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Between Universalism and Identity Politics

Contextualising Luxembourg's Racism Debate

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a 46-year-old black American man was killed in Minneapolis, Minnesota, after being arrested for allegedly trying to buy a pack of cigarettes using a counterfeit $20 bill. The police killing of yet another unarmed African-American citizen sparked outrage across the country and beyond. Street protests and demonstrations mushroomed in cities around the globe, thereby propelling racism (back) to the centre of the political debate.

The protests also found their way to Luxembourg. On June 5, 2020, more than a thousand people gathered in front of the US Embassy to express solidarity with the *Black Lives Matter* movement and demonstrate against police brutality. It was partly thanks to this protest that the racism debate gained momentum in the Grand Duchy.

The urge for a broader societal debate was brought to the fore by two specific incidents. First, on June 15, the daily newspaper *Tageblatt* featured a story of the Tshilumba family, in which the two Tshilumba sisters, Tiffany and Elodie, discussed the various ways in which they had experienced racism whilst growing up in Luxembourg. The story formed part of a series of vignettes entitled "Racism in Luxembourg", and covered the personal experiences of people of colour in the Grand Duchy. The article caused quite a stir on social media; following the publication of the article, the Tshilumba sisters posted a video response on Facebook, explaining that they had been misrepresented and emphasising that they felt welcomed by and well-integrated into Luxembourg society.

Does Luxembourg have a problem with racism?

A second incident occurred on June 25, when *RTL* Television aired an interview with Maimuna Djalò, a final-year high school student at Luxembourg Athenaeum, who spoke out about her experiences of racism in the classroom. Djalò described how she attended a performance of the musical "Fame" earlier this year at her high school, which featured a white actor wearing blackface makeup. When confronted about the issue, the high school principal, Claude Heiser, categorically denied all allegations of racism, explaining that no harm was done since 'no one was ridiculed or caricaturized'.

These two incidents raise questions about the existence of structural and institutional racism in the Grand Duchy. To put it bluntly, does Luxembourg have a problem with racism? In this contribution, I explore this question by drawing on the British experience. The broader aim of this article is to contextualise the current debate in Luxembourg by embedding it in the broader literature. I do so by drawing on books and articles on the politics of race and racism, notably from the British context, and subsequently mapping the discussions in Luxembourg onto these existing scholarly perspectives. Drawing on the examples and literature from other countries can help defuse the societal debate. Perhaps more importantly, it shows that despite our unique situation, the racism debate in the Grand Duchy

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bears much resemblance to discussions occurring elsewhere.

In this article, I draw from two recent books that explore discourses and perspectives on racism, including Reni Eddo-Lodge's *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2017), and Afua Hirsch's *Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging* (2018). Prior to going into any further detail, however, it is helpful to briefly introduce the British context.

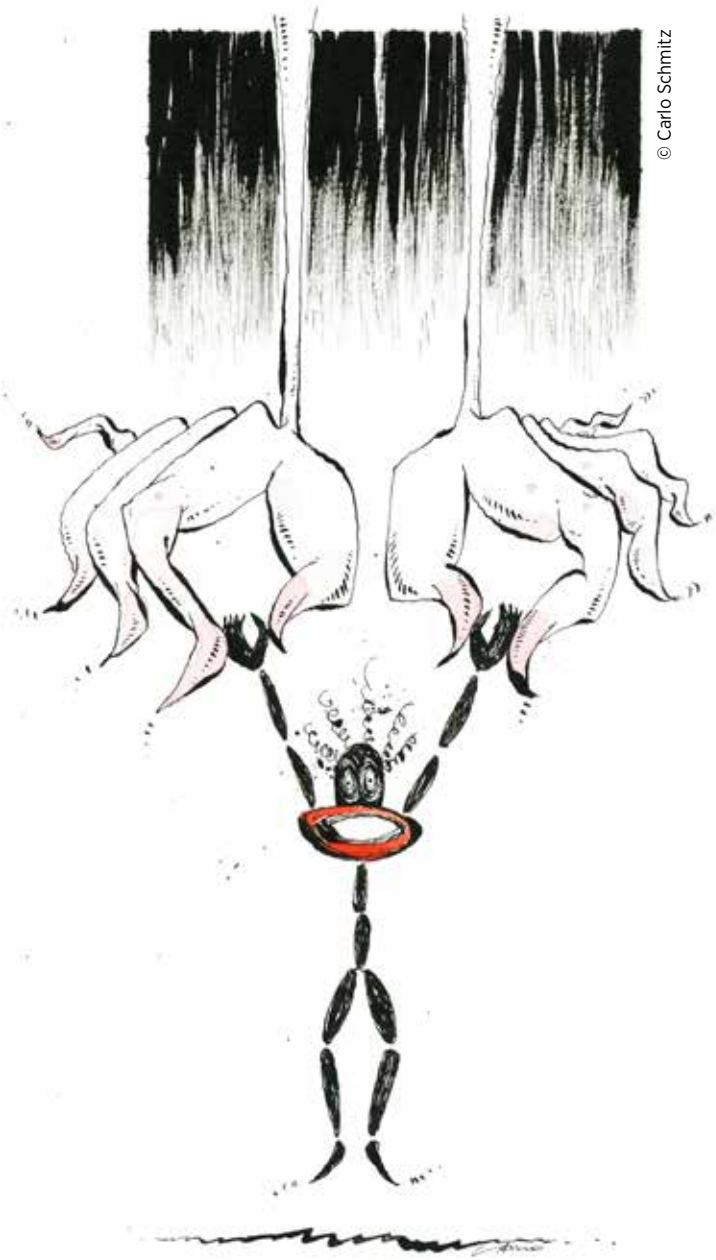
The Politics of Race in the United Kingdom: Lessons from Brexit Britain

