

Review – Race and the Undeserving Poor: From Abolition to Brexit

Written by Nivi Manchanda

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NIVI MANCHANDA, JUL 31 2020

Race and the Undeserving Poor: From Abolition to Brexit

By Robbie Shilliam

Columbia University Press, 2018

Robbie Shilliam's *Race and the Undeserving Poor: From Abolition to Brexit* traverses a vast historical terrain. In a short space of time, Shilliam deftly manages to paint a picture of Britain that spans the abolition of slavery and 'the poor laws' beginning in the 1780s all the way to 2016, when Britain voted to leave the European Union. *Race and the Undeserving Poor* tells the story of colonial and postcolonial Britain and the book's power lies in its ability to not only narrate a history but also to portend its future. This is increasingly clear to me as I write this review in Bath, UK, against the backdrop of two events that structure the present: a global pandemic that has disproportionately affected people of colour and a (equally global) reckoning with racism in the aftermath of George Floyd's brutal murder by a policeman – or perhaps more accurately by four policemen – in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I will summarise some of the core arguments that resonated with me, occasionally tracking back to the current moment, and the ways in which *Race and the Undeserving Poor* can help make sense of this bewildering present.

Class, race and worth

Shilliam's book provides a history of British politics to show how race and class have always been mutually implicated, and even been co-constitutive in the UK. Building on Stuart Hall's claim that "class relations function as race relations" and that "race is the modality in which class is lived" (Hall, 1998: 55), as well as drawing on what Cedric Robinson (1983) has called the "the black radical tradition", Shilliam posits that class in Britain cannot be detached from race, and in particular that the "white working class" has been conjured up as a constituency to suit Britain's colonial, and later imperial agenda. In his own words: "We must face the fact that the 'white working class' is not – and has never been – a category indigenous to Britain, least of all England. We must acknowledge that the working class was constitutionalized through the empire and its aftermaths; and in this respect, class is race." (p.107) This intimate relationship between race and class is the theoretical edifice on which Shilliam builds his analysis of modern Britain.

Race and the Undeserving Poor charts the lineage of the ascendancy of this so-called White working class, that in the 21st century, we are told, has been effectively abandoned by the country. Indeed, as Boris Johnson launches yet another initiative to look at race relations in Britain and the 'gap' in academic achievement, in opportunities, and in housing provision between people of colour and Whites, there is a glaring addition – that of White working class boys. Johnson's commission on racial inequality will include White boys who do badly at school, in order to examine *all* the disparities in British society. Downing Street maintains that the broader remit of the commission shows a commitment to the Conservatives' "levelling up agenda" and to present equal opportunities for all. This inclusion of (White) working class boys is notable for two main reasons. The first and more obvious one is that this is a deliberate dilution of the demand for racial justice. The enquiry was in response to the 'Black Lives Matter' movement, whose explicit mission is to eradicate White supremacy. Instead, we are presented with an amorphous and vague attempt to fix

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inequity that ultimately detracts from the core goals of the movement and the people galvanised by it. The second thing that stands out is the enterprising nature of this move by the Conservative Party. The centring of ‘Whiteness’ whilst maintaining the framing of class is an ingenious, if devious, tactic. It pre-empts the formation of a coalitional politics, or a politics of solidarity that challenges the status quo that might otherwise emerge from class consciousness. The working class is divided into the White (read: deserving) and the non-White (read: undeserving) and enacted upon accordingly.

Racialised welfare

It is precisely this distinction between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ poor that Shilliam excavates, walking us through how it has been implicitly, and increasingly explicitly, racialised and re-racialised by elite actors over time. Indeed, as Shilliam argues, elite actors have found “ever more expansive terms” to uphold this distinction (p.6), which has been key to preserving, or trying to preserve the integrity of Britain’s (post) colonial order. The idea that only those who are racialised as White are deserving of welfare “has been the case from Abolition to Brexit” (p.6) even as the coordinates of this racialisation shift over time. In the current moment it is through the invocation of an ostensibly left-behind White working class that is interpellated as ‘deserving’ and pitted against an ‘undeserving’ racialised population that Britain’s long colonial legacy of preservation of empire – or some remnant of it – is now playing out.

This is palpably evident if we stop a moment to consider the events of the last few weeks. In Bristol the statue of Edward Colston, a notorious and prominent slave-trader was brought down by a crowd of people protesting about the murder of George Floyd and racism more broadly. Against the backdrop of thousands of people chanting “bring him down”, Colston was brought down peacefully with a few ropes and then dumped unceremoniously into the Bristol harbour. Given that the harbour was the place from where many a slave ship sailed, the poignance of this was not lost on those observing this momentous event. In response to anti-racism demonstrations across the country, however, there have been counter demonstrations and it does not take a leap of the imagination to contend with what this connotes. And yet, those protesting against the anti-racists have been compared to the original protestors by the media, by the politicians and by the public at large. What gives rise to this wellspring of anger and resentment? The answer can be found in Shilliam’s book.

