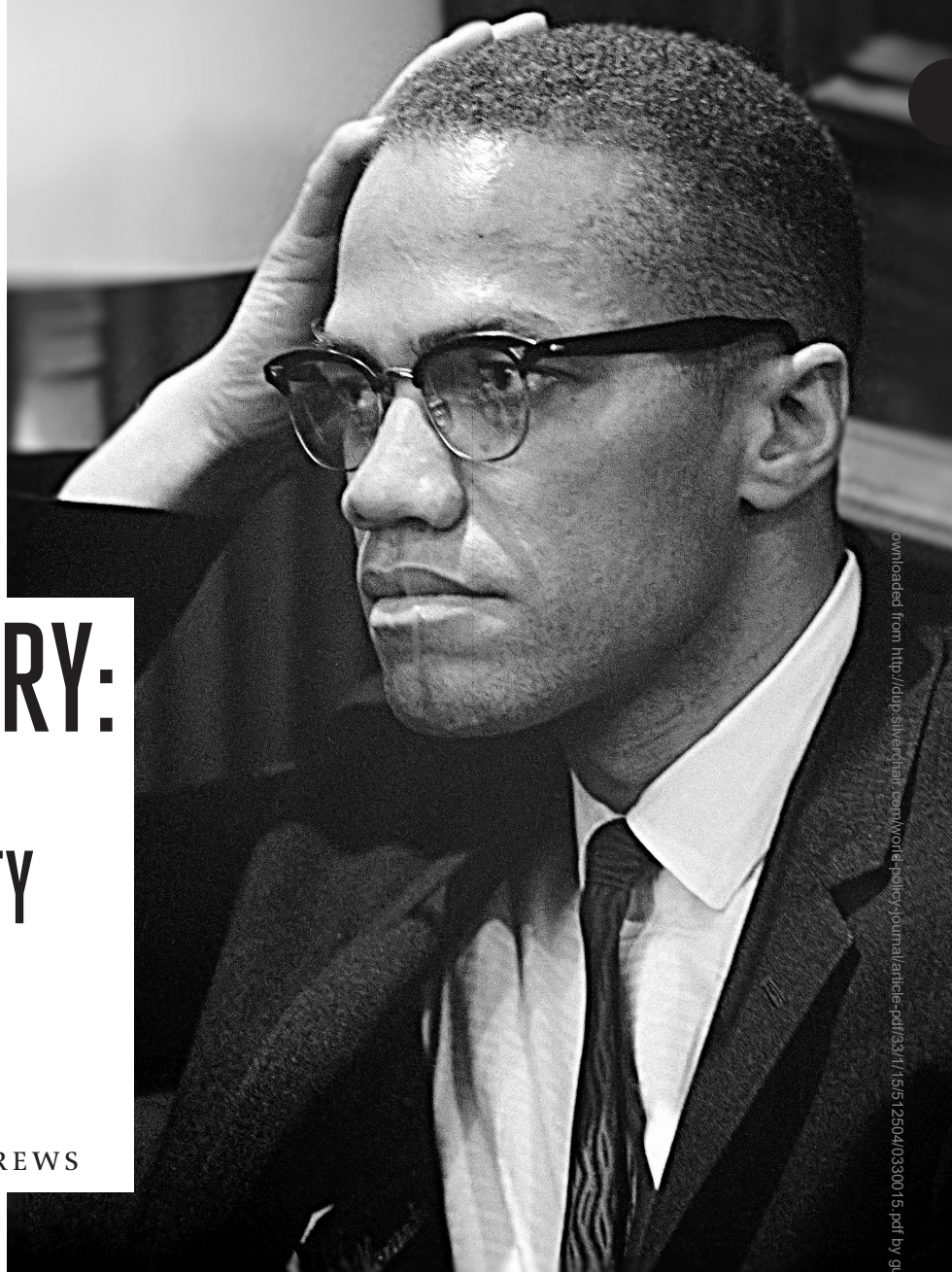


BLACK IS A COUNTRY: BUILDING SOLIDARITY ACROSS BORDERS

KEHINDE ANDREWS



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BIRMINGHAM, England—Racism transcends the boundaries of the nation-state, and so the fight for freedom and equality must also be global.

Too often when we try to understand anti-Black racism, our analyses are limited to our own country's borders. The late sociologist Herminio Martins dubbed this tendency to frame our thinking within the nation-state "methodological nationalism." In thinking about racism, the nation-state is frequently considered a real, tangible unit of study for racial formation and inequalities. In reality, the nation-state

is no more solid a concept than race; they're social constructions rooted in myth and produced by powerful ideologies.

