

Individualism, Ideology and talking about Lives that matter

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Individualism, Ideology and talking about Lives that matter

In May 2020, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, protests swept across America and extended to the UK along with many other nations. Perhaps galvanised by the sheer brutality of George Floyd's death, captured on film for all to witness; perhaps compounded by the collective psychological impact of Covid-19, a time when shared commitment to giving our all to protect life was seemingly at the heart of global consciousness and yet people of Black and ethnic minority backgrounds remained far more likely to die from it; George Floyd was the latest in a long line of Black men and women to die at the hands of those who should be there to protect them. His death sparked a response of collective action in America, not seen since the civil rights era. Under the mantra of 'Black Lives Matter', UK demonstrations took place in more than 150 towns and cities. From London to Hull, Manchester to Cardiff, Glasgow to Birmingham, Bristol to Sheffield, and Belfast to Bangor, anti-racism protestors united to demand radical change. Whilst demonstrating against police brutality and racism in America, protestors in the UK also emphasised how these same issues of anti-Black racism play out in the UK too, pointing to deaths including those of Rashan Charles, Sheku Bayoh, Mark Duggan, and Dalian Atkinson. All these men died during attempts by UK police to either apprehend or restrain them, or whilst in police custody. Protestors also highlighted the death of Belly Mujinga who lost her life to Covid-19 after reportedly having been spat at while working at Victoria Station. Her death offering just one poignant reminder of a significant disparity between racial groups in the UK which sees members of Black and Minority Ethnic communities more vulnerable to dying from Covid-19.

Since these protests began back in late Spring, there has been something of a continued national and global conversation, a refusal to step away from confronting issues of systemic racism. [Media commentary](#) also reports that these protests and the demands for change are more racially diverse, with increasing numbers of White people in both the UK and the US standing against injustice and police brutality, and offering allyship in the fight against racism. Whilst this allyship is largely viewed as a welcome development, it also raises questions about the level of serious commitment shared by White allies when it comes to the sustained pursuit of change, or whether this is merely evidence of a flurry of short lived emotions, or growing levels of virtue signalling fuelled by a desire to experience a pro-social glow in the social media spotlight. Regardless of what might be motivating some sections of this more diverse protest movement, the atmosphere began to feel a little different, the conversations more real, and the possibilities for institutional change seemed to tantalise. Such hope led some commentators to talk of a racial awakening. Then on August 23rd, three months after George Floyd was murdered, there was a violent reminder of exactly how little had changed. Jacob Blake, another unarmed Black man, was shot seven times in the back by a US police officer whilst opening his car door - three of his children sat inside.

Against this backdrop of unyielding police violence and the increasingly widespread public protest which demands change and gives voice to collective rage and of grief, there is also an attempt to reject or disrupt the rally cry that 'Black Lives Matter', through the counter claim that 'All Lives Matter'.

For people engaged in the 'Black Lives Matter' movement, indeed even those on the periphery of the pursuit for social justice, this response is hard to rationalise as one motivated by genuine concerns about the need to emphasise the sanctity of all lives. After all, the argument of the Black Lives Matter movement is not that 'Black lives matter *more*'. Moreover, the abiding inequalities in Physical and Mental Health outcomes; Education; Employment; and dealings with the Police and

criminal justice system continue to cleave the opportunities and outcomes of 'all lives' apart along distinctly racial lines. It is also hard not to notice that calls for 'All Lives to Matter' are largely voiced by White people. And so, what should we make of this?

Of course, 'All Lives Matter' is easy rhetoric for those individuals who truly do not value Black lives and wish to promote racist ideology, and so we might choose to simply reject it as the rantings of racists. But to roundly dismiss this as the language of racists, inadvertently risks playing into the individualising of racism and, individualising racism potentially adds fuel to the 'All Lives Matter' rhetoric.

Instead of assuming that everyone who adopts this position can be written off as racist and therefore either unredeemable or not worth engaging with, I find myself wondering why 'All Lives Matter' feels like a comfortable standpoint for people, and why they perceive that this argument offers the basis for a fair and just society. The issue I want to explore with them is this ... *"if your standpoint is that 'all lives matter', do you truly believe that Black lives matter equally?"* In response to this question I imagine I would learn that lots of individual Black people do matter to the individual White people that they know, and that where Black and White lives intersect or interact, and people are known as people with their own lives, their own families, and their own character, these lives matter very much. I hope in these discussions we would also acknowledge that many people continue to be confronted with interpersonal racism daily, and that this would be viewed as wholly unacceptable. However, the question of whether Black lives matter *equally* is not – should not - be approached at the level of the individual. To look at it in this way is to understand racism as something that racist people do. It focuses on the individual White police officer for example, as if they alone carry all that ugly racism inside themselves, an aberration of an otherwise just society. I imagine that this is still how many of the people I might speak to would frame their ideas about racism. A hateful ugly thing that one bad person does in isolation.

