



IT TAKES A SYSTEM

The systemic nature of racism and pathways to systems change

Dr Sanjiv Lingayah



Sanjiv Lingayah is the principal of Beyond Race. An independent researcher, writer and consultant working on racial justice, Sanjiv is the lead author of [Home truths: Undoing racism and delivering real diversity in the charity sector](#), co-authored with Kristiana Wrixon and Maisie Hulbert from ACEVO. He is also the programme lead of [Reframing Race](#) – an initiative to support advocates to communicate more effectively and powerfully on racial justice. Sanjiv can be contacted at mail@sanjivlingayah.com.

Race on the Agenda (ROTA) is one of Britain's leading social policy think-tanks focusing on issues that affect Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) populations. Originally set up in 1984, ROTA aims to increase the capacity of BAME organisations and strengthen the voice of BAME populations through increased civic engagement and participation in society. ROTA can be contacted at rota@rota.org.uk.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Race on the Agenda.

ISBN: 978-1-907500-04-6

Published by Beyond Race/Race on the Agenda in January 2021. This document is copyright © Sanjiv Lingayah 2021. Some rights reserved.

You are free to copy, distribute, display and perform the work in any format, including translation, without written permission. The main conditions are as follows:

- You must give the original author credit;
- You may not use this work for commercial purposes;
- You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

You are welcome to ask for permission to use this work for purposes other than those stated above. In these circumstances, please email mail@sanjivlingayah.com.

Citation: If you wish to reference this report in your own writing our preferred format (using the SAGE Harvard style) is:

Lingayah S (2021) It takes a system: The systemic nature of racism and pathways to systems change. London: Beyond Race/Race on the Agenda. Available from: <https://www.rota.org.uk/publications/systemsreport2021>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is a long note of thanks to Andy Gregg, retiring director at Race on the Agenda.

Andy is a personal friend and an amazing leader in the struggle against racism and xenophobia. His insistence on the full humanity of all people is a light to guide us all.

On his retirement as an MP, Tony Benn said that he was leaving parliament to devote more time to politics. I suspect that Andy will be doing something similar and will continue to make a contribution as he moves to his new phase.

Go well and thank you, Andy. Thanks also to Maurice Mcleod, Race on the Agenda's new chief executive, for his commitment to this work. My gratitude also goes to Race on the Agenda's Lee Pinkerton and Saifur Valli; to Luke Finley Editorial for copy-editing support; and to Thomas Salter for report design.

In addition, thanks to Cathy Stancer and Julian Corner at Lankelly Chase for providing a small grant to allow me to do some thinking on racism and systems and for being patient and allowing me to 'complete' this work. Thanks also to Jenny Oppenheimer from Lankelly Chase for discussing ideas and sharing wisdom with me.

Sanjiv Lingayah

January 2021

CONTENTS

About Reframing Race	2
Acknowledgements	3
Demystifying systemic racism	5
We need to talk about systemic racism	6
On systems	6
On race thinking and racism	8
Denying systemic racism	11
Towards an agenda for systems change	11
Building systems literacy	14
Investing in alternative mental models to race hierarchy	16
Working up systems-level solutions	18
Resourcing systems-level work	19
It takes a different system	19
Epilogue: Life beyond racism	20

Demystifying systemic racism

It is now normal to hear that racism is systemic. This is an important and essential truth and one worth holding on to. In a time of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter, systemic racism, as a term at least, is on the agenda.

But what does systemic racism really mean?

The problem with the concept of systemic racism as it stands now is that it obscures as much as it reveals. A lack of clarity on what systemic racism is and how it works risks it becoming an almost mystical concept – one which is too easy for cynics to dismiss. What is more, research shows that racism is viewed mostly as personal prejudice¹ and hostile actions directed by one person towards another, rather than as something that is designed into our systems.

With this as the state of play, how can we move decisively away from systemic racism towards systemic racial justice?

To make progress in the direction of racial justice we have to know systemic racism better and talk about it better. This is essential to build on past efforts for racial justice that have secured some (though not enough) improvements in the lives of some racially minoritised² people. A systemic focus is critical too because though ‘race’ shouldn’t matter, it does; and it can be a question of life and death.

