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To cite this article: Amanuel Elias , Jehonathan Ben , Fethi Mansouri & Yin Paradies (2021): Racism and nationalism during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, Ethnic and Racial Studies, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2020.1851382](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.1851382)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.1851382>



Published online: 04 Jan 2021.



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Racism and nationalism during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Racism and xenophobia associated with the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic disproportionately affect migrants and minority groups worldwide. They exacerbate existing patterns of discrimination and inequity, impacting especially those already facing intersecting social, economic and health vulnerabilities. In this article, we explore the nature and extent of racism sparked by COVID-19. We briefly introduce the relationship between historical pandemics and racist sentiments and discuss ethnic and racial disparities in relation to COVID-19. We contextualize racism under COVID-19, and argue that an environment of populism, resurgent exclusionary ethno-nationalism, and retreating internationalism has been a key contributor to the flare-up in racism during the COVID-19. We then discuss links between racism, nationalism and capitalism, and consider what intercultural relations may look like in a post-outbreak world. We conclude by highlighting the potential effects of COVID-racism on intercultural relations, and the national and global implications for social policy.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 2 July 2020; Accepted 10 November 2020

KEYWORDS Racism; discrimination; nationalism; xenophobia; pandemic; COVID-19

Introduction

Emerging research indicates that racism and xenophobia have increased during the outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (Clissold et al. 2020; McCoy 2020). This has happened against a backdrop of rising nationalism and populism that have been spreading worldwide over the last two decades. Scholars contend that nationalism thrives during times of crisis (Bieber 2020; Clarke 2010; Rantanen 2012). Clissold et al. (2020, p. 421) argue that, under COVID-19, “rising levels of nationalism in many affected countries” have compounded “a sense of xenophobia pervading into the political and social responses”. According to Su and Shen (2020), COVID-19 has led to a heightened ideological divide in the United States, with more

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nationalist sentiments particularly among conservative groups, while in many national contexts, the outbreak and its progression are driving the increasing prominence of far-right political parties. As a result, minority groups across European countries as well as the United States have experienced racism, discrimination and hate crimes under the heightened COVID-19 context (Croucher, Nguyen, and Rahmani 2020; Devakumar et al. 2020).

The pandemic has also signalled the re-emergence of a form of politicized ethno-cultural racism aimed specifically at people from Asian backgrounds (Mansouri 2020). Anti-Asian (particularly anti-Chinese) racism saw a rapid rise, for example, in North America (Gover, Harper, and Langton 2020), in the UK (Bhala et al. 2020), Australia (Priest et al. 2020) and India (Haokip 2020). This manifested in a plethora of incidents including racial slurs, graffiti, hate speech and physical attacks (Russell 2020), and has been amplified by political propaganda characterizing the COVID-19 virus as a “Chinese virus” and hashtags such as “Kung-flu” (Barreneche 2020). COVID-19 era racism against other groups has also been evident, for example, in reports of racial discrimination against African migrants in China and Muslims in various countries.

And yet, racism during global emergencies is not altogether new, as previous pandemics have shown throughout history. Certain pandemics have indeed been associated with hate and violence against minority groups (e.g. based on ethnicity, religion, migration, and sexuality; Cohn 2018). For example, the 1900 plague epidemic, thought to have originated in San Francisco’s Chinatown, was labelled an “Oriental disease, peculiar to rice eaters” by the then United States’ Surgeon General.¹ The response was widespread racism and the arbitrary detention, for months, of almost a quarter of a million Asian immigrants (Gorelick 2020; Risse 2012). McCoy (2020) also draws a parallel between the 1918 Spanish Flu and the COVID-19 outbreak: both events occurred in an environment of similar racial prejudice and systemic racism.

In addition to rising xenophobic sentiments, minority groups are disproportionately affected by racial disparities in the prevalence of COVID-19. Often, pandemics “follow the fault lines of society – exposing and often magnifying power inequities” (Gravlee 2020, 1). As such, COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated systematic discrimination and social inequities across the globe (McCoy 2020; Gravlee 2020). The people most negatively impacted by COVID-19 are those who already face numerous social, economic and health vulnerabilities, and who are now encountering intensified exclusion and marginalization. The direct and indirect, systematic effects of COVID-racism represent novel examples of the multidimensional nature of racism.

In this article, we argue that an environment of populism, resurgent ethno-nationalism, and retreating internationalism has been a key contributor to the flare-up in racism during the COVID-19 pandemic. We explore the nature and

extent of racism kindled by COVID-19 in this context. In the next section, we contextualize racism, xenophobia and race relations in the wake of COVID-19. We then consider what racism, xenophobia, and nationalism may look like in a post-outbreak world. Finally, we conclude with suggestions for tackling COVID-19-racism at the national level and consider implications for social policy affecting intercultural relations and social justice.

