

What's in a word? modelling British history for a 'multi-racial' society

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To cite this article: Claire Sutherland (2024) What's in a word? modelling British history for a 'multi-racial' society, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 27:1, 99-117, DOI: [10.1080/13613324.2022.2160775](https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2022.2160775)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2022.2160775>



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Published online: 26 Jan 2023.



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What's in a word? modelling British history for a 'multi-racial' society

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ABSTRACT

In March 2022 the United Kingdom (UK) government published *Inclusive Britain: the government's response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities*. This accepts the 'bad apple' understanding of racism but is incurious as to the historical context and existing power relations shaping racist attitudes, thereby creating a tension with its stated aim of developing a model history curriculum. This article will address two, key issues resulting from this tension: Firstly, it unpicks *Inclusive Britain's* handling of race and, secondly, adopts a decolonial standpoint to critique its recommendation on how to make the school history curriculum more inclusive. The article concludes that *Inclusive Britain's* vision of the UK as 'multi-racial' serves to re-establish racial categories as an unquestioned and unproblematic series of fixed, reified identities, without acknowledging the hierarchies and uneven power relations inherent in racial terminology.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 June 2022
Accepted 16 December 2022

KEYWORDS

Race; racism; inclusivity;
history; curriculum

In March 2022, the United Kingdom (UK) government published *Inclusive Britain: the government's response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities*, which had concluded the previous year. The Commission's Sewell report, named after its chair, was widely criticised on publication for its selective use of evidence and for appearing to deny the existence of institutional racism, leading many experts and even some of its contributors to denounce the findings (BBC 2021; Iqbal 2021). Likewise, the government's response in *Inclusive Britain* does not accept the existence of institutional racism, also known as structural or systemic racism, which refers to 'the raciological ordering of the world' (Gilroy 2004, 42). It contrasts with definitions of racism as 'illiberal, pathological and individual', understood as an aberration perpetrated by bad people rather than a constitutive part of the status quo (Mondon and Winter cited in Bremner 2022, 3). As Bremner (2022, 1) notes; 'This is important because, if racism tends to be characterised as a systemic problem, solutions will be centred around a fundamental restructuring of social institutions, but if it tends to be individualised, solutions will be focused on changing the attitudes of prejudiced people'. *Inclusive Britain* accepts the 'bad apple' understanding of racism but is incurious as to the historical context and existing power relations which shape racist attitudes. This sets up a tension with its stated aim of

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developing a model history curriculum designed to ‘ensure that how our past is taught in schools encourages all pupils, whatever their ethnicity, to feel an authentic sense of belonging to a multi-racial UK’ (HM Government 2022, 83). This article will address two, key issues resulting from this tension: Firstly, it unpicks *Inclusive Britain’s* handling of race and, secondly, adopts a decolonial standpoint to critique its recommendation on how to make the school history curriculum more inclusive. The two issues are closely linked because a limited understanding of black history as supplementary to ‘core’ British history misses the fundamental point that ‘European nation-states, in particular, have seldom recognised their very formation through imperial systems built on racism, let alone their contemporary social, political or economic legacies’ (Meer 2022, 2).

According to one of its foundational scholars, Anibal Quijano (2008, 181), decolonial theory is based on ‘the social classification of the world’s population around the idea of race, a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination’. This posits that Eurocentrism, capitalism and racism have proven more durable than colonialism itself, permeating societies and dominant knowledge systems to this day. Quijano models a homogenising social system of white supremacy emanating from Europe, beginning with the colonisation of the Americas and leading to a racialised hierarchy of slavery, serfdom and waged labour. He demonstrates how the economic power of capital has been co-constitutive of European modernity, also understood to include the bourgeois family, the nation-state and Eurocentric rationality (Quijano 2008, 193). Walter Mignolo (2008), another key member of the Modernity-Coloniality-Decoloniality school of thought, considers modernity and coloniality to have been co-constitutive phenomena for the last five hundred years, ever since the establishment of transatlantic commerce in the early sixteenth century. He draws attention to Quijano’s distinction between colonialism and the continuing ‘coloniality of power forced on non-European cultures that have remained silenced, hidden and absent’ (Mignolo 2008, 240). This leads to Mignolo’s (2008, 247) definition of decolonisation as ‘to produce, transform, and disseminate knowledge that is not dependent on the epistemology of North Atlantic modernity’.

Decolonising the curriculum, therefore, represents a different paradigm to that of inclusivity, which seeks to extend *existing* teaching structures, syllabi and delivery models to all students. Decolonising, on the other hand, entails a root and branch review of the foundations of academic knowledge, institutional classroom practices, learning materials, assessment aims and academic mindsets. Since the Rhodes must Fall student movement spread to Oxford University from South Africa in 2016, this radical theoretical perspective is having an impact on many British university campuses (Gabrial 2018). In a schools context, Moncrieffe (2020, 3) defines decolonising the curriculum as a ‘means to cause “epistemic discomfort” by decentring Whiteness through critical curriculum thinking’. The present article is also a decolonial project in that it seeks to understand and undermine some of the foundational assumptions derived from colonial modernity that find expression in contemporary UK politics. It is related to broader current debates and media representations of efforts to decolonise museums, schools, universities and other public spaces, that are often depicted in quite value-laden and polarising terms.