As we in the United Kingdom look across the water to the United States, we may reflect that we are at least not at that level of emergency. While this may be true in some ways, we have to consider the different ways in which violence can be done to racially minoritised populations. In this society, racially minoritised people are killed and brutalised at the hands of the state. This can take the form of police violence and intrusion, but it can also occur through enforcement of the ‘hostile environment’ – including violence in immigration detention, deportation flights and agendas such as making sea crossings from France to England ‘unviable’.³

Moreover, for settled racially minoritised people in Britain, bodily harm is suffered through heightened rates of infant mortality in Pakistani, black Caribbean and black African families and in the fact that black women die in childbirth at rate five times that of white women.⁴ These deaths lack the ‘drama’ of the ways in which black people can be killed in the United States. But they are part of the important everyday ways in which, around the world, the lives of racially minoritised people are diminished by racism.

¹ See S. Lingayah (2020), ‘Understanding how Britain really thinks about race is vital to tackling racism’, Independent, 30 November, www.independent.co.uk/voices/britain-race-racism-black-livesmatter-b1762975.html.

² Racially minoritised people are subject to processes of making their ‘race’ relevant to and problematic in particular situations or contexts. For example, see S. Garner (2010) ‘Racialisation’, in S. Garner, Racisms: An introduction (London: Sage Publications, 19-35).

³ See Institute of Race Relations (2015), ‘Dying for Justice’, 20 March, <https://irr.org.uk/publications/issues/dying-for-justice>.

⁴ See A. Hirsch (2020), ‘Britain doesn’t care about health inequalities. For minorities that ignorance is deadly’, Guardian, 23 April, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/23/britainignorant-health-inequalities-coronavirusblack-people-dying.

We need to talk about systemic racism

To engage with systemic racism, we must bring together two concepts – systems and racism. Neither of these are particularly well understood, making the task of defining systemic racism harder. But we can say that systemic racism is the condition where society's laws, institutional practices, customs and guiding ideas combine to harm racially minoritised populations in ways not experienced by white counterparts.

Systemic racism is not about denying that white people also experience harms. But it recognises that these harms – such as precarious employment, low income and class prejudice – are not driven by racism and are also experienced by racially minoritised people.

Systemic racism results in patterns whereby some people who are racially minoritised are over-scrutinised, over-sanctioned, under-served and under-valued in various settings, such as in schools, by the police, by social and health services, and in the jobs market.

Ultimately, the existence and extent of systemic racism is an empirical question, revealed by familiar and persistent patterns of racial disparities in a range of domains. And on this empirical basis, there should be no doubt that our society is systemically racist.

However, systemic racism is hotly contested as the underlying cause of racial disparity (see 'Denying systemic racism' below). In part, this resistance exists because accepting systemic racism implies a radical reshaping of how we organise every aspect of social and economic life – including how we assess worth and how we distribute resources.

On systems

A system is a discrete entity (like the solar system) made up of components connected together in an organised way. This arrangement of components is also called the structure of the system.

In human-made or -influenced systems, institutions are critical to generating and maintaining the structures of collective life. This is in part because institutions set the rules and distribute the rewards and sanctions, in education, employment, health, housing, criminal justice and other domains.

More than individual institutions, it is the interconnections between institutions that matter most in structuring life. And we can see how the web of laws, rules, practices and customs in one area of life tends to mutually reinforce those in neighbouring areas.

For example, people who safely navigate further education will be more likely to get into a 'prestigious' university which in turn is more likely to impress employers. And if it comes to it, these credentials may mean that such people tend to be more favourably treated by the police, the courts and even the healthcare system.

Just as positive experiences with institutions can be mutually reinforcing, so can negative ones. And if particular people 'fall short' in education, this can have profound negative knock-on effects on employment, income levels, housing and so on.

What is critical is that the particular categories of people that tend to benefit from or succumb to the laws, rules and regulations that shape life is not a random matter. Rather, systems are designed to serve some populations and not others; and to mark out some groups as worthy and others as unworthy.