Due to Britain's colonial past, the country has had an extended and convoluted history with racism. Britain has long proven an attractive place for immigrant communities, offering political stability as well as a relatively high standard of living. In fact, in light of the casualties suffered during World War II, the British government initially actively encouraged mass immigration from the empire and Commonwealth countries to fill shortages in the labour market. The British Nationality Act of 1948 granted British citizenship to all people living in the United Kingdom and its colonies. This implied that people living in the British colonies were granted the right to enter and settle in the United Kingdom. As a result, many immigrants from the West Indies (a region located in the North Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea) relocated to the 'mother country'.

The winding up of the British Empire in subsequent decades triggered large-scale immigration from Black Commonwealth nations to the British mainland. Rising racial tensions as well as the emergence of far-right movements led to the tightening of the country's immigration policy. As a result, from the 1960s onwards, net immigration stabilised, and the issue of race became less politically salient.

In more recent years, immigration has come primarily from Eastern Europe, particularly following the so-called 2004 'Big Bang' Enlargement of the European Union, after which Britain opened up its borders to migrants from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. The arrival of new immigrants rekindled debates about immigration and racism. At the same time, the idea that multiculturalism (i.e. the co-existence of diverse cultures) had failed became increasingly widespread.

In 2012, then Home Secretary Theresa May introduced the so-called 'hostile environment policy', which comprised a series of administrative and legislative measures to make it particularly difficult for immigrants without proper documentation to remain in the United Kingdom. The aim of the policy was to actively discourage immigrants from coming to the UK by creating a hostile environment (quite literally), whilst simultaneously encouraging those currently residing in the country to leave on a voluntary basis.



The hostile environment policy forms part of a longstanding practice of institutionalised hostility towards (racial) minorities. Indeed, the policy serves as a useful example to illustrate how racial governance can become institutionalised by advocating discriminatory practices and racial exclusion under the pretence of maintaining law and order.

The ensuing politicisation of immigration helped pave the way for the Brexit referendum, which was partly geared to blocking the rising popularity of the populist radical right UK Independence Party (UKIP). The nationalist and anti-immigrant sentiments unleashed in the runup to the Brexit vote propelled the issue of 'race' squarely back onto the public agenda.

It was against this backdrop that the books by Eddo-Lodge and Hirsch were published. In *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, Reni Eddo-Lodge traces the British history of slavery, police brutality and discriminatory practices in both education and employment. As the title indicates, the book captures her frustration with the fact that discussions surrounding race and racism are often led and dominated by people who are not directly affected by it. 'At best', she writes, 'white people have been taught not to mention that people of colour are "different" in case it offends us. They truly believe that the experiences of their life as a result of their skin colour can and should be universal'.[1] The emotional disconnect resulting from this belief is, in her view, illustrative of white privilege, a figurative shield that protects white people from being systematically excluded from narratives of being human. In her own words: 'To be white is to be human; to be white is universal. I only know this because I am not'.[2]

Similarly, Afua Hirsch's memoir presents us with a collection of sometimes blatant but often very subtle experiences of racism while growing up as a mixed-race woman of Ghanaian and German-Jewish heritage in Wimbledon, a posh (and predominantly white) suburb of London. In *Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging* Hirsch describes how national imaginaries of quintessential Britishness are built around the idea of whiteness: 'British society', she writes, sees itself as 'polite, wholesome, home to what we imagine to be "British culture" – an obsession with the weather, picnics and deckchairs, umbrella in hand, eating strawberries and cream, cheering the underdog, forming endless orderly queues'.[3] In this society, Hirsch is often targeted by microaggressions, for instance by being asked where she is *really* from when maintaining that she is from Wimbledon, or by being repeatedly prompted to show her student card at Oxford University, while her fellow white classmates were rarely stopped.