Evidence from opinion polls and UK media surveys suggests that coverage of the so-called ‘culture wars’ has increased exponentially since 2020, with 54% of the public now agreeing this divides Britain (Duffy et al. 2022). This timeframe coincides with widespread

coverage of Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on 25 May 2020. Public awareness of terminology related to ongoing struggles for social justice, such as ‘being woke’ and ‘cancel culture’, has also grown over this time to 65% and 60% respectively, while awareness of the term ‘white privilege’ has remained stable at around 80% (Duffy et al. 2022, 8). There is an increasing tendency for people to perceive being woke – which can be defined as an awareness of social injustice – as an insult rather than a compliment. 51% of the UK public also believe the term ‘white privilege’ to be unhelpful, though this varies significantly by age, ethnicity and political affiliation, compared to 23% who find it helpful in thinking about British race relations today (Duffy et al. 2022, 14). At 55% in 2021, the majority of UK media coverage devoted to white privilege was linked to schools and education, including a newly published House of Commons Education Select Committee Report, thereby putting the sector at the centre of ‘culture wars’ issues (Duffy et al. 2022, 16). This goes hand in hand with a hardening of attitudes among some Conservative government ministers since the 2019 general election, which Boris Johnson fought and won on a promise to ‘Get Brexit done’. In a House of Commons debate held to mark Black History Month in October 2020, for example, the then Equalities Minister Kemi Badenoch (cited in Hansard 2020, 1011) stated; ‘Our curriculum does not need to be decolonised, for the simple reason that it is not colonised. We should not apologise for the fact that British children primarily study the history of these islands’.

Together, these debates are part of a ‘Grand Discourse’ reflecting an ever-evolving social reality in Britain and beyond (Sutherland 2005, 187). More specifically, British education has gone through several phases, from an assimilationist policy towards immigrants in the 1960s to a gradual opening towards a more multicultural approach in the 1970s and 80s, even though ‘the focus was still on the child and parent as the problem rather than the education system’ (Race 2015, 23). In 1985, the Department of Education’s Swann report recognised the need to offer a culturally pluralistic education, but enjoyed limited support from Conservative governments at the time and subsequently. By the turn of the millennium, Tony Blair’s Labour governments were focusing on teaching skills, until the return of Conservatives to government from 2010 brought a renewed emphasis on acquiring canonical knowledge, understood as a return to traditional curriculum content and exam-based assessment (Gibb 2021). This is in marked contrast to a model of powerful knowledge premised on recognising that disciplines like history are systematic and evolving bodies of knowledge open to challenge and debate if students have the understanding, skills and agency to do so (Chapman 2021, 9). Building on the latter approach to knowledge, the present article’s analysis of *Inclusive Britain* focuses on a micro-level of discourse within the framework of Grand Discourse, since ‘speech and writing are themselves but internal components of discursive totalities’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 4). Sections of the text were selected for their typicality in distilling key recurrent themes in the so-called ‘culture wars’- as applied to education – and allusions were decoded based on the author’s broader knowledge of UK politics and expertise in the study of nationalism and belonging (Sutherland 2010, 2012, 2017, 2020).

As with all appeals to a national ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991), *Inclusive Britain*’s definition of the UK as ‘multi-racial’ projects a set of assumptions. Choosing to use this as an unqualified, descriptive term serves to re-establish racial categories as an unquestioned and unproblematic series of fixed, reified identities, without

acknowledging the hierarchies and uneven power relations inherent in racial terminology. This is important because ‘race works to organize knowledge through invocations to naturalized authenticity’ (Lentin 2016a, 44). If race is taken for granted as an identifier, racialised thinking will ultimately be harder to overcome. This article argues that the government’s stated aim of fostering belonging is framed in a racialised way that is not conducive to acknowledging and ultimately eradicating racialised thinking. It does so through close textual analysis of the way in which *Inclusive Britain* frames inclusivity in its preamble and third chapter, specifically focusing on its recommendation to promote a more inclusive history curriculum in schools. The article goes on to propose an alternative framing that could serve as a different basis for a more inclusive Britain. This consists in some indicative curriculum content on Britain and the history of race, selected to show how ‘[m]odern society is based upon the hierarchies of Eurocentrism in which anti-Blackness is essential’ (Moncrieffe 2020, 3). This article adopts a decolonial standpoint to argue that an understanding of this history is necessary to grasp and address contemporary racism. What this means is that the dehumanisation of black and indigenous peoples is constitutive of colonial modernity and the concept of European civilisation (as opposed to perceived barbarism). Illustrating how anti-black racism was part of the British imperial project offers practical examples of what could be included in a model curriculum. This comes with the crucial caveat that the concept of inclusivity is always premised on adding to a pre-existing community, in contrast to a transformative, decolonial approach. Rather than starting from inclusion, a concept which inherently distinguishes ‘us’ and ‘them’, this article proposes an approach premised on ‘then’ and ‘now’.

I

Connecting Britain’s history of racial hierarchy with its present-day legacies ‘involves moving simultaneously onto historical and political ground’ (Gilroy 2004, 33). *Inclusive Britain*’s plans to develop a model history curriculum by 2024 could be a welcome undertaking, given that understandings of racism ‘are not always sufficiently grounded in the actual history of race’ (Lentin 2016b, 403). There is evidence to show that an inclusive curriculum and valuing cultural diversity are among the factors contributing to the educational success – or lack of it – among Black Caribbean students, for example (Demie 2019, 2021). In practice, however, the government’s chosen approach risks compounding a lack of belonging by simultaneously denying the existence of structural racism while retrieving the term ‘multiracial’ to describe contemporary British society, thereby entrenching racial divisions while erasing racial hierarchy. This does not bode well for an endeavour which appears to be detached from precisely the historical context that it aims to instil in children. The term multiracial should be used cautiously, consciously and in historical context, if at all. These features are not apparent in *Inclusive Britain*, and its model history curriculum is therefore unlikely to address the ongoing importance of racism across several centuries of British history. A model history curriculum which does not connect to the global reach of imperialism and racism and integrate black and minority ethnic achievement fully and seamlessly will not achieve the stated aim of making ‘young ethnic minorities’ feel they belong (HM Government 2022, 83). Indeed, a project premised on the distinction between ‘them’ and the unnamed

majority – racialised by implication as not ethnic, or white – only serves to perpetuate that distinction. People cannot feel they belong if they are depicted as ‘add ons’. Critically analysing the origins and contemporary consequences of racial categorisation would be a more productive means of developing historically informed racial literacy among all schoolchildren, rather than expecting ethnic minorities to learn to belong (Lentin 2020).