A system's purpose is not always easily discerned. It is often not stated or not the same as what is stated. A government may claim that its goal is poverty reduction or gender equality. But if it allocates insufficient resources to the task then this cannot truly be its aim, because, as Donella Meadows states, '[t]he best way to deduce the system's purpose is to watch for a while to see how the system behaves'.⁵ In other words, if systems consistently deliver negative outcomes for particular populations, such as people living in poverty or women or racially minoritised people, then that is a design choice. These outcomes happen 'on purpose'.

Part of the confusion is that systems and their outcomes are often taken to be beyond human design and structured neutrally and naturally. Surely, so the logic goes, the schools, the courts, the police and the NHS treat people in a 'colour-blind' way. In fact, this idea fails to stand up to scrutiny in all sorts of ways, from the implementation of police stop and search powers, to court sentencing lengths, to cases such as the Windrush scandal.

Furthermore, specific laws, policies and regulatory approaches, such as the 'hostile environment', voter identification trials⁶ and austerity,⁷ may more directly and disproportionately harm racially minoritised populations.

In the final analysis, these racialised outcomes are chosen over alternatives. But how does a system get its purpose in the first place?

The answer lies, in large part, in the dominant 'mental models' in a society.

⁵ D.H. Meadows (2008) *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*. (New York: Chelsea Green Publishing).

⁶ See Electoral Reform Society (undated), 'Voter ID: Undermining your right to vote', www.electoral-reform.org.uk/campaigns/upgrading-our-democracy/voter-id.

⁷ See A. Gentleman (2019), 'Austerity has fuelled racial inequality in the UK, says UN expert', *Guardian*, 14 June, www.theguardian.com/business/2019/jun/14/austerity-has-fuelled-racialinequality-in-the-uk-says-un-expert.

On race thinking and racism

Mental models are powerful, enduring, 'common sense' assumptions and values that are relied on to make sense of the world.

Mental models are more than ideas. They are a set of beliefs that inform our structural arrangements (laws, rules, policies, institutional practices and so on) and that therefore determine which people and behaviours are to be rewarded, and which are to be sanctioned for being 'undesirable'.

Mental models do not take hold spontaneously: they are cultivated and invested in. This is what lies behind the invention of 'race' – a flimsy idea loosely based on observable human characteristics such as skin colour and hair type.

There are three central pillars to race thinking as a mental model. The first pillar is that humanity can be differentiated along the lines of the category called 'race'. The second is that there exists a racial hierarchy in which being white is the highest form of humanity. The third is that populations racially minoritised as 'other than' white are deeply and irreversibly biologically and/or culturally flawed. In other words, the racial order is largely fixed.

Over time, an apparatus has been put in place and maintained to develop and sustain race thinking. This has included the 'science' of racial biology and anthropology as the study of 'primitive' cultures, as well as the philosophy of eugenics and 'improving' the human species.

As a result of a few hundred years of work, and despite us knowing better than to believe in the idea, 'race' is now a reference point in contemporary thinking. As noted by Omi and Winant⁸:

Everybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification, and of their own racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation.

These rules about 'race' are used by the public to explain the world and why some racial groups have the lives that they do. For example, black lives have become associated with untimely death to such an extent that there has largely been a lack of curiosity about why such loss of life takes place.⁹

⁸ M. Omi and H. Winant (1994) *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge).

⁹ For example, see G. Younge, 'Black lives don't matter: Why stories of death on the streets rarely get told', *Guardian*, 23 February, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/feb/23/black-deathswhy-journalists-keep-missing-storyshootings-media.

Similarly, even in the 'progressive' media,¹⁰ it becomes routine to present racially minoritised populations as flawed, or as having very particular and limited talents, such as athleticism or musicality. And because of this, in banal and everyday ways, race thinking and racist hierarchy is normalised and made meaningful.

These processes that centre race thinking are important, but we also need to reflect on why so much has been invested to make race hierarchy appear meaningful in the first place. One explanation is chauvinism. Blind attachment to one's tribe can lead to efforts to exaggerate the qualities of one's own group at the expense of others.