Racism and nationalism during COVID-19

The COVID-19 outbreak is related to racism and xenophobia in two fundamental ways: first, it has contributed to heightened levels of racist sentiments towards minority groups; second, the pandemic has occurred in an environment of exclusionary nationalism, which exacerbated xenophobic racism.

The first relationship depicts an indirect social ramification of a national and indeed global emergency. Pandemics are among the deadliest natural disasters and global health emergencies, with far-reaching effects on human societies (Bavel et al. 2020). In addition to their heightened risks to lives, pandemics can cause significant economic shocks that also affect a significant proportion of the world's population. Depressive socio-economic environments often lead to scapegoating, heightened levels of racism, and currents of xenophobia in a context of rising levels of exclusionary nationalism (Bieber 2020), a pattern evident during the current COVID-19 pandemic (Gover, Harper, and Langton 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic broke out in Wuhan, China in December 2019 (Johns Hopkins University 2020). In a few months, anti-Asian racism rose sharply internationally as the virus began to spread across countries, with Chinese and Asian people becoming a feared, blamed and harassed group (Gover, Harper, and Langton 2020). By the time the World Health Organization declared it a global emergency, allegations of cover-up by the Chinese government fanned widespread anti-Chinese sentiments and inflammatory reactions by global politicians, stirring racist and xenophobic sentiments, and exacerbating an already tense intercultural environment (Barreneche 2020; Gover, Harper, and Langton 2020).

Racism and xenophobia during a global pandemic like COVID-19 are not entirely new phenomena. The spread of infectious disease can be strongly associated with heightened levels of prejudice, racial intolerance and xenophobia (Schaller and Neuberg 2012; Kim, Sherman, and Updegraff 2016). Historical pandemic outbreaks show the occurrence of similar racial prejudices targeting ethnic and racial minorities (McCoy 2020). This is often associated with fear, one of the main behavioural responses triggered during pandemics (Bavel et al. 2020). Fear affects how people think, feel and react towards perceived out-groups. Sometimes, fear associated with the spread of infectious disease can trigger attitudes and behaviours including prejudice, racial

intolerance and xenophobia (Schaller and Neuberg 2012; Kim, Sherman, and Updegraff 2016). For example, this has occurred during the bubonic plague (Black Death), syphilis, cholera, smallpox, typhus, the 1918 influenza (“Spanish Flu”), and HIV/AIDS pandemics (Cohn 2018; Echenberg 2002). Emotional reaction to the threat of infection can diminish empathy, leading to scapegoating, stigmatization and dehumanization of minority groups (Navarrete and Fessler 2006). Given that pandemics can give rise to hate and violent responses as well as to acts of compassion (Cohn 2018; Hoppe 2018), it seems the “outsider” status of minorities within societies is a key factor in their persecution during disease outbreaks (Echenberg 2002).

The second relationship between COVID-19 and racism arises via the effect on rising nationalism and populism, and their effects on race relations during a pandemic outbreak. Exclusionary nationalism and racism are often inter-related (Mosse 1995; Balibar 1991). Historically, the first half of the twentieth century was a period of rising nationalism around the world. When the bubonic plague broke out, anti-immigrant sentiments intensified in many countries such as the US, South Africa, Argentina, and Australia (Echenberg 2002). In the US, this was a period when anti-black racism was peaked with Jim Crow segregation, and widespread lynching and racial violence. Similarly, the outbreak of the Spanish Flu of 1918 resulted in hate and violence against African Americans who were scapegoated in its midst (McDonald 2020). In Europe, the outbreak of typhus, which caused significant deaths in the continent, was used to justify persecution and killings, and has been implicated in the genocides, of Jews during the Holocaust, and in the Armenian Massacre (Cohn 2012; Weindling 2000).

While the examples discussed above indicate events that sparked racism and xenophobic violence, Cohn (2012) has argued that pandemics did not always lead to racial violence. We contend that pre-pandemic state of intensified nationalist sentiments along with intercultural/ethnic polarization offer possible channels by which a pandemic exacerbates racism and xenophobia. An environment of social polarization created by widespread socio-economic oppression and trust deficit under global capitalism (Paul 2020) severely undermines social cohesion and intercultural relations (Elias & Mansouri 2020). When a pandemic occurs in such conditions, it can aggravate already tense intercultural relations, and trigger racial conflict and violence.

COVID-19 worsened existing social polarization and reinforced ideological entrenchment towards exclusionary nationalism (Su and Shen 2020). It fostered exclusionary nationalism and weakened global coordination and collaboration (Bieber 2020). While the pandemic has forced countries to close their borders, putting them in *de facto* localization and isolation, it has also led to increased forms of authoritarianism. For example, in the Philippines, Brazil, India, South Africa, Hungary and Hong Kong, emergency laws and other measures have been invoked and used for greater political control in

response to both the direct public health crisis and growing popular dissatisfaction with its handling by national governments. Another key indicator of countries' reactions to the pandemic relates to the conduct of national elections. Since the pandemic was announced, 17 countries have conducted national and sub-national elections while 66 have postponed them (IDEA 2020).