Consisting of three chapters and a total of seventy-four, wide-ranging actions, *Inclusive Britain* is aimed at tackling ‘prejudice and discrimination [...] dismantling practical barriers [and] foster[ing] a sense of inclusion and belonging to the United Kingdom and our country’s rich and complex history’, while emphasising the individual, family and community agency ‘that ultimately drives success and achievement’ (HM Government 2022, 9-10). It defines the UK as an ‘open, tolerant and welcoming country, with a great history and a great people’, highlighting its multi-ethnicity and diversity as a strength (HM Government 2022, 10). In her foreword to *Inclusive Britain*, then Conservative Minister for Equalities Kemi Badenoch both acknowledged that ‘racism does still exist in some areas’ and praised the Sewell report that had prompted the government’s response. Noting how the report ‘challenged the lazy consensus [...] free from politicisation or distortion’, she approvingly quoted its view that ‘we no longer see a Britain where the system is deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities. The impediments and disparities do exist, they are varied, and ironically very few of them are directly to do with racism’. (Sewell, cited in HM Government 2022, 8). This approach is in stark contrast to the structure and contents of the Welsh government’s explicitly *Anti-racist Wales Action Plan (2022)* published three months later. Linked to this, the new Curriculum for Wales (2022a) for students aged three to sixteen specifies that what matters for the humanities is that its ‘stories are diverse, spanning different communities as well as in particular the stories of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people’. Accordingly, the curriculum’s descriptions of learning in the humanities includes an understanding of the diversity and plurality of communities as a key aim (Curriculum for Wales 2022b).

The publication of *Inclusive Britain*’s recommendations and actions was given a cautious welcome, although the chief executive officer of the racial equality think tank Runnymede Trust commented that it was not a complete or coherent strategy (Begum 2022). This is unsurprising, given *Inclusive Britain* shares Tony Sewell’s rejection of institutional racism, though its reasoning is allusive:

The [Sewell] report’s focus on evidence has revealed an important general finding: that whilst there is still some prejudice in our society, most racial disparities are not the consequence of individual acts of prejudice, whether unconscious or unwitting. The report’s analysis shows that for the most part negative disparities arise for reasons not based on personal dislike or attitude. This explains why, in our more liberal-minded era, disparities continue to exist (HM Government 2022, 11).

This acknowledges the existence of disparities, but repeats that most cannot be explained by racial prejudice. The reasoning is circular and obscure. In effect, this passage refutes the existence of institutional racism without ever explicitly employing the term. The phrase ‘liberal-minded’ also implicitly distances racism from liberal thinking, thereby reinforcing its association with ‘some prejudice in our society’ while simultaneously asserting that individuals are not responsible for racial disparities. Despite a statement to the contrary, no explanation is actually provided for who or what is responsible, only

that prejudice and dislike are *not* to blame. As the basis for *Inclusive Britain's* recommendations, it has important implications for its approach to identity, inclusivity, and history.

The extract's references to attitudes and unwitting prejudice echo Sir William MacPherson's well-known definition of institutional racism in the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, which examined London Metropolitan Police failings in investigating Lawrence's murder (MacPherson 1999, 49). In the same year, the Labour government quickly responded by drawing up an action plan to implement all seventy of the inquiry's recommendations and to establish the Stephen Lawrence Steering Group. This group was chaired by the Home Secretary until 2005, when it was dissolved in favour of creating specific projects (Home Affairs Select Committee 2021, 562-3). Recommendations 67-69 of the Macpherson report related to education. They called for anti-racist amendments to the National Curriculum, for Local Authorities and School Governors to take responsibility for recording, reporting and strategically addressing racist incidents, and for OFSTED inspections to examine this strategy implementation (MacPherson 1999, 382). This represented a marked departure from the Department of Education's own reports on multicultural education since the 1960s, which tended to place the onus on 'West Indian' and 'Asian' children to integrate and often laid the blame for failure on them or their families, rather than critically considering the education system to which they were exposed (Race 2015, 18-32).

The official status of government documents, and their capacity to bring about political change, gives their words greater authority in defining public discourse than other forms of mass media and communication (Turnbull and Broad 2022, 201). This has been particularly clear since the Brexit referendum, as successive Conservative governments have employed terms like 'Global Britain' to redefine the UK's place in the world (Parnell 2022). Former Prime Minister Theresa May's failed attempts to 'unite the country' behind her definition of post-Brexit Britain, for example, turned on her rhetorical framing of the national community and how inclusively she imagined her audience (Atkins 2022, 218). Similarly, *Inclusive Britain's* model history curriculum promises 'a selective retelling of history that is intended to confer meaning on the past and, with its promises of continuity, to assuage concerns about the future' (Atkins 2022, 218). As such, it plays a key part in the 'political and media mechanisms that simultaneously privilege and constrain, amplify and mute [and] consistently constrict how racism can be discussed' (Titley 2020, 96). Placing racism in its historical context is crucial to understanding its legacy today. Racism was a creation of colonialism, used to justify both chattel slavery, which fuelled the plantation system across the Americas, and Europe's subsequent conquest and exploitation of vast swathes of Africa, Asia and Oceania as part of a so-called 'civilising mission'. Britain played a leading role in profiting from this, as any model history curriculum should make clear.