However, the scope and scale of race hierarchy goes way beyond making certain groups feel good about themselves. Constructing a worldview based on hierarchical racial order is a deeply political act that can justify, among other manoeuvres, the theft of people, wealth and land from groups deemed 'lesser'. Within a territory, it also helps to determine who is considered worthy/unworthy of a place in a society, who receives the protection of the law, rights and resources, and which populations may be subject to unusual punishment and control.

Against this backdrop of race hierarchy and thinking, the punishment and control of racially minoritised populations is a logical consequence and one that can take a variety of forms. These include antagonistic acts directed by one person towards another, such as hate crime. This person-to-person form of punishment and control can be profoundly painful and it can be seen to be informed by a broader 'race'/racist context.

But although interpersonal racism matters, from a systems perspective it is institutions, individually and collectively, that really determine the ways in which racially minoritised populations can and cannot move freely in the world. In particular, people who are racially minoritised are subject to being over-scrutinised, over-sanctioned, under-served and undervalued across a range of institutions, such as schools, police, social and health services, and employers.¹¹

¹⁰ For example, Turner Prize winner Lubaina Himid's residency at the Guardian. Himid critiqued the depiction of black people in the newspaper and how this was often negative (black people as criminal), limiting (black people as solely athletic) or absent. See C. Armitstead (2018), "'You keep telling me it's a coincidence': Lubaina Himid's week at the Guardian", Guardian, 3 December, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/dec/03/lubaina-himidguardian.

¹¹ A 2019 report by Oxford academics saw them make fictitious applications to over 3,000 real jobs, randomly varying applicants' minority background but holding skills, qualifications and work experience constant. On average, 24% of white British applicants received a positive response from employers, compared with 15% of 'Black Asian and Minority Ethnic' applicants applying with identical CVs and cover letters. See CSI Admin (2019), 'New CSI research reveals high levels of job discrimination faced by ethnic minorities in Britain', Centre for Social Investigation, Nuffield College, 18 January, <http://csi.nuff.ox.ac.uk/?p=1299>.

The sharpest edge of punishment and control of racially minoritised people is in the sphere of criminal justice. We can see there the overpolicing of particular populations, for example black people and Muslim people, and the over-sanctioning and over-incarceration of such groups when they come into contact with the courts.

Such engagements are undoubtedly informed by race thinking, particularly notions about 'black criminality' and Muslim 'pathologies'. Indeed, policing and penal arrangements in Britain today carry the hallmarks of approaches used in days of empire to manage colonies and to suppress black and brown bodies and threats of insurrection¹².

The prevalence and power of racialised mental models contaminate the development and applications of laws, rules and institutional practices such that they operate against the interests, in aggregate, of racially minoritised populations compared with white counterparts. This is not the same as saying that every racially minoritised person is dogged by racism at every turn for the whole of their life. But harms are organised and distributed along racial lines.

This results in the over-representation of racially minoritised people in, among other places, low-paid roles, in ill health, in school expulsions and on the radar of the criminal justice system. Harm means overexposure to risk and can be a matter of life and death, as we have seen in COVID-19 and with the murder of George Floyd.

And harm also takes the form of good things that do not happen to racially minoritised people. This is reflected in the relative absence of racially minoritised people in employment or in positions of formal leadership in business, the public sector, charities and the cultural sector.

¹² See A. Elliot-Cooper (2015), 'When did we come to Britain? You must be mistaken, Britain came to us', Verso blog, 20 October, www.versobooks.com/blogs/2294-when-did-we-come-to-britain-you-must-be-mistaken-britain-came-to-us.

Denying systemic racism

Before moving on to what anti-racists might do to target systemic racism, it is important to say more about how and why many people are resistant to a system-centred explanation of racism.

As suggested earlier, one reason for this resistance is the complexity associated with systems and systems thinking. Engaging with systems is cognitively tiring. It requires long-chain thinking that brings together multiple factors to explain the racialised outcomes that we see in society.

