

## Reflections on Racism

Language was developed by human beings to facilitate communication but so often it is used in such a way that it actually prevents communication. How often does what you intended to communicate to someone come across to them in a way you did not intend? Perhaps in a way you never dreamed it could be interpreted? If we don't listen to 'the other' and get to know them, then the 'default position' in our minds is likely to be an expectation that they will have exactly the same thoughts as our own. A rather self-centred arrogant position that leads to communication failure and misunderstanding.

If you think of a spectrum with total self-centredness one end and total other-centredness at the other pole, the ideal position would be for most people to be clustered in the centre; but the truth is that we have crept ever further towards the self-centred pole. Most of us find it increasingly difficult to empathise with 'others' the more different we perceive them from ourselves and the further away they are geographically. We have a small 'us' group we are concerned about and we define ourselves by making all the others 'them'. Sometimes our small group is just 'me' and the whole world is 'them'.

We have an inbuilt hunger for 'purity' and 'absolutes'; two things we can't have. We tend to see things in black and white when most things are somewhere in between. We mostly think of black negatively and white as superior and yet they depend on and complement each other as in the Yin-Yang icon. We have made a serious mess of humanity by creating racism when we all belong to one human race. Our enormously complex genome is over 90% exactly the same for us all and yet we try to separate out 'races' with less than 1% of what we are! Racism is very difficult to define and even harder to deal with because it is a construct that has nothing to do with skin colour or any other bodily features.

We divide people into Black and White races, and sometimes Brown or Yellow or Red races as well because skin colours are concretely visible and act as convenient labels. These race-colours enable us to be enraged ( racist - bad) by the colour difference or colour-blind (ever so good and non-racist). But we are all racist to some extent because we live in a world of power hierarchies.

**Race is all about power.** There are powerful dominant groups/races that suppress and oppress groups/races that are less powerful. The systems of domination and oppression operate by masking the power/lack of power divide with skin colour and myths about the difference that skin colour is supposed to make.

Centuries of injustice inflicted by powerful dominant groups(usually white races) on groups(usually non-white races) lacking power adds up to a human history of atrocities that have mounted up and generated a toxic legacy that has been covered up with denial, glorification of war and severely redacted history taught in schools. The Covid pandemic has exposed this toxic legacy as Black people are overall more vulnerable to it than Whites. At the same time the pandemic has exacerbated to boiling point the frustration with the growing visibility of injustice.

It is time to face Racism for what it really is. Listening in safe small groups to how people in different groups experience Racism, is the first step. Creating inclusive groups to work on reviewing and replacing the racist systems we all live with at present needs to be the longer term aim. There are some difficult concepts to be mastered. Not only 'racism' but the 'default positions' in our thinking and structures we create, need to be understood. Decision making groups, even if they have a realistic non-white membership, tend to 'White default thinking' leading to White interests excluding Black interests in the decisions they make.

The 'male default position' needs to be taken into account in the same way. Decision-making bodies, even if they include some Blacks and women, are likely to think in a White male default position. And this is important as Black women experience the intersection of male default and White default positions. Racism cannot be ended by anything less than a change in thinking from Black-White people to equal human beings with equal rights in our systems and all our decisions.

A Channel 4 documentary "The School That Tried to End Racism" has shown us a possible way forward. While viewing this programme my thoughts turned to how important it is to involve every MP and every decision-making committee in this kind of consciousness- raising exercise before we can begin to analyse and reform the systems that keep Racism going. A recent (2017) book by Reni Eddo-Lodge, "Why I'm No Longer Talking To White People About Race" is a shocking eye-opener to the exclusion that Black people experience daily.

The time is ripe. . Myths of White Genocide by vengeful Blacks gaining power, Blacks outbreeding Whites to grab power and oppress Whites and Far Right radicalisation are growing. Covid 19 has been a positive trigger. Let us use the chance to get going on.

Ruth Barnett June 2020