Inclusive Britain's third chapter, simply titled 'Inclusion', breaks down the government's understanding of the concept in a way which seems to preclude any significant shift in how race is conceptualised or taught. Its stated aim of fostering a sense of belonging through the school history curriculum is the first action of many, which range across education, policing, the justice system and community initiatives. The 'more inclusive history curriculum' in recommendation 20 is intended to encourage all pupils, 'whatever their ethnicity, to feel an authentic sense of belonging to a multi-racial

UK' (HM Government 2022, 83). Although *Inclusive Britain* is correct in connecting an understanding of history to a sense of belonging, its terms of reference serve to perpetuate the very divisions they are ostensibly designed to overcome. The chapter begins 'Our multi-racial society in the UK is unique', thereby setting the scene in three important ways. Firstly, the pronoun 'our' is deictic. That is, it is used to refer to a specific national grouping and to address the reader as a member of that group. It also represents a case of methodological nationalism in that the nation-state container is being taken for granted as the subject of analysis (Sutherland 2020). This is a problematic starting point for trying to understand the history of the United Kingdom in European and global context, another of the recommendation's stated aims. Crucially, it elides the fact that the United Kingdom was an Empire until the close of World War II and the onset of decolonisation, rather than a nation-state (Gilroy 2004). This is what the historian Timothy Snyder (2018, 74) terms 'the fable of the wise nation'.

Secondly, the UK is described as multi-racial. That is, it assumes race to be a really existing and appropriate descriptor. This has the effect of embedding race as a social construct further into public discourse, thereby entrenching a concept which scholars like Paul Gilroy (2000, 2010) argue should be overcome. It is important to note that this neither implies that institutional racism does not exist, as *Inclusive Britain* implies, nor that it has already been overcome, nor that it need not be taught. Just as nations are creations of nationalism (Gellner 1983), so races are created by racism, and not the other way around. Racial classifications, in turn, are inherently hierarchical, and students should be taught how they came about and how they function; 'The "race" idea is powerful precisely because it supplies a foundational understanding of natural hierarchy' (Gilroy 2004, 9). In other words, it is not possible to employ racial classifications while denying the pervasiveness of their concomitant racial hierarchies, which is what *Inclusive Britain* attempts to do.

Inclusive Britain avoids using alternative terms to define the UK, such as multicultural, which is redolent of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown's Labour governments (1997-2010). Subsequent Conservative governments likely shared former Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron's assessment; 'Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream' (Cameron 2011, online). In the context of tackling Islamic extremism, Cameron (2011, online) condemned multiculturalism in a speech to the Munich Security Council, calling instead for 'a much more active, muscular liberalism' as opposed to a 'passively tolerant society'. The term 'mainstream' is instructive here because it is part of the same discursive framing as inclusion. That is, the premise of inclusion is that all should subscribe to a national guiding narrative or in this case, a historical script encapsulated in a 'more inclusive history curriculum'. A similar trajectory could be observed in Germany, where the Christian Democrats criticised left-leaning, so-called 'MultiKulti' supporters and professed the need for a national *Leitkultur*, or guiding culture (Sutherland 2010, 52). *Inclusive Britain* demonstrates, after 'the putative "failure of multiculturalism"', the resurgence of Integrationism' (Valluvan and Kapoor 2016, 379).

David Cameron's reference to an 'active, muscular liberalism' is also revealing. As Lisa Lowe (2015) and Priya Satia (2020) have shown, liberalism has been premised on notions of historical progress and personal freedom throughout colonial modernity, understood as several hundred years of European colonisation of the globe. However, the enjoyment

of individual freedom and the fruits of progress is also very much racialised, in that this was only made possible for a privileged minority through the labour of colonised, enslaved and indentured others, often racialised as non-white: ‘Race as a mark of colonial difference is an enduring remainder of the processes through which the human is universalized and freed by liberal forms, while the peoples who created the conditions of possibility for that freedom are assimilated or forgotten’ (Lowe 2015, 7). The dehumanisation inherent in chattel slavery is thus key to understanding the origins of the liberal project, the limiting of universalism to those considered fully human, and ‘how this assumed universality continues to legitimise and extend racializing processes and dynamics’ (Tittley 2020, 135).

Thirdly, *Inclusive Britain* describes the UK as ‘unique’ and ‘one of the best examples of managing complex diversity, protecting rights and delivering opportunities for the individual – no matter who they are or where they have come from’ (HM Government 2022, 83). While demographic similarities with other countries like France and the USA are acknowledged, describing the UK in this way immediately sets it apart. This establishes a form of exceptionalism that has characterised many of the Johnson government’s pronouncements in office, such as the use of terms like ‘world-beating’ to describe the UK’s Covid test and trace system (O’Toole 2020), and former Education Secretary Gavin Williamson’s claim that the UK is a ‘much better country’ than France, Belgium and the United States (Cowburn 2020). This rhetoric aims to tap into a sense of national pride, patriotism, and even a chauvinistic sense of superiority (Womack 2021). Some may find *Inclusive Britain’s* unsubstantiated assertions that the UK is doing better than others ‘across a range of measures, including socio-economic disparities, economic marginalisation and prejudice’ fit with their image of the UK. Others may struggle to discern the Britain they know in this description, namely one of high inequality further exacerbated by the Covid pandemic.

