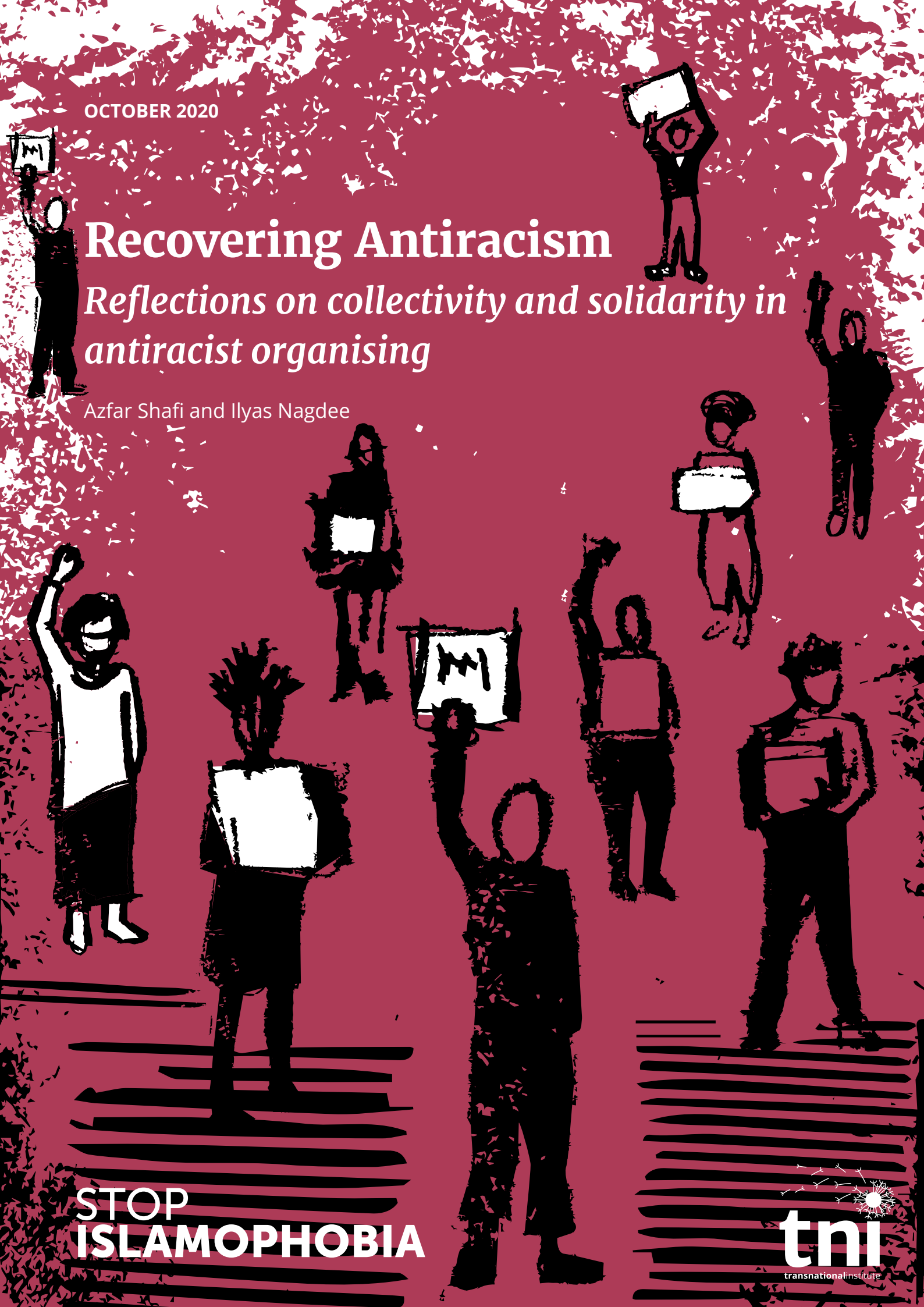


OCTOBER 2020

# Recovering Antiracism

*Reflections on collectivity and solidarity in antiracist organising*

Azfar Shafi and Ilyas Nagdee



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## Introduction

2020 will be remembered as a year of events that have had a global impact: the COVID-19 pandemic, the accelerated onset of an economic crisis and global recession, and the continuing climate catastrophe.