In the wake of decades of austerity and the erosion of the (somewhat mythologised) national compact, we have witnessed the “diminution of the benefits that whiteness once afforded” (p.156). The *relative* advantage that White people – specifically poorer White people – once enjoyed has decreased. This position of comparative privilege was institutionalised through formal, and later informal ‘colour bars’ which functioned through trade unions, discriminatory housing and other welfare provision. Whilst these colour bars have not disappeared, they have receded. The welfare state that once existed, albeit primarily for White people, has now all but been dismantled, with its dredges (in theory) shared between all citizens regardless of the colour of their skin. And it has been far more politically expedient for the political class across the Labour/Conservative divide to craft a narrative that rests on a distinction between those deserving of this welfare and those classified as unworthy. By using proximity to Whiteness as a yardstick to measure worth, not only has the ‘White working class’ gained purchase as a constituency, it has also diverted from the tragedy of the erosion of the welfare state. Instead of a ‘de-racination’ of welfare provision, this provision has been dialled back dramatically, and people of colour made into the scapegoats.

Racism across the British political spectrum

Shilliam’s ability to contextualise critical moments and tendencies in British politics is perhaps the book’s greatest intellectual, and more importantly, pedagogical triumph. Many of us are familiar with the abolition of slavery in 1833 in parts of the British empire, with Enoch Powell and his rivers of blood speech, and with Margaret Thatcher’s love of the European Union for instance. But *Race and the Undeserving Poor* locates these instances in their broader historical and political contexts. The abolition of slavery was driven by and in the colonies, and the White abolitionists in Britain were primarily concerned with the ‘blackening’ of the English genus. On this account, enslavement did not allow for the development of a proper work ethic and respected qualities of ‘industriousness, prudence and patriarchy’. Abolition in Britain was never fundamentally about racial justice or equality. In somewhat analogous

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fashion, Enoch Powell, often presented as an intolerable racist, even by the standards of the 1960s Britain, was not as divisive a figure as one is now led to believe. His sacking after the infamous rivers of blood speech was protested not just by the right but also by the left, including by trade unionists. And finally, Thatcher's affection for the European Union was always conditional. Whilst she championed the marketisation that the EU promised, in her 1988 Bruges speech she showed "alarm at the erosion of British sovereignty" (p.151). This alarm mirrored that expressed by Labour, whose own Euroscepticism was racialised and either couched in the language of 'workers conditions' or an alignment with Europe as expressed a detraction from Britain's 'Commonwealth interests'. The connective tissue across the political spectrum, and across time in Britain has been racism.

Resistance and Solidarity

Notwithstanding this bloody and racist genealogy, *Race and the Undeserving Poor* is not merely a critique of Britain's imperial past and postcolonial present. It is also a story of the resistance to this legacy and presence of empire, and of those who have pushed back against the political economy of classification that deems some people less worthy than others on the basis of their skin. These skeins of resistance run through the book through their many avatars. In the form of "the Haitian revolutionaries, the abolitionist movements amongst British workers, the Black Baptists of Morant Bay, Black Power in Britain, Grunwick, Westway, [...] and many more". Although "this detritus of empire has rarely been considered the material from which to build new publics, and certainly not in the metropolitan core", Shilliam reminds us that "the stone which the builders rejected shall become the chief cornerstone." (p.134) In the interstices of the politics of racism and racialisation, we glimpse another politics – a politics of solidarity.

In the contemporary conjuncture, we see this coalitional politics take hold in Britain and elsewhere. There is a palpable shift in discourse: on the streets, on Twitter, in academia. Black Lives Matter has become a rallying cry, and not a hollow one. Activists and community organisers are making very similar arguments to the ones found in *Race and the Undeserving Poor*, highlighting the ways in which racism and its manifestations such as police brutality are not incidental or supplementary features of the current political landscape, but rather are baked into a broken capitalist system that needs to be overthrown, and not merely reformed. Sylvia Wynter argued in 1994 that humanness is "always already defined not only in optimally White terms, but also in optimally middle-class terms" (Wynter, 1994: 44). A redefinition is long overdue; and without it, we all lose. Shilliam ends by proclaiming that "justice for Grenfell is justice for all" (p.131). People at rallies are now chanting "no justice no peace" around the world. Justice – in its manifold guises, including the defunding of the police, the abolition of the prison-industrial complex, and reparations – is on the cards, and it shall be delivered.

About the author:

Dr Nivi Manchanda is a Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) of International Politics at Queen Mary, University of London. She is interested in questions of race, empire, and gender and has published in, among other journals, *Security Dialogue*, *Millennium*, *Current Sociology*, and *Third World Quarterly*. She is the co-editor of *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line* (Routledge: 2014) She is currently the co-convenor of the British International Studies' Colonial, Postcolonial, Decolonial Working Group and the co-editor of the Journal *Politics*. Her monograph: *Imagining Afghanistan: The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge* has been published recently with Cambridge University Press (2020).