Tolerance is a corollary of inclusion in that it assumes the ‘Other’ to be outside the national imagined community, waiting to be let in. It suggests grudging acceptance of different ways of life to the national deictic ‘ours’, premised on an underlying distinction between ‘them’ and ‘us’. It follows that coming to feel a sense of belonging to ‘us’ will be more arduous for those in Britain’s ‘multi-racial society’ who have to overcome a primary designation as ‘them’. This is made explicit in action 58 of *Inclusive Britain*, which aims ‘to support teaching all-year (sic) round on black history in readiness for Black History Month’ and ‘to share the multiple, nuanced stories of the contributions made by different groups’ (HM Government 2022, 84). This approach is consistent with the idea of a multi-racial society, since it appears to silo contributions into racialised groups, rather than considering them all as co-constitutive of British history. It divides and distinguishes according to notions of ‘groupness’ (Brubaker 2002), in turn conjuring associations with purity that appear to overlook the really existing cultural cross-fertilisation characterising any ‘multi-racial society’. Even though *Inclusive Britain* considers ‘multiple identities’ to be ‘a clear strength’ (HM Government 2022, 83), its rhetoric does not envisage a model of teaching whereby ‘hybridity, mixture, and contaminating combination can be seen as sources of excitement and strength, rather than symptoms of weakness and pathology’ (Gilroy 2010, 105).

Action 57 of *Inclusive Britain* sets out to ‘help pupils understand the intertwined nature of British and global history, and their own place within it’ (HM Government

2022, 84). However, this laudable aim is undermined by the imagery and terminology used, which suggest compartmentalised racial and national categories that may be ‘intertwined’ but necessarily remain separate from each other and from a world history approach (Vann 2019). That is, British history is posited as a discrete entity somehow distinct from global history. Black history is to be taught alongside British history, rather than as a constitutive part of it. The result is like a Russian doll; black history sits inside British history, which sits inside global history, but all three have clear contours and contents that never merge into a single story. It follows that if black history is not considered constitutive of British history, then British history must therefore be something other than black. In the UK context, non-black suggests whiteness as the racialised term that best fits the majority population. Taken together, the distinguishing features employed in this text appear to associate British history with white history, without ever saying so explicitly.

Inclusive Britain’s introduction to chapter three links inclusion to equality and anti-discrimination. It further defines an inclusive society by pointing out that ‘everyone has a stake in society – not just in their own prosperity but that of their neighbours and fellow citizens’. The next paragraph elaborates:

An inclusive society is built on shared values, and a shared history. In a diverse community, such as ours, inclusion will not happen so long as membership of a particular race or ethnic group supersedes integration with wider society (HM Government 2022, 83).

Again, there are three points to note here. Firstly, race is once more referred to as an identifier, alongside ethnic group. Secondly, even though these terms are not prefaced with the word ‘minority’, the burden of sharing and integration is implicitly skewed towards them, since the stated goal is ‘integration with wider society’. Finally, social integration is presented as a one-way street deemed incompatible with a primary loyalty to a different race or ethnicity to the ‘silent majority’. This is more like a process of assimilation to the majority than reciprocal exchange. It is consistent with the concept of inclusion, which implies incorporation into a pre-existing whole rather than a newly created amalgam. It is also redolent of ‘assimilation and immigration control: the leftover categories of the 1960s debate’ (Gilroy 2004, 134), and seems likely to vitiate *Inclusive Britain’s* stated goal of fostering a sense of belonging in all young people through education.

Inclusive Britain goes on to state that ‘the most important characteristic we have in common is that of being part of the UK’ (HM Government 2022, 83). Exhorting people to put their national identity above their ethnic or racialised identity not only serves to reify those identities but also prevails upon people to part with them if they are deemed to compete with national belonging. This only pertains to people not already considered part of ‘wider society’, or what David Cameron called the mainstream. In other words, diversity and multiple identities are acceptable, and even to be celebrated, so long as they do not trump a patriotic allegiance to the UK. This is apparently intended to be part of a hopeful vision, which ‘rejects fear [and] requires thinking the best of our fellow citizens’ (HM Government 2022, 83). Requiring certain racial groups to integrate only entrenches perceived differences in public discourse, however, which can breed suspicion and hate. By contrast, ‘the refusal of racialised hierarchy and marginality is itself a civic asset which

can deepen political life and enhance the fragile, universal humanity to which rights are addressed and attached' (Gilroy 2010, 164).

The introduction to chapter three of *Inclusive Britain* ends by connecting the dangers of negative thinking to the study of history as a means of promoting 'an authentic sense of belonging to a multi-racial UK':

This will need a focused and continual communication on the positives of our society as well as its history and values and an honest examination where there are deficiencies. The risk is that an imbalanced emphasis on the negatives can distort the true picture, often to the detriment of young ethnic minorities who are led to believe, incorrectly, that their society is against them and they will never belong (HM Government 2022, 83).

This sets up a moral dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad', in addition to the previous opposition between 'us' and 'them'. As with the previously cited extract, it also accords importance to fundamental British values – namely democracy, the rule of law, individual freedom, mutual respect and religious tolerance – which have been taught in England since 2004. There is an argument that this 'requirement itself proceeds through disavowal and amnesia about Britain's history of colonial violence and racialised structural inequalities in the contemporary state', thereby contributing to a more 'precarious' sense of belonging among non-white and non-Christian school pupils (Vincent 2022, 332, 336; see also Moncrieffe 2020, 5).

Perhaps surprisingly for a prime minister who decried 'self-recrimination and wetness' (Johnson, cited in ITV News 2020, online) about British history, Boris Johnson's government appeared to be advocating an 'honest examination' of any shortcomings, without ever losing a sense of balance. *Inclusive Britain* explicitly singles out young ethnic minorities, who are informed that it is simply 'incorrect' for them to believe they will never belong, while it literally goes without saying that the white majority belongs by default. *Inclusive Britain* asserts that a supposedly undistorted view of the truth will deliver a foregone conclusion. Anything else, including lived experience of discrimination and disadvantage, is thereby dismissed as mistaken. That perspective is silenced and any assertion as to the existence of institutional racism is delegitimised to create a discursive space constructed as both postracial and multiracial (Titley 2020, 50). Thus, people can be defined by their race and yet denied access to a structural critique of racism. This fits the description of a 'postracial' approach that denies 'race as a technology (rather than as a descriptive category)' (Lentin 2016b, 386). In other words, race is reified at the same time as the impact of doing so is dismissed. The next section considers the implications of this framing for teaching British history.

