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Reconciling with Europe's Past

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Abstract

The graphic killing of George Floyd in the USA in June 2020 forced a wider reckoning over structural injustice in Europe and elsewhere than ever before. The call to mitigate ingrained institutional racism commences with understanding actions responsible for erecting and maintaining structures that consistently defeat legal systems' promises of equal rights. Building egalitarian societies requires a deep understanding of how inequality germinated, and concerted strategies for its defeat. This Brief explores Europe's responsibility in reconciling its future in light of actions in its past.

Introduction

Despite significant efforts through education, policy-making and establishment of legal regimes and institutions, ingrained structural racism besets every society in the world where more than a single ethnic, religious and linguistic community are contained within a single state. Such structural racism in contemporary times should be understood

as consisting of any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference, that is conducted or that occurs uncontested, within any type of institution broadly defined – public or private –. These actions may have either the intent or the effect of undermining access to human rights and fundamental freedoms that should otherwise accrue to an individual or a community, on the basis of their membership of a group with one or more 'protected' characteristics.

That structural racism exists and accrues on the basis of origin and identity is uncontested by evidence.¹ Despite the promise of legally enforceable human rights, societies' ability to respect an individual's inherent dignity and worth relies heavily on that individual's accident of birth. With identity politics taking centre stage in Europe fuelled by assertive, supremacist and contestable versions of history, this structural racism is becoming further ingrained to the detriment of all – even those who may benefit from short-term access to power. This brief sheds light on Europe's role in establishing systems that perpetrate structural racism abroad,

¹ Nwabuzo 2018.

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while asserting that its selective teaching of its own history perpetuates a veil of ignorance that compromises its own future.

Europeans Abroad: A Story of Arrogance and Entitlement

The still widely accepted notion that there are different 'races' among humanity shows how deeply ingrained 'race-related' or 'racist' thinking is.² The misconstruing of different ethnic physical characteristics among human beings, (most visibly 'colour') as constituting an entirely different 'race', (a biological term to refer to classes of life), was based on the notion that there was one superior race – self-defined as 'white', with all 'deviants' deemed different and therefore sub-human. This gave the dominant race in one continent, Europe, which had gained ascendancy through the use of 'guns, germs and steel',³ avenues to conquer and spread its hegemony over other continents. While European colonization was a single episode in a history of similar ventures by other dominant powers at other times in human history, its contemporary legacy is extended by four factors:

1. Relative Monopoly of Narrating History: the presentation of a single definitive discourse about the colonial encounter and the 'benefits' it brought.
2. International relations: the construction of an 'international society' in European image and likeness with Europe at its centre.
3. Legal systems: the determination of governance mechanisms and institutions within nearly every country in the world.

4. Business & economics: the definitive action of attributing value, generating wealth and establishing parameters for economic growth.

Three key ideas underpin contemporary structural inequality. First, that exploitation of nature for commerce is legitimate, can fuel growth and prosperity, and must be recognised as entrepreneurship. Second, that property is only legitimate when individually claimed and owned. Third, that regimes of non-discrimination build egalitarian meritocratic societies that can overcome lack of access to opportunity.⁴

The result is the celebration of wealth irrespective of how it was acquired, despite its destruction of circular indigenous economies elsewhere. The failure to account for the sustainability of natural resources is an accounting as well as a moral one. Assuming natural assets to have minimal value has been central to environmental destruction, the effects of which are felt elsewhere far more dramatically than in the more temperate zones of the European continent. Depriving communities of their livelihoods, resources and ability to sustain themselves, and then justifying this by alleging gains made in the name of 'civilisation' of such populations points to an arrogance that was normal for all invaders, but hypocritical when combined with other exports such as justice and ideas of enlightenment.

² Bowser 2017.

³ Diamond 1997.

⁴ Gilligan & Snider 2018.