So far, the societal ramifications of COVID-19 have been significant, and have varied across countries (Delvin and Connaughton 2020). According to Fukuyama (2020, 26), "the factors responsible for successful pandemic responses have been state capacity, social trust, and leadership". By comparison, countries experiencing social polarization have done worse, and this can have an adverse effect on intercultural relations (Fukuyama 2020). The effect is evident in the intercultural tension, with racism, xenophobic nationalism and discrimination against minorities expected to rise for years to come (Bavel et al. 2020; Nicola et al. 2020). The recent anti-Asian xenophobic sentiment is a typical example, whereby COVID-19-related racism and discrimination have not been limited to people of Asian descent but cut across various minoritized groups. Examples of other minorities subjected to racism include Muslim minority groups who were attacked in India, Sri Lanka and Myanmar (Human Rights Watch 2020). Moreover, a sharp increase in anti-African discrimination in the Chinese city of Guangzhou has been reported, where African residents have faced evictions and refusal of services, and have been targeted by a racialized campaign to have them compulsorily tested for COVID-19, self-isolated or quarantined (Human Rights Watch 2020).

Furthermore, COVID-19 has led to a global increase in discrimination against migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers. For example, in Singapore, Malaysia and some Middle Eastern countries, strict COVID-19 related sanctions, as well as raids, detentions and blame have affected foreign workers disproportionately (Human Rights Watch 2020). For refugees and asylum seekers in particular, the pandemic presents additional threats to their already vulnerable lives, particularly while awaiting status determination and settlement decisions (WHO 2020). Indeed, given the inadequacy of available health care, particularly for those in crowded refugee camps in war-torn countries such as Syria and Yemen, the risks posed to these individuals and groups are catastrophic. As with the differential impact of work and housing situations on racial and ethnic groups during the pandemic, this illustrates how discrimination is compounded in ways that disproportionately affect already vulnerable groups.

At a time when the pandemic continues to impact racial minorities across many countries around the world, resistance against xenophobic nationalism and racism is also intensifying. COVID-19 has highlighted the social determinants of health and the consequent ethnic disparity in health outcomes. The widespread public reaction against systemic racism, as exemplified by the

Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, indicates a growing solidarity in anti-racism struggles tackling ongoing racial oppression. The recent outburst against police violence in the US is a clear indicator that this sentiment is widely shared by people of colour and many others (Jee-Lyn García and & Sharif 2015).

Against the backdrop of COVID-19's disproportionate death toll for people of colour, and galvanized by the George Floyd incident – Mr Floyd died of racism while being infected by COVID-19 – the BLM movement has shored up worldwide support, with global condemnation of racism and xenophobic nationalism generating global solidarity, leading to assertive global anti-racism across North America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Oceania (Krieger 2020). Founded in 2013, the BLM movement has networks around the world with a mission “to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes” (Black Lives Matter Global Network 2020). The BLM movement has stimulated important anti-racism debates, particularly in the context of COVID-19, which has exposed the structural injustice that perpetuates economic deprivation and systemic racism (Krieger 2020). Indeed, these profound disparities thrown into stark relief by COVID-19 have affected policy debates that underline the need for tackling institutional racism not only in policing and mass incarceration but also in education, healthcare, and community services.

A post-outbreak world: re-thinking the relationship between nationalism, capitalism and racism under COVID-19

To better understand the current moment in race relations, we need to grapple with emerging intersections between racism, capitalism and nationalism (Paul 2020). Racism may be defined as thoughts, attitudes and practices that create hierarchies of superiority and inferiority based on characteristics such as “race”, ethnicity, and nation (e.g. Banton [1969] 2018; Garner 2010). It circulates across many levels of social life and may be expressed through stereotypes, prejudice or discrimination that serve to maintain or exacerbate unfair and avoidable inequalities (Berman and Paradies 2010). Nationalism, when narrowly defined, often refers to an ideology that privileges nations as “imagined communities” and/or “natural” units of socio-political organization and favours membership in the nation or national movements (Anderson 2006; Gellner 2008) while capitalism is a system that is fundamentally based on hierarchical exploitation of economic output and alienation from the fruits of labour.² Nationalism and racism may pertain to many – and quite different – things, yet they also contain obviously pertinent overlaps and intersections, from their historical embeddedness in colonialism, to the convergence of negative social attitudes towards immigrants and the poor. Some of their fundamental concepts and ideas are closely connected too;

indeed, “the discourses of race and nation are never very far apart” (Balibar 1991, 37), while the transformation of nations into plutocracies is virtually ubiquitous.