II

Beyond the commitment to create a 'knowledge-rich, coherent' model history curriculum by 2024, *Inclusive Britain* gives little indication of how this will be inclusively designed to achieve its stated aim of fostering belonging. Further insight into how the government defines a knowledge-rich curriculum can be gleaned from a speech by Education Minister Nick Gibb at an event on raising school standards in 2021. Here it is linked to both an 'inclusive and cohesive society, a society in which argument and debate is based on evidence rather than emotion' and to the National Curriculum's emphasis on 'the best that has been thought and said' (Gibb 2021). Commenting on the

cumulative advantage of pupils who start school with a wide vocabulary, compared to their less advantaged peers, Gibb (2021) vows ‘to close this gap by making sure that every child is taught the same knowledge’. The contents of what Gibb terms historical ‘communal knowledge’ is outlined in terms of ‘battles ... experiments [and] the actions of leaders’, described each time by association with a good or bad outcome. Approving references to Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the Spanish Armada, the Battle of Waterloo and nineteenth century UK prime ministers also give a flavour of what such communal knowledge might comprise. Presented as a solid basis on which disadvantaged students, specifically, can build, it raises the question of how teaching everyone the same ‘communal knowledge’ will encourage an authentic sense of belonging across the board. Further pressing questions include: Who gets to decide on the content of communal knowledge, and whose perspective and power govern the selection of ‘the best that is thought and said’?

In his speech, Gibb (2021) states that; ‘A curriculum based on relevance to pupils is to deny them an introduction to the “best that has been thought and said”, naming Shakespeare, Mozart and Newton as exemplary in this context. Rather than entertaining the thought that great works are to be found across many cultures, this statement assumes that the “best” is in a class of its own and will not necessarily intersect with relevance to pupils’ background. This reading is supported by the subsequent example of the African-American poet Maya Angelou’s connection to Shakespeare, who Gibb chooses to describe as a ‘dead white man’. Gibb (2021) closes the argument by saying: ‘We will not create a more harmonious, tolerant and equal society through promoting a curriculum based on relevance to or representativeness of any one group’, apparently unabashed at this inconsistency with his exclusive reference to ‘dead white men’ as examples of curriculum content. As such, Gibb does not demonstrate any intent to broaden all students’ horizons beyond knowledge of the great men cited.

Fittingly, given Gibb’s reference to England football manager Gareth Southgate’s much admired open letter and leadership of his multi-ethnic men’s team through to the 2021 European cup finals, Gibb’s speech is a game of two halves:

We should tell the full and true story of who we are and what, as a country, we have done; right and wrong. And, by doing so, we can build a broad and accepted understanding of the country and create a common sense of belonging and shared history. And the broader the knowledge is that is taught the more inclusive it can be (Gibb 2021).

Gibb goes on to cite a wide range of international subject content to support this claim before suggesting a rather narrower range of what a global history for British children should cover, although this does include ‘the struggles and achievements of peoples from all races’. This is difficult to square with his prior assertion that a curriculum should not be linked to representativeness. It also normalises race once more as a term to describe human diversity. Gibb’s speech ends by making the case for knowledge as a basis for reasoned argument, citing the Enlightenment as a guide to pursuing truth and progress in our polarised society. It is a deeply one-sided assertion, however, that is hard to reconcile with both Gibb’s and *Inclusive Britain’s* commitment to offer a balanced historical view. This is because the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment was built on racial hierarchies, as the writings of Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Hegel and David Hume make abundantly clear (Elden 2009, 17-20; Taiwo 1998; Immerwahr 1992).

Some Enlightenment thinkers could be opposed to slavery and oppression in principle while ignoring it in practice, or even profiting from it, as did John Locke through his investment in the Royal African Company (Stovall 2021, 107). A more inclusive history curriculum designed to foster a sense of belonging would be better served by making the link between past and present, as opposed to ‘them’ and ‘us’ or ‘bad’ and ‘good’. It would incorporate relevant and respectful learning opportunities that speak to ethnic minorities’ own sense of identity and help them understand their place in the world by examining how it was constructed throughout colonial modernity (Nieto 2017).

According to Paul Gilroy (2004, 31), we ‘need to reconstruct the history of “race” in modernity. That task entails offering multiple genealogies of racial discourse that can explain how the brutal, dualistic opposition between black and white became entrenched and has retained its grip’. Any model history curriculum designed to foster belonging would have to teach some core facts about race, namely that racism was developed as a system to justify slavery and colonial exploitation. Learning about Atlantic slavery as a technology of colonial control reveals the historical origins of systemic racism and should give pause before using race as an unqualified descriptor. The development of colonialism and slavery went hand in hand with the doctrine of racism, but passed through several distinct phases. In the sixteenth century, as the first plantations were established on the islands of Barbados and Jamaica, it was principally Irish workers and other dispossessed from the islands of Great Britain and Ireland who cleared the indigenous forests to make way for enclosed plantations, at a time when the enclosure of common land had left them without a livelihood in their home countries. Sugar cane first came to the Caribbean with Columbus via the Canary Islands, which together with Sao Tomé and Madeira had been early experimental zones for mass production (DeLoughrey 2007, 9). When the forests were completely felled, English coal was imported to process the sugar, and so the interdependence between the colony and the colonising power’s industrialisation bedded in (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, 125).