For example, systemic accounts of the significantly higher-than average death rates of black women in pregnancy and childbirth¹³ require that we think about:

- Institutionalised practices that mean that black people may be ignored more than their white counterparts;
- Why institutions might not listen to black people; and
- How 'race' plays a part in determining factors that shape health outcomes, such as income, employment and housing.

While we might be frustrated at a lack of systemic thinking about 'race', this can, in theory, be taught. But there are two other blockages to treating racism as a systemic phenomenon. And these are likely to prove more difficult to shift.

The first blockage is based on emotions and the second on ideology. We take each of these in turn.

Anti-racists should not underestimate how emotionally triggering the mention of any form of racism is for some people. Systemic racism turns up the emotional heat even further because it defines racism as a design feature of society.

Many people are programmed to think of collective life as largely fair and meritocratic. In some cases, people's self-worth depends on this notion. To hear otherwise, and to hear that they may be beneficiaries of racism, can profoundly disrupt the positive self-image that a person has about themselves and their society. It can manifest in 'emotions such as anger, fear and guilt and behaviours such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal'.¹⁴ The result is that meaningful conversations on addressing racism are shut down before they really start.

¹³ See E. Kasprzak (2019), 'Why are black mothers at more risk of dying?', BBC News, 11 April, www.bbc.co.uk/news/ukengland-47115305.

¹⁴ R. DiAngelo (2018), *White fragility* (London: Allen Lane).

And there can also be hyperbolic reactions to even minor changes in the old racialised order. For example, the removal of Edward Colston's statue in Bristol¹⁶ and the proposal to play an instrumental version of 'Rule Britannia' at the 2020 last night of the proms were turned into battlegrounds in the so-called 'culture war'. Change is portrayed as an attack on the nation and its history and almost the beginning of the end of civilisation itself.

These various arguments and manoeuvres are unfair and plainly wrong on many, many levels. But, in one way we should not be surprised about the resistance to systemic change. For example, in systems literature there are predictions that those invested in maintaining the existing order will tend to 'self-stabilize around the status quo and reject any tendencies for systemic change'.¹⁷

In the face of such resistance, the challenge for anti-racists is to move the conversation on racism to the level of systems and to cultivate conditions whereby this relocation becomes possible and necessary.

Towards an agenda for systems change

Though the symptoms of racism draw the eye – in part because they can be deadly – it is our systems that underpin these outcomes. Looking to the future, a central question is how advocates and activists might invest their energies to illuminate, disrupt and ultimately replace systems designed to ensure lesser outcomes for racially minoritised populations.

Sometimes it is hard to know where to start, even though we know that another world is possible.

So much time and energy of advocates and activists is used up dealing with some form of emergency or another for racially minoritised people: think Windrush scandal, Grenfell, COVID-19 and so on.

The condition of emergency seems permanent. This means that those seeking to advance racial justice are constantly forced to deal with the symptoms of racism rather than attacking the race thinking and the structures that generate these crises in the first place.

¹⁶ After the removal of the statue, the prime minister claimed that Black Lives Matter protests had been 'hijacked by extremists intent on violence'; P. Walker, A. Topping and S. Morris (2020), 'Boris Johnson says removing statues is 'to lie about our history'', Guardian, 12 June, www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jun/12/boris-johnsonsays-removing-statues-is-to-lie-about-our-history-george-floyd

¹⁷ I. Scrase and A. Smith (2009), 'The (non) politics of managing low carbon sociotechnical transitions', Environmental Politics 18(5): 707–726.

This is not the fault of advocates and activists. They are faced with the unenviable choice of fast-responding to what can be matters of life and death or doing the 'slow work' of addressing underlying causes. It has to be possible and is necessary to do both if we are to break from our present trajectory onto a transformative path to racial justice.

There is no easy answer to balance out the twin demands of dealing with the urgent symptoms and the underlying systems of racism. But a starting point is to support advocates and activists to be more systems-attentive and, wherever possible, to bring systems into the picture when trying to address racialised harms.

Creating the necessary conditions for this switch might involve three central areas of work: (1) building systems literacy; (2) investing in new mental models on and around 'race'; and (3) working up systems-level solutions to racism.