2020 will also be remembered as the year of anti-racist and anti-police uprisings, under the banner of Black Lives Matter (BLM), taking to the streets across the US and beyond, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by police officers on 25 May.<sup>1</sup> Activists and organisers of the demonstrations the murder unleashed have taken great heart and hope in the renewed interest in antiracism and the energy it has generated. This enthusiasm needs to be tempered, however, by the knowledge that previous upsurges have led to setbacks, defeats and co-option. Above all, it needs to recall that 'antiracism' cannot be reduced to a single line of action or thought, but embodies its own contradictory and conflicting impulses. Antiracism can take many forms and directions, as soon became evident from the diverse responses in the US and beyond to the BLM uprisings.

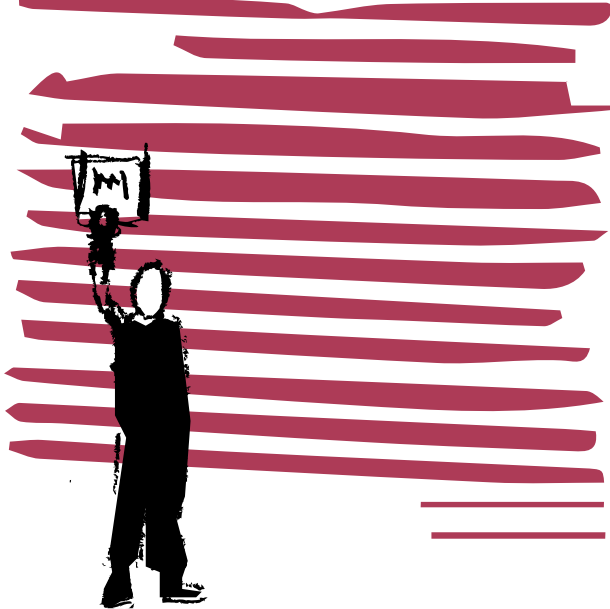
The drive towards emancipation and abolitionism competes with the drive towards the politics of representation and Black entrepreneurialism. Socialism competes with narrow chauvinism. The debates spawned by BLM are both marked by ideological, theoretical and organisational differences, and are also shaped by much broader trends and historical developments.

Beyond the moment initially galvanised by the murder of George Floyd and the reignition of BLM campaigning, what has become clear is the need for antiracist movements to take up the demands and challenges thrown up in specific national contexts. That task requires grappling with long-term trends and projects that have forced the retreat of antiracist organising, alongside radical and left-wing politics more broadly.

The areas identified for reflection in this paper are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Rather than being driven by a single or linear event – say, the march of neoliberalism, or the rise of so-called 'identity politics' – they are an accumulation of historical developments that shaped certain tendencies already present within antiracist thought. These developments are multi-centred, shaped by government agendas, as well as by local political struggles, and contain contradictions internal to any form of political organising.

This paper addresses some of these wider developments and contradictions, and outlines why they must be overcome in order to harness the liberating potential of antiracist organising. This necessarily means a socialist project that takes antiracism as a guiding principle rather than as a set of individual demands.





## The British Example

The trajectory of post-war antiracism in Britain is instructive.

In 1981, urban uprisings of predominantly Black and Asian youth were sparked in response to the ramping up of **dragnet policing, racist immigration legislation, unemployment, recession and far right attacks**. The state response was a strategy of **containment and pacification to prevent further rebellion**<sup>2</sup> which, while never completely successful in suppressing antiracist fervour, has indelibly shaped British antiracism ever since.

Focusing on the 1981 riots in Brixton in south London, an inquiry led by Lord Scarman made recommendations emphasising community relations between non-white communities and the police.<sup>3</sup>

The **Scarman Report sidestepped the fundamental question of policing and institutional racism** however, and instead underlined mediation strategies such as community policing, police training, and reviewing the role of Community Relations Councils in promoting police–community relations.