Some of the early scholarly observations about how these relationships have unfolded under COVID-19 may help explain the current moment of race relations and the varied forms racism presently takes. For example, Bieber (2020) depicts the increasing biases against certain groups during the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the handful of important features of exclusionary nationalism that often manifest during crises. We may thus see racism both as a constituent element within versions of nationalism emerging periodically and an enduring feature of the oppression intrinsic to capitalist (de)valuing of human life. Observations about how quickly, long-rehearsed anti-Asian tropes have resurfaced and surged, are typical examples of the relationship between plague and otherness (Echenberg 2002; Hoppe 2018). They suggest that seemingly diminishing racist sentiments may remain close to the surface, ready to be reinvigorated and acted upon with a contemporary twist – this time with China at its epicentre – and flavoured by the intractable combination of pandemic, global recession and nationalist fervour (Hartman, *forthcoming*; Woods et al. 2020).

Finally, we want to consider some new directions in thinking about the possible futures of race relations in a post-outbreak world. Over the past several months, we have witnessed an emergent sliding back into a primal, survivalist mode of approaching our own existence vis-à-vis racialized and feared Others. Yet, similar patterns of nationalism and nationalist racism that thrive on heightened xenophobia have spread far and wide. The “sharing” of nationalism, capitalism and racism is also telling given changes and contestation to mobilities, globalization, and movement of a tremendous amount of human and economic activity, online. This will stimulate rapid expansion and transformations of racism in online platforms, thereby challenging social science research both in theoretical framing and in methodological design (Krieger 2020). COVID-related racism predominantly takes place in virtual environments, driven by individuals and groups that are spatially and temporally beyond the traditional milieus of intercultural encounters and race relations. Such racism of the moment also strives on misinformation and conspiracy thinking, on misconstruing norms, values, practices, and moralities of different groups, and on issues that encompass, for example, hygiene, care, proximity, and “good” citizenship. It is a racism contingent on tropes of intimidation, often nationally instigated, on “blame games”, a general evasion of responsibility and leadership and expanding scapegoating practices. Likewise, state-inflicted racism and socio-economic neglect, blatant and unashamed, through discriminatory policies against minority groups and discursive violence, will likely remain a force to reckon with and contest.

Conclusion

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, a surge of racism has impacted minority groups within countries across the world. Emerging research has particularly documented the link between the pandemic and heightened anti-Asian racism. This renewed form of ethno-cultural racism can be contextualized in relation to rising hate speech, cultural prejudice, and racial attacks that have occurred during historical pandemics. In this article, we have argued that an environment of rampant exclusionary nationalism and unprecedented economic inequalities created conditions for the resurgence of xenophobia and racism following the outbreak and progression of COVID-19. In a context of exclusionary nationalism and global recession, fear plays an adverse role, triggering attitudes and behaviours that foment hate and xenophobic sentiments. Such sentiments, crystallized by exclusionary ideologies, threaten the future of social reform and racial justice, both due to potential for intercultural and resource conflict as well as the reinforcement of ideological divides, and intensified polarization.

We argued that COVID-racism should not be viewed from an interpersonal ethno-cultural relations perspective alone. Equally, and perhaps more consequential is the systemic discrimination and socio-economic injustice that is exacerbating the disproportionate adverse outcomes for racialized ethnic minority groups. While the rise in racism and xenophobia have affected these groups, racism at policy, institutional and societal levels have also been exposed during the progression of the pandemic. This has implications for public policy, adding pressure on national and international governments to pursue policies that address growing exclusionary social attitudes, yawning economic chasms and burgeoning racism, while paradoxically, these factors constitute a “major process in the construction and existence of nation-states” themselves (Paul 2020, 27). Callous consumer greed facilitated abused animal life leading to infected bats birthing COVID-19, which then flowed freely along neo-liberal gouges in societal bodies thereby intensifying reliance on the very capitalist technologies of self, surveillance and supervision that instigated the initial predicament (Braidotti 2020). Extricating ourselves from such a paradox will require no less than a questioning of modernity itself, in order to genuinely challenge the triumvirate of racism, capitalism and nationalism (Paradies 2020).

Notes

1. Todd, F. M. (1909). *Eradicating plague from San Francisco*. Cited in Trauner (1978).
2. Anderson (2006, 5) argues that nationalism belongs to the socio-cultural notions of kinship and religion [more] than with ideological notions of “liberalism” and “fascism”.

Disclosure statement

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

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- [pewresearch.org/global/2020/08/27/most-approve-of-national-response-to-covid-19-in-14-advanced-economies/](https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/08/27/most-approve-of-national-response-to-covid-19-in-14-advanced-economies/).
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