Both books serve as a powerful reminder for white people that our experiences are very different from the lived realities of people of colour. More importantly, both accounts provide insight into what it is like to grow up in a predominately white society that considers itself to be 'post-racial'. Post-racialism refers to the relatively widespread (but often misguided) belief that race neither exists nor matters. It is built on the idea that racism is a relic of a distant past that has become irrelevant in modern society. People who hold post-racial views generally consider themselves to be 'colour-blind'.

While Denial, Colour-blindness and Post-racial Frames

Colour-blindness and post-racial frames are much debated both in the academic literature and beyond. While pseudo-scientific theories of race have largely been discredited, much debate remains about how to articulate and problematise issues pertaining to race without becoming complicit with racism. It ultimately boils down to the question as to whether and how we can possibly end racism when the conceptual tools used to discuss race implicitly acknowledge and indeed reinforce its existence.

There are different strands of post-racialism, ranging from more conservative views arguing that the declining salience of race in today's world – as illustrated by the inauguration of America's first black president – indicates the arrival of a 'post-racial moment', to more progressive and radical claims, suggesting that we must discard race as a concept altogether in order to embrace universal claims to humanity. Proponents of the latter strand maintain that the reproduction of racial frames is a prerequisite for racism. To be sure, there are people of colour who are in favour of abandoning 'race' as a category. The British historian Paul Gilroy is a case in point, who has long argued 'against race', explaining that race-thinking is counter-productive as it prevents us from moving beyond 'race'.[4] However, Gilroy also recognises that we have not arrived there yet. In other words, there is a difference between aspiring for a post-racial world and believing that we already live in one.

Critics maintain that the politicisation of race (and other identities) can have a fracturing effect on society. The American political scientist Francis Fukuyama, for instance, has spoken out 'against identity politics', arguing that the fragmentation of democratic societies into ever-narrower segments threatens the collective. 'This is a road', he writes, 'that leads only to state breakdown and, ultimately, failure. Unless […] liberal democracies can work their way back to more universal understandings of human dignity, they will doom themselves – and the world – to continuing conflict'.[5]

However, such claims to universalism fail to acknowledge existing power structures and underlying social inequalities. Post-racial frames are often a symptom of what Eddo-Lodge refers to as 'white denial', which is the refusal to accept the existence of structural racism. 'This emotional disconnect', she suggests, 'is the conclusion of living a life oblivious to the fact that their skin colour is the norm and all others deviate from it'.[6]

The accounts by Eddo-Lodge and Hirsch both suggest that post-racial frames are often used to silence people of colour who try to articulate the racism they experience. Any attempt to free ourselves from race-thinking must take into account structural inequalities and existing power relations.

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Luxembourg has a Serious Problem with Racism

This message carries important lessons for the racism debate in Luxembourg. Of course, the Luxembourg context is very different from the British one. Unlike Britain, Luxembourg does not have (much) colonial baggage.[7] Partly as a result of this, discussions surrounding race and racism have rarely gained much traction in the Grand Duchy. But as the two incidents mentioned at the beginning of this article indicate, this conversation is long overdue. In both instances, young women of colour spoke out about their lived experiences with everyday racism, and in both instances, they were confronted (and to some extent silenced) with post-racial frames.

As the books by Eddo-Lodge and Hirsch indicate, racism can be perpetuated by the (wilful or unconscious) failure to see and recognise racism. Silencing discussions about race denies people of colour's attempts to raise awareness about the ways in which their lived realities are negatively impacted by racism, thereby further delegitimising the experiences of people of colour. The ability to speak about racism *and be heard* is central to challenging racism. The inability (or unwillingness) to see race and acknowledge the presence of racism in Luxembourg society can therefore become an act of racism. To paraphrase Afua Hirsch, how can we ever be post-racial without admitting how racial a society we have been?[8] ◆

1 Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017, p. ix.

2 Ibid., p. xvii.

3 Afua Hirsch. *Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging*, London, Vintage, 2018, p. 117.

4 Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line,* Cambridge/Mass., Harvard University Press, 2000.

5 Francis Fukuyama, "Against Identity Politics: The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy", *Foreign Affairs,* September/October 2018, p. 93.

6 Eddo-Lodge, op. cit., p. ix.

7 See, however: Romain Hilgert, *Banken, Kaffi, Hädekanner, 500 Jahre Luxemburg und die Dritte Welt*, Luxemburg, COPE, 1992.

8 Hirsch, op. cit., p. 125.