In the following years, the British government embarked on a Scarman-influenced strategy of **community patronage and social containment**,

while experiments in *Municipal Socialism* by left-wing Labour-led local councils drew antiracist organisers into the ambit of local government. Both approaches fostered the growth of a professionalised antiracist circuit, which began some years earlier with the establishment of the Community Relations Commission, under 1968 Race Relations Act.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas the Community Relations Commission model had to contend with pushback from an increasingly radicalised second generation of immigrant youth and the growing influence of Black Power in the UK. By the 1980s, the exhaustion of Black Power organisations, the first Thatcher government’s expansion of policing and its immigrant control policy, and the establishment of institutions such as the Labour Party’s Black Sections caucus, created a perfect storm for the **institutionalisation of antiracism in Britain**.

Antiracism began to ossify into **bureaucracy and ‘NGOism’**. The dictates of funding conditions promoted tendencies such as **apolitical ‘ethnic’ or cultural politics, at the expense of the type of organic internationalism and youthful militancy** that – however uneven and contradictory – had characterised Britain’s Black Power era of antiracism from the late 1960s.

At the same time, then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s infamous pronouncement that **there is ‘no such thing as society’ not only signalled an ideological aversion to collectivity and welfarism, but symbolised her government’s concrete attack on the institutions through which collectivity and solidarity are formed and negotiated**. The Thatcher years also saw the decline of the British left and labour institutions, with which antiracist organising had become entwined.

Today, union density in Britain is 23.5 percent,<sup>5</sup> down from 54 percent at the turn of the 1980s, and the constellation of radical multiracial organisations that emerged before 1981 have consolidated into professionalised outfits.

After enjoying a closer relationship with the New Labour government from 1997 to 2010, the climate for British antiracist NGOs and charities has become much more hostile since 2010 under successive Conservative-led governments. Alongside the official rebuke of multiculturalism as state policy,<sup>6</sup> the charitable and NGO sector has been subject to **ensorious gagging laws,<sup>7</sup> an increasingly politicised and interventionist regulatory body,<sup>8</sup>** open attacks by government ministers<sup>9</sup> and the disappearance of funding streams under austerity.

**This forty year-long process has served to hollow out antiracism, and leave it unequipped to tackle the increasingly stark racism in Britain. Flashpoints, like those that took place during the summer of 2020 as part of the Black Lives Matter upsurge, underscore the fact that antiracism will not fade quietly into the night. While this should instil hope for antiracist organisers, it is vital that this moment is nurtured into something more sustainable – this will only be possible by building organisational forms, where political education and physical shows of strength converge.**

This latest upsurge – along with the growth in trade union membership during the COVID-19 pandemic and the widespread radicalisation of the disenchanted in the face of Government incompetence – provides some of the raw material for recovering radical traditions of solidarity, collectivity and antiracism. But in order to do so, organisers must also confront the prevailing orthodoxies that have accumulated over the decades: of individualism, of ‘NGOisation’ and of parochial views of race and antiracism.

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## Individualism

Individualism in antiracism includes, but also goes beyond, the generalised atomisation and individualisation that is inherent in neoliberalism. As well as the emphasis on individual gain, this extends to the rise of ‘influencer’ culture over collective struggle, and the primacy placed on the individual as the supposed site of antiracist analysis and struggle.

### Influencers

The rise of social media has produced the influencer as a new actor in the field of antiracism and activism. The influencer ‘class’ heightens the existing tendencies of individualism, opportunism, competition and careerism in professionalised antiracism (see below). This moves the imperative even further from building a movement towards building a brand and stridently pursuing for-profit motives.

The terrain of social media allows opinions to be decoupled from action, and antiracist ‘influencing’ to be decoupled from activism. In this way, authority is conferred upon individuals who have no organic links with antiracist campaigning or organising credentials.

While there is no denying the value of social media as a means for movements to form and communicate, it should not become the primary medium for antiracist organising. The anti-collective tendencies inherent in social media, as well as the hostility to which it affords a platform, render its much-vaunted ‘democratising’ potential dubious at best.

### Individual as the site of struggle

Individualism rears its head in another form: the veneration of the individual experience – or ‘lived experience’ – as the site of antiracist struggle. It would be virtually impossible to build an antiracist

movement without addressing people’s real pain and experiences and offering them a solution, or a movement led by people without any such experience on which to draw.

