

The virus in the mind

"Viruses of the Mind" was a term coined by Richard Dawkins. It opened up a new science of the meme. Now it takes on a terrifying, new significance as the other day, the Mayor of Minneapolis said there was an epidemic of racism that was in people's minds.

A new significance? Hardly that when racism has been around for as long as people dominated and enslaved each other. Pervasive concentrations of power seep through the very language we use about ethnicity, gender, age or intact bodies. White privilege and exceptionalism shapes standards and debates about what tone to use and what is correct (I'm looking at a challenging new book on that, Layla Saad's *'Me and White Supremacy: How to Recognise Your Privilege, Combat Racism and Change the World'* (Quercus 2020).

This last week we have seen the spectre of America burning. A simmering sense of injustice boiled over with the revolting death of George Floyd. I remember well the sheer sense of rage that engulfed the American street after the assassination of one of my boyhood heroes, Martin Luther King in April 1968. Current events have strong resonance with that – except now we have Smart camera phones to record and transmit images faster than Covid.

Inequality matters because it gets under the skin. It digs into the role that our sense of value or its absence plays in human action generating psycho-social effects as well as lack of cash and poverty of power. But racism doesn't just get UNDER the skin though it does that to be sure. Racism is an attitude of mind that shapes both perpetrator and victim. Steve Biko, the black South African leader who died under Apartheid-era brutality diagnosed a submissive state of mind and lack of self-respect as illness. We collude with the definition of ourselves that others impose upon us. ⁱ Racism is inscribed ON the skin

It is a curiosity of history that white people in the time of Queen Elizabeth 1 used to prize their skin colour so much they would rub whiteness into it. Now a sun tan is a mark of health and vitality. It is though a tragic curiosity that so much misery has been played out on the surface of human beings. A casual observer looks at this central phenomenon of history with complete astonishment. If the configuration of genitals and gender has evoked so much historical agitation, how come that, in addition it has been the colour of skin, and not just the colour of money that has so sharply divided the human consciousness? Who was

responsible for this? If the answer is, 'we did it', then who are the 'we' who subjected our fellow men and women to such unimaginable cruelty and abuse? Why would we do it?

And who determined that skin should witness such mortal combat? Who set the pattern that the darker the skin the greater the inferior status? Racism has been so deadly because it combines the sharp divides of history into lethal challenge. This is all the more surprising since 'race' is a largely artificial construct as is 'religion' with which it is closely intertwined. Do either actually exist as the basis for pernicious cultural inequalities? Not really.

So why do we have a Report on which groups of people had a higher risk of dying from COVID-19 finding that people from ethnic minority backgrounds were "disproportionately" more likely to die from the disease? Public Health England showed that people of Bangladeshi ethnicity had around twice the risk of death than people with a white British background. People of Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, other Asian, Caribbean and other black ethnicity had between 10% and 50% higher risk of death. Matt Hancock, England's Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, acknowledged that people were "*understandably angry about injustices*" and that the pandemic had "*exposed huge disparities in the health of our nation*". He said it was a situation he was "determined to understand in full, and take action to address". It could be that long-term conditions are associated with COVID-19 fatalities, such as high blood pressure and diabetes. Occupational exposure may partially explain disproportionate deaths for some BAME groups. Doctors and nurses are at higher risk of infection through the jobs they do. There does seem more to the statistics than just demographics. The issues of racism, fairness, trust, discrimination and stigma are certainly there and will need to be addressed on both sides of the pond when this is all over.

More under the radar but it has become clear too that social tension at this time puts Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities under pressure. Damaging stereotypes feed negative attitudes that compound people being more at risk and struggle to access support.

Martin Luther King's sad adage has been much quoted in recent days – 'in the final analysis, violence is the language of the unheard'. The sad reality is that though overt racism and violence towards ethnic minorities is rare thank goodness, slightly different treatments and attitudes remain. Our minds have been infected. We didn't know we were carrying a virus.

Education has to be the great antidote to inequality everywhere. Wanted: an early warning system about the devaluation of human life; especially of those who are different. A psycho-social lens is critical to any kind of understanding how difference generates such horror that disfigures our humanity so profoundly. People need to grasp how the virus takes hold.

A way of understanding how trashing people is humanly possible is to imagine an early-warning system of moral education as a 5-point scale on which we plot descending levels:

- Denigration (inter-personal put downs)
- De-personalisation (cloaking people with invisibility so they becomes objects)
- Desecration (acts of violence that degrade and assault the dignity of lives)
- Dehumanisation (acts and practices by the authorities that brutalise and kill people)
- Demonisation (genocide that treats ethnic groups like vermin or as sub-human)

Once a way of speaking and practice becomes thinkable, the mind is prepared to go down to the next level that can be acceptable. The descent into darkness is a series of steps. But the racism we have seen wearing such an ugly face doesn't just arrive from a clear blue sky. It is firmly lodged in the transmission sites within a system and then gets reproduced.

It is time to expose the virus and how it is lodged in attitudes that can be transmitted that de-personalise and then de-humanise coloured people as being ripe for violence.

Although a powerful place to come from, whiteness is a ridiculously lamentable attitude from the past. Many of us are more pink than anything – until May's sunshine set in!

Time's up for all this stuff.

ⁱ Biko, S. (1986) *I Write What I Like*. San Francisco: Harper & Row