal profession, I was the ringleader of a gang and had orchestrated an attack on the police. His other reason for postponement was because he did not want to miss the opportunity to play golf. On 1st June 1990, I received a suspended custodial sentence, fine, costs and an order to pay compensation to an officer who was injured during my arrest.

The judge, like the arresting officers, had become fully aware during the course of the trial that I was a successful legal practitioner working for a reputable city firm of solicitors. Indeed, the senior partner had attended and provided a very favourable character reference during trial. They were also aware that I had no previous convictions, however, despite this, the judge disregarded all positive character references in preference for police accounts regarding me. Contrast this with my counsel's character synopsis to comprehend the extent to which a senior member of the legal establishment endorsed members from another structurally racist institution; the police:

"Mr Baker is a young man...of impeccable good character. He is employed by a firm of solicitors, Messrs xxxxx. He has no previous convictions. He had previously been employed by the Crown Prosecution Service....He is an impressive man who will make an impressive witness in due course." [11]

Both entities fully realised that a conviction would also jeopardise the career, home and security of a young black professional and his family. Unfortunately, all of this was of no consequence as systemically, my ethnicity fit an altogether different racial profile that was not conducive to the predominant structurally racist construct. Recognising the precarious nature of my position, my solicitor wrote to my employers:

"...I trust your firm would be able to continue to employ Tony or if his employment position is to be reviewed, at least I would request that you consider delaying such a review until after the hearing of the appeal." [12]

"F&%K THA POLICE" [13]
OR TRY A DIFFERENT STRATEGY?

On 5th and 6th September 1990 during my crown court appeal against conviction and sentence, witnesses testified and affirmed my original version of events. Additional witnesses also attended, including an archdeacon, to attest to my character. My appeal was successful, with **"...the judge making it clear that he did not believe the evidence which he had heard from the Police Officers."** [14] They had flagrantly lied. Subsequent civil proceedings were instituted against them for unlawful arrest, false imprisonment, malicious prosecution and assault and battery. An out of court settlement was reached.

Unfortunately, none of my friends pursued the same course of action, perhaps due to perceptions of a foregone conclusion that they could not 'beat the system'. They did however continue to provide moral support in my case. Challenging Structural Racism is daunting, as the apparatus supporting it has existed for more than 4 centuries. Having said this, resistance to it has and continues to happen with varying degrees of success. Since the epoch of transatlantic slavery, accounts of revolt, resistance and rejection of this racist imposition have been recorded – up to the present day where we are, once again, witnessing its noxiousness in football.[15] It is important for ethnic minorities to resist an almost default mind-set of victimhood, as this facilitates the existing zero-sum-game paradigm of Structural Racism; namely, the expectation that White Privilege will invariably prevail because the system has been constructed that way.

Professor Kehinde Andrews effectively elucidates the position of Black identity politics where he declares:

"Blackness was never created by whiteness: it is a rejection of it...Blackness is a declaration of self and resistance, not a position of victimhood and oppression."
[16]



Conclusion: Black to the Future

In spite of a plethora of narratives and accounts highlighting successful resistance to whiteness and White Privilege as stifling barriers to societal and ethnic minority progress, we must return to the initial questions posed at the Stephen Lawrence event last month; what lessons have been learnt and what more needs to be done? If the default societal norm is to preserve White Privilege, any success in challenging and indeed, conquering it merely amounts to nothing more than a pyrrhic victory – and undoubtedly, there have been many over the years; however, this should not suffice.

Professor Andrews makes a poignant remark that:

“There is no healing for a broken people while the system that breaks us is left intact.” [17]

He proposes an alternative solution where a form of Black Excellence plays an integral role in counterbalancing White Privilege:

“Black radicalism is one of the most optimistic politics that exists. While recognising the totality of oppression that Black people face, it refuses to lose faith that the problem of racism can be solved. Given the nature of our oppression, and how far the condition has spread, this might seem unlikely. In fact, this is one of the main reasons that we have generally stopped fighting for a cure and tried to make ourselves as comfortable as possible. But we are not resigned to treating the symptoms or relieving our pain with palliative care...Black radicalism is built on a revolutionary vision that provides the antidote to racial oppression.” [18]

Admittedly, such revolutionary politics risks unsettling the status quo and, more than likely, terrifying the existing white establishment; nevertheless, in view of the current political disarray and emergence of new parties as a result of Brexit, this evolving trend should not be ignored.

The reason for this is simple, and succinctly rationalised by Mbembe:

“Until we have eliminated racism from our current lives and imaginations, we will have to continue to struggle for the creation of a world-beyond-race. But to achieve it, to sit down at a table to which everyone has been invited, we must undertake an exacting political and ethical critique of racism and of the ideologies of difference. The celebration of difference will be meaningful only if it opens onto the fundamental question of our time, that of sharing, of the common, of the expansion of our horizon.” [19]

Two years after winning my civil case, I came across the magistrate who had wrongly convicted me. We were traveling on the same train together. As I introduced myself and politely recounted the sequence of events that almost altered my career irreversibly, he appeared a little taken aback and was understandably concerned. Had he come face to face with the stereotypical black young man who he sentenced or, was I the exception to his rule that he was so keen to implement? I fitted neither of these two categories and hopefully, left him pondering over the fact that we – as a society – needed to address the issue of Structural Racism and White Privilege. Only, this time, we would not be bringing anything to the table, except the table itself.



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Contact

Dr. Anthony (Abdul Haqq) Baker MBA [Ed.], PhD

Strategic Director

E: anthony.baker@cen-alliance.com

W: www.abdulhaqqbaker.com