But the overemphasis on individual, lived experience as an inviolable site of analysis and struggle means that antiracist priorities have now become defined by these experiences, without necessarily integrating or making sense of them within an ideological or political framework.

First, it has narrowed the frame of what constitutes racism to here-and-now experiences at the expense of a broader political and historical perspective on racism. This can serve to flatten racism, and lead to unhelpful conflation between interpersonal racism and institutionalised or structural forms.

Second, when lived experience becomes the focal point of organising, the elevation of the experience of racism instead of analysing it can leave campaigns rudderless, with no theoretical underpinning. It can also promote parochial or very narrow, exclusivist solidarities based on specific experiences rather than on a unified antiracist project, or a generalised opposition to racism. It sometimes extends to the charge that collective, multiracial, antiracist organising is undesirable because it ‘erases’ specific experiences of racism.

Third, the emphasis on personal, lived experience can gloss over the importance of tackling invisibilised forms of racism, and obscure their wider social impact – which also plays out along gendered lines. An understanding of racist police violence that is confined to those on the receiving end of bullets and batons can overlook how women in communities impacted by police and racist violence are central to organising defence campaigns, alongside invisibilised care work. As well as significant challenges posed to families’ material conditions following the death or injury of a family member, they are often left without proper support networks and socially isolated.

## Individual as the site of change

The final form of contemporary individualism makes individual decisions and change as the locus of antiracist progress. This stems from the idea that racism is, ultimately, a problem of individual attitude, conduct or ignorance that must be fought at the level of ideology or behaviour – while erasing the social and political context.

The contemporary period, marked by rising racism and widespread political disarray, has also seen the emergence of jargon and terms that place individual racism and antiracist strategies at the centre, developed and promoted by a cottage industry of professional antiracist outfits, media platforms, and academics. Whether ‘racial awareness’ or ‘unconscious bias’, ‘white privilege’, ‘white fragility’ or ‘micro-aggressions’, each concept is premised on an individualised form of racism that is cut off from any structure of power, framing it as a nebulous, free-floating form of oppression that can be diagnosed and treated by individualist interventions.

The popularity of these concepts speaks to a broader cultural shift:

“The last time when similar conceptualisations of white privilege had a breakthrough was as an ideological expression arising from the changed global political mood (the Thatcher/Reagan era) and an all-out attack on class politics. Individualism and personal identity were heavily promoted after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and ‘systemic critique’ and ‘grand narratives’ correspondingly delegitimised” - Academic Miriyam Aouragh on addressing the resurgence of ‘white privilege’ theory in antiracist discourse.<sup>10</sup>

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*There is a clear and pressing need for left-wing movements across the board, including antiracism movements, to turn back the tide of individualism and recover the ethos of collectivity and solidarity.*

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Individualism writ large has created avenues for personal advancement and gain, while negating the democratic impact that antiracism in its fullest sense seeks to achieve.

## Solidarity

### Defining solidarity

Solidarity is the cornerstone of radical or emancipatory politics, the glue of any political movement, and the vernacular of left-wing movements throughout history. But the question of solidarity has become increasingly fraught and contested in today’s antiracist movements – whether it exists, or whether it’s even a worthwhile exercise.

Perhaps, however, it is not solidarity as such that is being rejected, but rather the narrow version that is being promoted. Solidarity is not a pre-existing condition but constructed as a political process; its terms are not given, nor based on ‘already formed communities’, but are open and can be articulated in various ways.<sup>10</sup>

Contemporary types of ‘racial unity’ solidarities – the politics of ‘Black unity’, ‘Muslim unity’ and so on – are *silently political* processes, in that they necessarily suppress existing divisions such as class, nation, ethnicity, or gender for the purposes of creating a collective form.

So, how is solidarity understood today? It is marked by the now-familiar inward retreat away from a solidarity that is based on a collective political commitment to antiracism, socialism, and/or



anti-imperialism, and towards an understanding based on identity or perceived affinity – a tendency replicated in other areas of activism (described below).

In popular or mainstream discourse, solidarity is increasingly being replaced by the framework of ‘allyship’, or as a transactional, rather than a transformative, relationship. ‘Allyship’ reduces solidarity to a fragile politics of temporary togetherness between groups or struggles that will remain otherwise separate. It is predicated on a vertical relationship between partners, rather than the more generative, horizontal process of building solidarity across difference. Meanwhile the moves towards a ‘transactional’ logic of solidarity transforms it into a mechanical, almost market-style, exchange.