It is a strange irony that whilst the phrase 'All Lives Matter' implies an argument made at the highest level of our collective humanity, it is in fact an argument founded at the level of the individual.

The argument is often expanded with an insistence that 'my' life and 'your' life are equal, or by attempts to trade in death equality – "I'll take your fury at a Black death and I'll raise you with my fury about a White one". Occasionally it goes beyond the individual, using the most economically disadvantaged members of White society as evidence of 'inequality equality' between Black and White people. What we see in these arguments is an attempt to frame the response to 'Black Lives Matter' through the lens of individualism. Constructing a claim that 'All Lives Matter' is *more* equal and therefore more socially just, whilst the structural inequalities that underpin our individual lives and which reveal collective inequalities remain obscured. My feeling is that the fabric and the consciousness of our deeply individualist society has something to do with why some White people appear, all too readily, to align with the argument that 'All Lives Matter', and why some people struggle to understand how this could ever be viewed as a racist argument. After all, it is a position that has a superficial morality - it values all life, whilst laying the blame for instances of ugly racism, such as the killing of George Floyd solely with the individual actor who pressed down his knee, or pulled a trigger. Furthermore, for those that recognise inequality in society, it maintains that all inequality is experienced by all racial groups, therefore it all matters the same.

We need to shake the individualist consciousness of those who maintain that 'All Lives Matter' and make plain that inequality is not equal. Moreover, the Black Lives Matter movement is not simply asking for individual Black lives to matter to individual White folk, although that, of course, is important. Black Lives Matter is surely a demand for racial equality to exist at the bedrock of society,

to become an immutable feature woven into the fabric of our politics and our institutions. In our health services, our police forces and legal systems, in our education provision, our workplaces and our social care provision.

The rhetoric of 'All Lives Matter' is the emptiness of Individualism packaged up as democracy. It invites people in with a veneer of easy equality. It does not encourage folk to examine too closely, if at all, the layers of structural injustice and inequality that exist in our society. It quietly soothes the discomfort that the Black Lives Matter movement, and talk about racism provokes, especially the discomfort it provokes for some White people whose lives have never before felt so touched by it as they have been this year. Should those of us who fundamentally disagree with the rhetoric that 'All Lives Matter' be angry that people might align with this position? Anger, born of frustration is certainly understandable, but anger leads us to turn our backs; to dismiss, denounce and divide. Social division feeds every kind of social inequality, solidarity is the fuel of social power. And so perhaps there is yet more work to do in talking with people and seeking to build greater understanding about systemic and structural racism. We might imagine that everyone has such knowledge and that some people simply chose to ignore it. But again, if we want to advocate and continue to support the Black Lives Matter movement, we would do well to remember that Individualism does not encourage any of us to look beyond those things which directly affect us. Alongside which, opportunities to learn about histories of race and racism are variable. We are not all gifted the same access to education, either in our formal education or our wider life. What if, each time we hear someone voice the argument that 'All Lives Matter' we took this as an invitation to talk with them, without judgement or rancour, simply with a hope to understand what fuels it, and to invite them explore an alternate perspective. I recently listened to an impassioned argument from a colleague of South Asian heritage about allyship. This colleague spoke powerfully about the emotional impact that comes from having to deal with all manner of racial microaggressions, not to mention the impact of more explicit racial abuse. On top of this is the unremitting toll that comes from shouldering responsibility and managing expectations that it is the job of all people who experience racism to stand strong and battle racial injustice for all of society. My colleague was equally passionate in their belief that engaging with White people to better understand racism and racial injustice was essential in continuing the fight for equality. They very much saw this as work that White allies could, indeed should, take a lead on. And so, this is my commitment, and my invitation. Yes, it can sometimes be difficult, and it can sometimes feel futile, but every conversation holds some promise until we know otherwise, and so whenever and wherever the 'All Lives Matter' narrative arises my response will be .. "let's talk".