Racism was closely imbricated in the development of capitalism. There was a strong connection between the enclosure of common lands in Britain and Ireland and the creation of the plantation system in the West Indies. Both relied on the basic principle of private property that, in turn, underpins capitalism. The slave ship was a particularly horrific technology of terror, control and commodification. It encapsulated both the capitalism that fuelled repeated crossings of the ‘Middle Passage’ throughout four hundred years of the transatlantic trade in humans as private property, and the racial hierarchy of power:

It was the common practice for everyone involved in the slave trade, whether African or European, to refer to the ship’s crew as the “white men” or the “white people,” even when the crew was motley, a portion of it “colored” and distinctly not white. The sailor’s status as a “white man” guaranteed that he would not be sold in the slave-labor market, and it marked him as someone who could dispense violence and discipline to the enslaved on behalf of the merchant and his capital (Rediker 2007, 260).

Putting race into historical context demonstrates that it is principally about relations of power rather than phenotypical characteristics, thereby helping to explain why accusations of ‘reverse racism’ against majority populations racialised as white make little sense, other than as a deflective manoeuvre to avoid examining the historic, political and economic roots of racial injustice.

Slavery and civil rights should not be students' only encounter with the history of black Britons, which should be fully rounded and incorporated into British history as a whole, but accounts of enslaved resistance and its consequences are nevertheless important in helping students understand the nature of systemic racism. Debates about slavery remain relevant today because they are linked to 'persistent racism and racial inequalities that prevail in former slave societies or countries where slavery existed' (Araujo 2021, 3). This includes the former British Empire. Caribbean plantation owners lived in fear that they would be attacked by those whose work had produced their wealth, and sought to sow division between enslaved people and indentured servants. Africans and Irish who conspired together to resist atrocious working conditions were kept in check by horrific acts of violence. The hierarchical distinction between servants and chattel slavery as private property was codified in Barbados in 1661 and soon copied on other islands. Servants were elevated to the status of artisans, overseers and militia men, armed to discipline and punish the enslaved. This hierarchy was racialised. At a time when indentured servants from Britain and Ireland could no longer be supplied as cheaply or in such reliable numbers, colonisers developed a racist doctrine to manage and control the hugely profitable plantation system and enshrined it in law. Thus, the association of black Africans with chattel slavery and its binary opposite, the 'free-born Englishman', became established (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, 134).

An inclusive British history curriculum would have to acknowledge and explore race as a key tool of imperial power. If *Inclusive Britain* wants 'young ethnic minorities' to feel they belong, its model history curriculum must examine the reasons why they might feel excluded in the first place. As a schoolteacher commented on teaching Shakespeare, this is a 'chance to empower students to examine the power dynamics that dictate our world. To eventually enact change' (Asbali 2022, online). Once placed in the context of what came before, accounts of slavery's abolition would have to be supplemented with what came next. Even though the British slave trade was made illegal in 1807, slavery continued in British colonies for several decades due to the concerted efforts of the British establishment's West India Interest (Taylor 2020). Nevertheless, Britain became a self-appointed policeman of the seas, intercepting other countries' slaving ships in an attempt to eradicate a practice at which Britain had been 'world-beating'.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the British increasingly engaged in 'pacifying' missions across Africa under the pretext that these served to stamp out the slave trade, when their principal purpose was to establish British bases for commerce and ultimately colonisation across the continent. The twentieth-century gradualist position on granting independence to Britain's colonies in Africa and elsewhere parallels the nineteenth century gradualist position on emancipation from slavery, which long characterised Britain's abolitionist movement. As the Quaker abolitionist Elizabeth Heyrick noted in her influential 1824 pamphlet, *Immediate, not Gradual Abolition*, the gradualist strategy adopted by leading figures like William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson – involving relentless lecturing, pamphleteering and awareness-raising in parliament and around the country – was not making headway against the West India Interest. Two centuries on, Heyrick's forceful call could be transposed to those who claim that all but a few 'bad apples' in society are not racist, when racial hierarchies in fact persist; 'the veil of ignorance is rent aside; the whole nation must now divide itself into the active supporters

and the active opposers of slavery; there is no longer any ground for a neutral party to stand upon' (Heyrick 1838 [1824], 5).

The persistence of racial hierarchies continued well after formal emancipation in 1833. Former slaves in Britain's colonies did not enjoy the same rights as free citizens. Instead, they had to undertake five years of 'apprenticeship' to their former masters, according to a gradualist model which plantation owners exploited so that working conditions did not substantially improve. Even after Britain's apprenticeship system ended in 1838, abolitionist Baptist ministers in Jamaica and elsewhere expected their black flock to remain under their moral and religious tutelage, while continuing to work for wages. Many abolitionists in Britain also held, at best, deeply paternalistic views of emancipated West Indians. The majority, who had never been to the Caribbean, imbibed the same negative stereotypes about black people that were current at the time, such as indolence. They believed that, though equal, emancipated slaves needed tutoring to reach a comparable level of civilisation to white Britons. A visiting Baptist missionary to Jamaica in 1847 opined that, through no fault of their own, the impact of slavery was that the 'entire population stands intellectually at zero' (Burrell cited in Hall 2002, 344). Only the canon of Western civilisation – including the Classics, bible study, English literature and mathematics – counted as knowledge. All other forms of knowledge were deemed superstitious or otherwise suspicious. There are echoes of Gibb's communal knowledge here, which makes it 'vital [...] to trace the significance of the notion of cultural competency to ideas of race right back to the hearth of colonialism' (Lentin 2016b, 387).