Neither ‘allyship’ nor the ‘transactional’ form of solidarity transcend the logic of separateness or atomisation, nor do they impinge on individual sovereignty or experience. The aversion to collectivity as an ‘instrument of coercion’ is an ideological buffer against solidarity that must be surmounted for the sake of all liberatory projects.

According to the logic of allyship, groups which fall under collective terms, (such as BAME – Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic – for example) do not have a shared or mutual stake in antiracism, but are instead arms-length ‘allies’ with each group’s or individual’s own struggles. According to the transactional model, solidarity is no longer borne out of collective struggle but from an exchange of favours.

The shift towards allyship, coupled with the use of collective terms for identifying non-white people, has raised questions about whether such terms are in fact unhelpful, even oppressive, because they flatten differences between and within ethnic groups and therefore erode or reduce solidarities.<sup>11</sup> These debates have played out on social and mainstream media, and have had a deleterious impact on ‘real life’ antiracist movements.

## Defending solidarity

The decline (or reshaping) of solidarity cannot be decoupled from attacks on the organisational forms that make solidarity possible. In recent years, practices of solidarity are increasingly being criminalised.

The Institute of Race Relations’ 2017 report *Humanitarianism: The Unacceptable Face of Solidarity*<sup>12</sup> illustrates the bleak picture for migrants’ rights activists being convicted of ‘crimes of solidarity’ across the European Union (EU). Under the pretence of stopping ‘people smuggling’ – a loose term regularly used to conflate humanitarian efforts with exploitative people-trafficking enterprises – acts ranging from search and rescue missions at sea, to providing food, shelter or transport to undocumented migrants on land have been criminalised. It is in this environment that solidarity groups have been forced to suspend their operations because of the criminalisation of humanitarian work and threats to their personnel.<sup>13</sup>

Belligerent governments and the EU have steadily militarised European borders, the upshot being increased criminalisation and repression to deter solidarity efforts.<sup>14</sup> Alongside this are moves by various governments to draw migrant-support initiatives into the purview of state agencies. This has included border force patrols boarding Italian search and rescue ships or Greek NGOs offering support to migrants in Lesbos being compelled to register with the state.<sup>15</sup>

These moves are echoed in the British government’s ‘Hostile Environment’ agenda, which imposes anti-migrant monitoring duties on the health and education sectors, among others. This co-option or repression of support services and solidarity work by hostile state agencies also resembles the UK’s ‘counter-extremism’ surveillance strategies, whereby the ‘Prevent’ counter-extremism programme has increasingly been woven into the operations of frontline services such as health and welfare.

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*Through these moves, solidarity initiatives are not simply being diluted, but are actively rerouted into the very architecture of state violence they often exist to oppose. The struggle to rebuild a culture of solidarity begins with rebuilding the organisational forms that make it possible, and through which disagreements and grievances can be handled and resolved. That struggle also needs to engage in the more difficult balancing act between individual sovereignty and collective responsibility.*

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## **NGOism and professional antiracism**

The outsourcing of political action to the NGO and non-profit sector more broadly, stands in contrast and often in competition with grassroots political campaigning. The issues endemic to 'NGOism'<sup>16</sup> reproduce themselves in the context of antiracism. The following patterns are noted:

### **★ Depoliticising campaigns**

In order to develop campaigns that are easily communicable and justifiable to funders, NGOs and other agencies often strip grassroots campaigns of their more radical political content, although sometimes retaining radical-sounding language. More generalised critiques of capitalism or political economy are clipped, and translated into single-issue campaigns that can appeal to broad constituencies on the basis of rights and civil liberties. Narrow policy demands of the government, state institutions and the market are preferred over insurgent challenges to those institutions.

### **★ Reshaping relations between organisations and communities**

In contrast to a grassroots campaign that develops organically within the communities concerned, the relationship between NGOs and communities is passive, impersonal and non-democratic. Within the non-profit model of organising, communities remain broadly inert until they are 'activated' for the purposes of supporting campaigns. Today, this is often through shallow-engagement tactics like tweeting or signing a petition. The draw of professionalisation and stability can tend to make communities over-reliant on the NGOs or other bodies that serve them, and stifles their ability to organise autonomously.