Building systems literacy

Research experiments suggest that people in Western societies tend to notice and emphasise the behaviour of individuals and tune out the contextual factors that shape their actions.¹⁸ In other words, our general orientation is to look away from systems: an obviously unhelpful situation when trying to secure systems change.

The response is not simply to boost the systems know-how of people who identify as racial justice advocates and activists. We need more than that. Ultimately we need to grow systems literacy in the wider public consciousness.

In practice this may necessitate efforts to accessibly show how systemic racism operates in order to enable conversations about how systems can be redesigned.

In part this agenda is about unlocking and 'decolonising' systems knowledge stored by academics and academia to more fully put it into public use. This desire is not driven by anti-intellectualism, but it can require challenging the centrality of universities as the highest/sole source of knowledge. It also recognises that universities have been and continue to be agents of social control engaged in elevating whiteness and devaluing racially minoritised 'others' – and that we need this role to change.

¹⁸ The Michigan fish test shows an image of fish swimming against an underwater background. Tests show that in Western societies we tend to notice what the fish are doing and tune out their operating environment. See: <https://vimeo.com/179991145>.

The companion piece to releasing university-based systems knowledge is to recognise and utilise the systems wisdom among people whose lives are impeded by structural arrangements. In the field of racism these systems specialists/survivors will be critical if we want to better understand how systems really work.

Possible interventions might include radical exchange programmes/secondments between those who hold 'everyday knowledge' with those more formally recognised as 'experts' with PhDs. And perhaps we can have people in prison and immigration detention, and black people who get stopped and searched, as systems diarists helping to build more vivid accounts of the web of arrangements that impact racially minoritised populations.

Another potential model is the Wellcome Trust's programme on public engagement in science. It supports projects that encourage all parts of society to be 'informed, inspired and involved' in science and discussions of its place in society.¹⁹ It could be extremely powerful to have something analogous on systems, structures and mental models and how they shape collective life.

But that still leaves and makes more pressing the question of finding ways to speak more clearly and creatively about systems. We need to use language and metaphors to better explain how systems operate and show that changing them is both within reach and a priority issue. As advocates, we cannot simply say that racism is a systems problem and leave it at that.

Fortunately, there is some language already available to us to more accessibly describe systemic racism. Metaphors of the birdcage and the web are used to describe the multi-stranded and layered nature of systems and the way that they restrict the lives of some people. These images also help us to understand that up close we may only see one or two of the wires or strands which entangle racially minoritised people. However, stepping back we can see the wider set of constraints.

There are downsides to this existing language, however. In particular, it does paint racially minoritised actors as passive victims. Furthermore, cages and webs on their own may be too easy to dismiss as an idea for those who are not subject to them.

Elsewhere, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva talks extremely helpfully about ‘racism without racists’. But again, this conception has limits. And even though it points to the almost automatic way that our arrangements deliver racial disparities, many people think racism does require racists. And these people will take some convincing otherwise.

But Pixar, in the animated movie *Inside Out*, communicated the complex neuropsychology of how our emotions of joy, sadness, anger, fear and disgust interact and help us to navigate the world. Surely, then, something similar is possible to show how systems shape all of our lives. We at least need to get our most creative advocates, activists, community-builders, researchers, storytellers, facilitators, campaigners, artists and others on the job.

Investing in alternative mental models to race hierarchy

Racist mental models mark certain populations as not fully human and inform systemic arrangements. As such, there is an urgent priority to dethrone such thinking.

But how can one talk sense into the significant proportion of people who think that some ‘races’ are less intelligent or lazier than others?²⁰ Equally, how can one prove to a doubtful audience that negative depictions of racially minoritised people, such as the unfavourable coverage of Meghan Markle compared with Katherine Middleton,²¹ is down to racist thinking?

We must continue to take on hierarchical race thinking and racist stereotypes and also recognise that these thought patterns are deeply entrenched. We can also expose some of the supporting ideas that help to maintain a racial order.