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The export of legal and financial systems based on *laissez faire* economics and non-discrimination legal regimes, envisaged a passive role for government, with the market (i.e. those who made better gains from the exploitation of resources) determining the future trajectory of their societies. Decolonization under European, and, by proxy, international supervision, was accompanied by constant interference, including through the supply of arms driven by a powerful industry at the heart of European governance. As a consequence, decolonization in many contexts was no more than an act of privatization of vast tracts of lands and resources with people deemed collateral, driven by the need to ensure that existing structures and supply chains would not be disrupted.⁵

Europeans at Home: Disarray and Fragmentation

While European hegemony, including the significantly different variants between East and West, remained contested only by its allies in North America, the World Order could be more easily maintained, despite the spectre of nuclear annihilation. The defeat of the Soviet Union appeared to leave one dominant power who could reify the rules of

the game. The triumphalism of the market-driven, allegedly democratic, model was left unchallenged and forced many drives within economies to shape themselves to this mould. This significant jump in extraction and consumption of resources exacerbated the climate crisis in a race to the bottom. The continued celebration of wealth and how to generate it added people of other ethnic and religious groups to an exclusive club of the wealthy, sharpening global inequality. The reiteration of human rights and egalitarianism held out the promise to the 'deserving' that they could escape poverty if they were good and committed. However, incessant critique from within and outside the human rights movement undermined its perceived utility.⁶

Meanwhile, the depletion of resources and transfer of wealth from developing countries, fuelled by armed conflict, social breakdown and unequal development, heightened migration to Europe. Increased mechanization may have generated 'manufacturing efficiencies', but this came at the cost of jobs, and with no social security system in place, human insecurity increased dramatically.

The resulting trickle of people into Europe was aggrandized as an invasion, while the simultaneous depletion of jobs in Europe, also due to mechanization, contributed to a febrile environment. Increased market-orientation in Europe's services, forced due to stalling governmental tax revenues, empowered private interests further, who saw opportunities to agglomerate greater wealth while ensuring their own hegemony through closer links with government.⁷

⁵ Castellino, 2020.

⁶ Dominguez Redondo, 2020.

⁷ Schiering, 2020.

The concerted claim of political aspirants to consider outsiders as thieves, stealing jobs and scarce resources was engineered to reach angry ears that were uneducated about Europe's adventures abroad. The consequence was a collective viewing of queues of migrants as seeking an easy life, and their incursion as threatening European ways of life and traditions.

Accusations of structural racism were dismissed as powerful voices instead reinforced conviction in the egalitarian credentials of European institutions, especially when compared with everywhere else.⁸ Evidence of these institutions' patriarchy was similarly dismissed as highly qualified women broke through glass ceilings through merit, only to find mass mediocrity based on gender and ethnicity had a permanent residency there.

Conclusion

The pandemic has been a significant test of humanity and many argue it was dramatically failed across most parts of Europe.⁹ More than anything else it highlighted how good governance is at a premium in what are increasingly complex times, and that while populist narratives and the generation of societal aggression may be good for seizing power, they are futile and foolish in the face of significant challenges. They merely constitute politics of mass distraction, will not save lives, generate jobs, or tackle the climate emergency.

The imperative to *build back better* is clear, as is the burning need to reorient European and other societies to sustainable, peaceful and progressive values. Maintaining the inherent dignity and worth of every

individual, including through sustainable livelihoods, adequate healthcare and quality education is urgent, if the human solidarity desperately needed to mitigate the climate crisis is to be forged at speed.

An immediate reckoning and the correction of the narrative around profit-making and continued unjust enrichment must come first. Strict measures deeming narrow nationalist narratives as propaganda is equally pressing. Understanding that human progress has come from embracing change and reorienting our societies to ensure that the best talent can be honed to confront the toughest challenges is crucial. The narrow pool of talent on display in governance, mostly male, mediocre, and from the dominant class is a damning indictment against the belief that our societies are meritocratic or that Europe imbibed the vaunted ideas of the *Enlightenment era* it sought to export.

In the end, reconciling with Europe's past is less about that past, more about the future for European societies. Embracing the challenge transparently, honestly and fairly is the only formula for overcoming societal fragmentation and disruption.

⁸ Loftsdóttir, 2020.

⁹ Jordana & Triviño Salazar, 2020.

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