

Where does all this murderous racism come from? Boris Johnson and his like!

News:

In the wake of ongoing violent protests that have spread to the UK following the murder of George Floyd in the US, the UK media have rediscovered an old article written in 2002 by now prime minister Boris Johnson, which sheds light on the racism that is killing so many black men. *“Boris Johnson said colonialism in Africa should never have ended and dismissed Britain’s role in slavery”* according to the Independent on the 13th of June.

Comment:

Just hours earlier a black man was killed by police in Atlanta. No, not George Floyd: another black man. He was shot in the back while running away from police, terrified for his life, having committed no crime except sleeping in his car, which was parked outside a restaurant. Officers approached him and found him rational, unarmed and initially compliant. Having celebrated his daughter’s birthday hours earlier and hoping to spend the next day with her, he became agitated and wrestled free of officers when they arrested him on suspicion of drinking. Moments later another black man lay dead at the feet of an officer who boasted, “I got him.”

Why is a black man’s life so cheap in the US? Where did all this hate come from? It is not unique to the US. It is just that the US is in love with guns as a symbol of freedom enshrined in their constitution with the result that the police are militarized. This hatred is a cover for colonial guilt, and what Boris Johnson wrote in his 2002 article for the Spectator Magazine encapsulates it. Johnson was on a trip to Africa as Foreign Secretary and his conscious troubled him briefly about the condition of that continent. Nevertheless, he wrote: *“but it is not a blot upon our conscience. The problem is not that we were once in charge, but that we are not in charge any more.”*

According to Johnson, Uganda needed Britain, to save it from “Arab slavers” and worse than that: “the jackfruit, hanging bigger than your head and covered with green tetrahedral nodules” which he informs us is “more or less disgusting,” and thereby justifies British coffee, cotton and tobacco plantations. Not content with rescuing the black man from the allegedly disgusting jack fruit, which white men don’t want to buy, Johnson aims his ire at their love for another insidious fruit: the plantain. “If left to their own devices, the natives would rely on nothing but the instant carbohydrate gratification of the plantain... Though this dish ... was greatly relished ... the colonists correctly saw that the export market was limited.” After Johnson has painted a picture of tasteless stupidity and addiction to carbohydrates, he turns to another common colonial trope: “Everywhere the people glide by, rather slowly, on big black bicycles.” His point is that Ugandans have not developed technologically to make their own bicycles, but the parenthetical “rather slowly” quip is instructive of a covert way of saying that these black people are lazy. Moving on from stupidity, addiction and laziness he treats us to the image of the black man as a murderous rapist: “We were raping, we were killing,’ one of them told me” and in case anyone thinks this is an isolated case he gives us a white man’s general assessment: “As one British official said, ‘I’ve been in Africa for ages and there’s one thing I just don’t get. Why are they so brutal to each other?’”

It would be easy for an African to do the same with a selective examination of white European history. There is no shortage of stupidity and laziness: rows of sunbathers exposing themselves to cancer inducing ultraviolet rays for hours at a time on a sunny beach perhaps. There is no shortage of addiction to choose from: maybe epidemic obesity and junk food consumption to outdo “the instant carbohydrate gratification of the plantain.” As for murder and rape: this is a daily occurrence, while in war one could settle on Srebrenica, the Spanish civil war, the American civil war or Auschwitz for example. Such comparisons parody the absurdity of colonial justifications whose effects are still very pervasive.

The black man was robbed of his dignity and nobility in colonial literature in order to allow the colonial white man to live with his heinous crimes. Two centuries after the legal abolition of slavery in the US, the vicious racism that underpinned it still infects and corrupts that nation as it does the other colonial nations that built their wealth upon the backs of oppression. The fact that the UK has a prime minister who unashamedly espoused such views speaks as loudly as the murderous police officers in the US, who so thoughtlessly unload their weapons into the backs of terrified black men in the US who daily live in fear of harassment or murder.

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