Undergirding Western capitalism is a global system of racism: The genocide of natives in the Americas, transatlantic enslavement of Africans, and colonial and neo-colonial domination were all transnational oppressions. Despite these international origins of systemic racism, civil rights analysis and politics remain inscribed within a country's borders. As Malcolm X argued in 1964, "Whenever you are in a civil rights struggle, whether you know it or not, you are confining yourself to the jurisdiction of Uncle Sam"—or, I'd add, whichever nation in which you reside.

In the U.K., methodological nationalism has obscured the importance of more global approaches to fighting racism. Taking an intra-state strategy has allowed the government to focus on promoting diversity while avoiding addressing structural inequalities caused by racism.

The desire to build an anti-racist coalition within the U.K. has meant there is pressure to avoid disunity among minority groups. This focus on cross-racial solidarity, however, has taken energy away from calls to build a Black rights movement across state borders.

It is too simplistic to argue that because you do not have white skin in the U.K. you have identical struggles with racism. White supremacy, which is at the heart of racism, creates hierarchies and exclusions that vary for different groups. Black Britons have more common experiences with Black Americans than Britons of South Asian descent. This is true for most areas of social life, but it's most obvious in the area of criminal justice.

In England and Wales, there are far fewer people incarcerated than in the U.S., but Black people are even more overrepresented in the prison population. In 2013-14, Black individuals made up 12.6 percent of the prison population, while comprising only 3.3 percent of the general population. The over-policing of Black communities has been a constant feature of life in the U.K. The latest figures show that Black people are up to 17.5 times more likely to be stopped and searched than White Britons. The figures for the "stop and accounts," where there is no search but you have to explain what you are doing, were so disproportionate that, in 2011, half of the worst offending police forces announced they would stop collecting data on ethnicity altogether. In 2007, Baroness Patricia Scotland, then minister of state for the criminal justice system and law reform, warned that three-quarters of young Black men in the country would soon be in the police DNA database.

On the issue that sparked the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S.—deaths at the hands of the police—there is a similar pattern of overrepresentation in the United Kingdom. Police deaths are rare here in comparison to the U.S., largely because British forces do not routinely carry firearms. Since 2009, there have been 238 deaths involving the police that were investigated by the Independent Police Complaints Commission and therefore considered suspicious. Black people accounted for 9.6 percent of these deaths, almost three times more than their representation in the general population. This pattern continues for homicides, where the Black population accounted for 11 percent of murder victims between 2011-12 and 2012-13. Further connecting

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the experiences to African Americans, Black people accounted for 36 percent of homicides by firearm, a staggering figure 10 times higher than would be expected.

Despite these similarities, methodological nationalism frames the experience of Black people in the two countries as different: Plantation enslavement never took place in Britain, and the descendants of enslaved populations in the U.K. are mostly economic migrants from the Caribbean. What is obscured here is the similarity of the process of migration from the slaveholding South to the free North and from the Caribbean to Britain. Black people in the U.S. and the Caribbean found themselves in a post-enslavement society where they remained at the bottom. Given their high rates of unemployment, both groups had little choice but to migrate to the urban centers of their respective emancipators.

When they arrived in these supposedly progressive lands, they encountered the same forms of racism on both sides of the Atlantic. It is not simply that both groups were filtered into the lowest strata of their respective societies; it is the *nature* of their confinement and the basis of the discrimination they faced. For African Caribbeans in the U.K. and African Americans in northern cities of the United States, the stereotype of the aggressive, lazy savage formed the foundation of the relations with the majority population. In a 1993 paper, writing about the post-World War II migration from the colonies to the U.K., sociologist Mike Cole explained the state's view of its African-Caribbean communities:

[The] British Cabinet racialized many of the African-Caribbean community as 'accustomed to living in squalid conditions and hav[ing] no desire to improve' (*The Observer*, 1 January 1989), while their children were described, by one local education authority, as 'physically robust and boisterous, yet mentally lethargic.'

It should come as no surprise then that the experience of African Caribbeans in Britain and African Americans are mirror images. The *nature* of the racism along with the *formation* of racial African Caribbeans in the U.K. and African Americans in the U.S. are based on nearly identical processes.

The U.K. now also has a large Black population descended directly from Africa, who do not have the same history of enslavement. African migrants to Britain had previously been seen as "model minorities," who performed well in school and achieved professional jobs. This particular African migrant experience relates specifically to the

THE CHALLENGE FOR BLACK LIVES MATTER WILL BE TO MOVE FROM PROTEST TO NATION BUILDING.

migration of higher skilled and class groups from former British colonies such as Nigeria and Ghana.