Racial hierarchies lived on. The coolie system of indentured labourers brought to the Americas, Southeast Asia and Fiji from British India and elsewhere in the Empire came to replace slavery. Exemplary violence continued to be a defining feature of British capitalism and colonisation, premised on racist, stereotypical assumptions about the 'Other'. British colonial officials in India were genuinely amazed that both Muslim and Hindus there could believe their culture to be comparable and even superior. In 1858 a correspondent for the Times newspaper, which a year earlier had bemoaned the failure of emancipation as evidenced by the decline of West Indian economies and communities, commented on the 'arrogant and repellent' British treatment of Indians; though 'we hate Slavery [...] we hate slaves too' (cited in Satia 2020, 127). This attitude went hand in hand with the widespread belief that other 'races', such as Australian aborigines or Native Americans, were doomed to die out by dint of their very inferiority. Increasingly, too, connections were made with a British 'underclass', sometimes seen as so different to respectable British denizens as to constitute a different 'race' entirely (Shilliam 2018). Other forms of racialised exploitation came to replace slavery, as racism persisted and even prospered. The influential essayist Thomas Carlyle's virulently racist *Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question* was published anonymously in 1849, for example, but reissued four years later under a modified title featuring the N-word (Goldberg 2000). A new racist doctrine of polygenesis was emerging, one that saw black Africans and other 'races' not as backward but equal, but rather as fundamentally different species. The superiority of the Anglo-Saxon was routinely asserted. Though this was defined culturally in terms of shared language and literature, 'it was not difficult for slippage to occur' (Hall 2002, 366) and for this to be considered in biological terms.

Rather than prompting British introspection about the devastating and divisive consequences of imposed British rule, anti-colonial resistance like the Indian uprising of

1857, the Morant Bay rebellion of 1865, and the 1950s Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya were widely interpreted as proof of ‘native savagery’ and inability to self-govern, barring some dissenting voices (Claeys 2012; Gopal 2020). The imperial civilising mission was premised on a liberal belief in a self-correcting path of development and progress, in which benighted peoples were being prepared for self-government by the benevolent British and other colonising powers. This was a view sincerely held. It also underpinned the self-serving myth that Britain as the fount of freedom ‘bestowed’ independence on its colonies, once more denying putatively passive peoples their agency. In 1961, the Oxford academic and government adviser Margery Perham grappled with her own gradualist views when giving BBC’s annual Reith lectures, a prestigious platform accorded to leading figures in British society. Entitled *The Colonial Reckoning*, Perham’s lectures acknowledged both colonialism’s pervasive racism and the fact that Britain’s Empire, ‘through most of its duration, like all other empires, had been created and conducted mainly in the interests of the ruling power’ (Perham cited in Gopal 2020, 439-40). This may seem self-evident, but *Inclusive Britain’s* support for a ‘balance sheet’ approach to teaching colonialism in terms of good and bad suggests otherwise. It is difficult to see the good in a fundamentally racist and exploitative system, which continued to have severe repercussions in post-war Britain and up to the present day; from the overt racism endured by Caribbean and South Asian immigrants, through the racist rationales behind successive immigration acts, to the recent Windrush scandal (El Enani 2020; Gentleman 2022).

Conclusion

In principle, inclusion begins with recognition of the ‘Other’ from the privileged standpoint of the ‘in-group’ (Brubaker 2002). This is the starting point for *Inclusive Britain’s* model history curriculum, as opposed to the societal transformation envisaged by decolonial approaches to education (Moncrieffe 2020). It follows that inclusion requires minority integration and erasure of the fact that formerly colonising nation-states may be ‘constitutively broken’ (Meer 2022, 3) insofar as they are built on racist imperialism. Decolonisation, by contrast, takes that ongoing legacy of colonial modernity as its starting point, as has this article (Mignolo 2008). The evidence discussed above suggests that *Inclusive Britain’s* recognition of minoritized ‘Others’ is limited, thereby undermining its stated aim of fostering their belonging to the UK. The article has argued that this aim would be better served by a decolonised approach to teaching history that recognises and discusses how racism came about, and has highlighted some key illustrative episodes. It has also argued that *Inclusive Britain’s* description of the UK as a multiracial society is dangerously decontextualised, both in failing to recognise that racial hierarchies are inherent in this category and in failing to include black history as a constitutive part of, rather than an adjunct to, British history. Together, these features seriously undermine the coherence and likely success of *Inclusive Britain’s* planned interventions.

Fostering an alternative, historically informed understanding of race as a core organising principle of the last several centuries would require a fundamental rethink of *Inclusive Britain’s* rejection of systemic racism and its reification of race; ‘it is only through the fullest exploration of the rise of race, not as a concept, but as a technique

of governmentality, that brought the fiction of racial categorization into existence, that such reification can be overcome' (Lentin 2016b, 387). Racism's historical roots and routes must be fully understood. Atlantic slavery, the Holocaust and South African Apartheid may have marked racism's apogee, but it did not end with them, simply because racism is bound up with modernity itself (Lentin 2005, 381). National community formation should not begin from static and fixed divisions, as the term multiracial does, but rather undertake a dynamic and continually reimagined construction of belonging; 'the words longing and belonging derive from the same Old English verb *langian*, the various meanings of which include to yearn and to summon, as well as to belong (with the prefix "be" used as an intensifier)' (Sutherland 2020, 740). A politics of belonging must look to the past, but need not be defined in racialised terms. The 'imagined community' of the nation will deploy a whole repertoire of symbols to signal belonging and to mask internal differences. However, it is also possible to tell histories and reimagine collective identities through solidarity, without being hidebound by communal knowledge and 'the power of sameness' (Gilroy 2010, 103).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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