One such idea is that of meritocracy. This is the concept that people will rise (and fall) by their talent and hard work. Attachment to merit means that ‘success’ is seen as a sign of virtue – and ‘failure’ is a sign of vice. This reinforces the idea that racially minoritised populations (with lesser outcomes) are to blame for their own circumstances. And it provides an excuse to leave racist systems intact.

²⁰ See NatCen (2017), ‘New report uncovers extent of racial prejudice in Britain’, 29 September, www.natcen.ac.uk/newsmedia/press-releases/2017/september/new-report-uncovers-extent-of-racialprejudice-in-britain

²¹ See E. Hall (2020), ‘Here are 20 headlines comparing Meghan Markle to Kate Middleton that may show why she and Prince Harry are cutting off royal reporters’, BuzzFeed News, 13 January, www.buzzfeednews.com/article/elliievhall/meghan-markle-kate-middleton-doublestandards-royal.

We need a much more nuanced discussion of merit, including building an understanding that context and how people experience systems significantly influence the progress that they can make. With this more contextual outlook, we can recognise that some successful people may be highly meritorious – for example, the relatively few black university professors – while also questioning the neat link between status and deservingness.

Rethinking merit forces us to take context-shaping systems seriously and to consider how some people can be enabled to succeed and others impeded. It makes us also think about better, more just arrangements.

Alongside merit, the idea of scarcity of resources keeps us wedded to existing, unjust ways of organising society. Scarcity is emphasised in public and policy discourse and is driven home by an economy based on precarious employment and often low income. It discourages affinity between relatively privileged populations and their marginalised counterparts. Those with advantage may view their situation as fragile and see equitable treatment of other populations as contrary to their own interests.

Instead of scarcity, perhaps we need to raise into prominence ideas of sufficiency and sharing. We can emphasise that our lives are interdependent, not independent. We can invest in mental models that emphasise community and parity of esteem and, by extension, that our common wealth ought to be allocated based on principles of need, mutual care and radical kinship.

In doing this work on the flaws of merit and emphasising the sufficiency of collective wealth, we can perhaps reduce resistance to action on systemic racism and build notions of solidarity and justice.

Working up systems-level solutions

We know that it is possible that the systems that govern life can have as their purpose justice rather than disregard for justice. We know too that we can replace mental models about racial hierarchy with ideologies that insist on the full humanity of all people. We also know that it must be the case that our structures – laws, institutions and everyday behaviours – can deliver on these higher values.

But none of us have experienced such a world. And we are socialised by current arrangements to think that the only world that is possible is this one, or a slightly modified version of it. All of this makes thinking through change at a systems level particularly challenging – even for those committed to transformation.

Advocates and activists have to step into a place of radical imagination and to fill in the blanks on what a system for racial justice looks like. If we don't, the void will remain. And without a sense of the structures and mental models needed in order to sustain this alternative, the pull of a world transformed will be weak.

We must take up the challenge of 'working up' models of alternative structures and systems.

In the United States, the calls to defund the police may seem at first glance antithetical to safety. However, this is only because we have become so wedded to ideas of police and law enforcement as the best way to resolve antagonism and conflict. Where this mode of policing should be the last resort, it has become the default.

There already exist alternatives to conventional policing,²² for example those used in indigenous communities in North America. Such models focus on creating a web of inter-institutional services, including efforts to support wellbeing, mental health and peacebuilding and to provide appropriate youth and family services, housing, and healthcare.

This type of blueprinting and piloting can point the way to the future. In doing so, it can build systems literacy and make more concrete the shortfalls of our current arrangements.

Working up systems-level solutions

We know that it is possible that the systems that govern life can have as their purpose justice rather than disregard for justice. We know too that we can replace mental models about racial hierarchy with ideologies that insist on the full humanity of all people. We also know that it must be the case that our structures – laws, institutions and everyday behaviours – can deliver on these higher values.

But none of us have experienced such a world. And we are socialised by current arrangements to think that the only world that is possible is this one, or a slightly modified version of it. All of this makes thinking through change at a systems level particularly challenging – even for those committed to transformation.