It has become apparent, however, that the election of a Conservative-led coalition in 2010 and the increasing number and diversity of African migrants has changed that narrative, with strict criteria and limitations being placed on African migration. Poor Africans and refugees do not fit the so-called "model minority" label. The backlash against refugees, asylum seekers, and economic migrants from the continent clearly demonstrates how Black African lives do not appear to matter, with the U.K. all but ignoring African deaths in the Mediterranean. In 2015, the foreign office minister, Baroness Joyce Anelay, explained that the government does

“not support planned search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean,” because saving lives of those coming from North Africa was a “pull factor” for migration.

As Africans settled in the U.K., they found themselves subject to the same pressures, living in the same areas, and feeling the same oppression as their Caribbean counterparts. As the communities have grown together, the distinctions between African and Caribbean have merged into the shared experience of being Black in Britain.

FROM PROTEST TO NATION BUILDING

The global system of racism articulates itself a little differently in each nation-state. It cannot, therefore, be solved with civil rights legislation in any one country. It is necessary to see Blackness as the foundation of a global diaspora connected in a shared struggle against racism. There have been previous efforts to establish the idea of the global Black nation including Ethiopianism, Garveyism, and Pan-Africanism. When Malcolm X founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) in 1964, he aimed to build an organization that brought together all those of African descent in the Western Hemisphere in order to connect that struggle to the revolutionary movements taking place on the African continent. He saw that racism was a central part of Western capitalism and that to change it we would need a new social and economic system.

This can only be brought about by rethinking and revolutionizing how we approach the issue of racism. The challenge for Black Lives Matter will be to move from protest to nation building. The OAAU was built on the idea that political and economic power starts at the local level, leading to nation-state organization and then connecting into a global solidarity network. At the OAAU founding rally in 1964, Malcolm X said:

The aim is to unite everyone in the Western Hemisphere of African descent into one united force. And then, once we are united among ourselves in the Western Hemisphere, we will unite with our brothers on the motherland, on the continent of Africa.

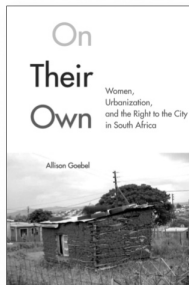
In the U.K., we founded the Organisation of Black Unity in 2013 with the principles of the OAAU in mind. The first aim of the Organisation has been to build a local base of support in Birmingham, where we started. In keeping with Malcolm X’s philosophy, one of the first steps has been to start a program of “political re-education” to explore and discuss issues of racism from a more radical perspective. Our Year X, when we dedicated 2015 to events and writings on Malcolm X’s legacy, is the best example of this. We are using these events and other local campaigns—such as re-establishing the Marcus Garvey Nursery, which was opened in 1976 as one of the first Black preschools in Britain—to gain membership and financial independence. The aim is to use the work we have done so far to build up self-help programs in the fields of education, health, politics, youth, and economics. The idea is to build a model that can be replicated in other cities in the U.K. and across the African diaspora.

We have also worked to create a national network—partnering with the Interim National Afrikan People’s Parliament, a London-based representative body geared toward uniting Black community groups across the U.K. The next challenge will be to take the struggle global. We want to use the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent, which began in 2015, to help build cross-border solidarity and produce a political and economic alternative to Western capitalism.

In the U.S., Black Lives Matter has shed light on the symptoms of racism but not on

the structures creating them. While it is essential that the police stop killing African Americans, we have to recognize that even if they do, it will not end racial oppression. Racism is a central feature of Western capitalism, and only Black populations gaining political and economic power can change that. This means breaking free from the limits of methodological nationalism and creating global networks. Seeing Black as a country opens

the possibility of creating a nation based on freedom and equality for Black populations across the world. In a similar vein to Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, we want to build a global Black diaspora on our own terms. As Malcolm X argued in 1964, the current political and economic system can no more produce freedom and equality for Black people than a "chicken can lay a duck egg." ●



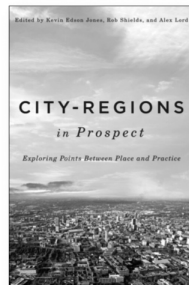
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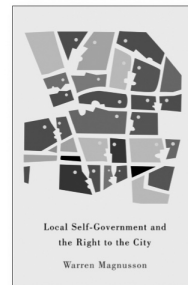


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