Advocates and activists have to step into a place of radical imagination and to fill in the blanks on what a system for racial justice looks like. If we don't, the void will remain. And without a sense of the structures and mental models needed in order to sustain this alternative, the pull of a world transformed will be weak.

We must take up the challenge of 'working up' models of alternative structures and systems.

In the United States, the calls to defund the police may seem at first glance antithetical to safety. However, this is only because we have become so wedded to ideas of police and law enforcement as the best way to resolve antagonism and conflict. Where this mode of policing should be the last resort, it has become the default.

There already exist alternatives to conventional policing,²² for example those used in indigenous communities in North America. Such models focus on creating a web of inter-institutional services, including efforts to support wellbeing, mental health and peacebuilding and to provide appropriate youth and family services, housing, and healthcare.

This type of blueprinting and piloting can point the way to the future. In doing so, it can build systems literacy and make more concrete the shortfalls of our current arrangements.

²² M. Zerkel (2020), 'Reimagining community safety', American Friends Service Committee blog, 30 July, www.afsc.org/blogs/news-and-commentary/reimaginingcommunity-safety.

Resourcing systems-level work

Efforts to increase systems literacy, to build more productive mental models and to develop and implement alternative systems need resources. We are not likely to see a much-needed new wave of racial justice advocates, activists, organisers, researchers and others move more into the slow and messy work of systems change unless the funding landscape encourages this.

If we are not able to move towards a funding landscape that better supports both the 'fast' work to mitigate the consequences of racial injustice and the 'slow' work of addressing systemic causes, we are likely to remain engaged in reducing the fallout from the latest crisis of racism or caught in a loop of trying to secure only minor reforms.

It takes a different system

To undo racism, we need resets across the web of laws, rules, institutional practices, customs and underlying mental models that combine to over-scrutinise, over-sanction, under-serve and under-value racially minoritised populations.

To move from racism to racial justice takes a different system.

As advocates and activists, we must do more to demystify systemic racism and the structures that support it. And we must find ways to bring to the fore new designs that will make another world possible, that will build demand to redesign our system and structures in order to serve racial justice.

More than this, a decisive reorientation towards changing racist systems provides a way to build affinity and common cause with other populations, including, but in no way limited to, working-class people, migrants, 'queer' people and women, who are also subject to being under-served and over-sanctioned by prevailing systems.

And this is perhaps where the true prize of seeing the world in systems is to be found. It provides a way to turn attention fully to transforming our systems for good. And a more systems-focused movement for racial justice can show how we can remake the protocols of our shared lives so that racial and other forms of justice are encoded into our future.

Epilogue: Life beyond racism

I want to end by asserting the difference between the lives of racially minoritised people and racism. In other words, they are not the same. Racism is not all there is to the lives of racially minoritised people.

We know that racially minoritised people, overall, experience in a variety of ways lows that are lower and highs that are less high than the general white British population. However, this does not mean that the lives of all racially minoritised people are at every turn thwarted by 'race' and racism. More importantly, a focus on racism is not saying that racially minoritised people individually and collectively are helpless victims of racism. Instead, they are agents making their lives and remaking contexts.

The documentary 13th²³, on the continuities between slavery and the penal system in the United States, ends with photos of black people in mundane, ordinary and everyday scenes. There are dads playing with children, a photo of a female elder looking out at the Grand Canyon, images of dressing up for Halloween, school concerts and weddings. These stills are in contrast to the rest of 13th, which shows how black people are set up to fail and end up incarcerated in large numbers.

The photos are a reminder of possibilities despite racism. They symbolise defiance, strength of spirit and survival. They provide a glimpse into what could be and they insist on the full humanity of black people and the bandwidth of black lives.

We must focus relentlessly on removing the shadow of racism and its systemic delivery mechanisms. There is no alternative to that project. But we must remember, too, the light that still shines in the lives of racially minoritised populations.

²³ See W. Ide (2016), '13th review – fiercely intelligent prison documentary', Guardian, 9 October, www.theguardian.com/film/2016/oct/09/13th-review-bracingfiercely-intelligent-prison-documentary-avaduvernay.