### **★ 'Buying off' activists**

NGO, non-profit, and voluntary sector organisations are well-placed to 'scout talent' ostensibly providing

a way for activists to continue their organising but with more stability, resources and a salary. This process often produces professional NGO workers who become more accountable to funders and stakeholders than to their respective communities. Antiracism as a vocation often provides a pathway to a political career or other high-profile positions, and therefore risks promoting opportunism, careerism and gatekeeping, while deepening a divide between professional antiracists and communities at the sharp end of racism.

### ★ Reinforcing relations of dependency and patronage

While nominally challenging power, NGOs and voluntary agencies are caught in a fatal embrace with it. Non-profit organising often remains subordinated to state institutions, political parties and the market, and becomes reliant on friendly contacts in each in order to further campaigns.

### ★ Creating an organisational division of labour

This division of labour is shaped, crucially, more by the dictates of corporate management and organisation building, rather than movement development or capacity building. This often leads to an expanding bureaucracy and develops a cottage industry to facilitate non-profit work. Simultaneously, this division of labour can prevent the emergence of organic solidarities between struggles by encouraging a vertical or top-down perspective on campaigns over a political one that builds across difference.

### ★ Encouraging values of competition and resource scarcity

While some non-profit sectors are better resourced than others, competition for funding, media attention and political constituencies are part and parcel of their terrain. Although not precluding cooperation among organisations, the drive for resources has served to impede joint campaigning, and in the case of ethnically stratified organisations, can place a wedge between non-white communities.

Often, the battle for state funding plays out along ethnic grounds, and promotes inward-looking ethnic politics at the expense of a more expansive or ideological notion of antiracism. This generates deep fissures between racialised communities that impede broad-based antiracist organising.

The turn towards state-led multiculturalism also pushed the retreat of antiracism towards apolitical and cultural politics – *'saris, steel pans and samosas'* – completely divorced from the material deprivation and struggles facing non-white working-class communities.

Antiracism has become increasingly professionalised around the world. In recent decades antiracist projects have congealed into a network of non-profit organisations, charities, local government bodies, quasi-governmental (quangos) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as designated 'community leaders', who claim to speak on behalf of their specific group. These professional structures have, in many instances, replaced the infrastructure of radical grassroots antiracist campaigns and labour organisations, and privilege patronage over organic leadership. Positioned as intermediaries between non-white populations and governments, these organisations often serve as a buffer for both sides, ameliorating racist excesses in defence of non-white groups, while simultaneously exerting a moderating influence on them in order to preserve relationships with various levels of government.

All these critiques aside, it is important to stress that not all NGOs and non-profit agencies can be described solely in the terms outlined above. NGO workers are often dedicated individuals and, in a context where institutions such as trade unions are in a position of weakness, can potentially act as a bulwark against state excesses. But the issues described above transcend individual organisations or workers, and the limited purpose that NGOs can serve pales in comparison to the scale of the task antiracist movements are facing.



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*Grassroots organising? Professional organising? Streets? Institutions?*

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**How is power exerted?**

The uneasy relationship between grassroots and professionalised organising plays out across the world, and came to a head in the first wave of Black Lives Matter protests<sup>17</sup> and again in its more recent iteration.<sup>18</sup>

This division should not be reduced to a binary between 'streets' and 'institutions', but derives from a fundamental difference in theories of change and an understanding of how power is exerted; the question of whether the aim of uprisings is to be channelled into lobbying and electoral demands, or organised into popular, working-class, struggles and institutions.

Without fetishising the spontaneity of the 2020 BLM uprisings, there is a collective need to move away from the ossified organisations of the past, and build organisations of a different kind which can properly coordinate and advance the struggle against racism.

## **The limitations of a technical approach to racism**

Professionalised antiracism operates on a technical, legalistic terrain. This does have some merit, and can be used as the basis for campaigns against racial discrimination and racial disparities both in law and in practice, but there are clear limitations.

Applying a technical approach to the question of racist police violence, for example, may accurately identify disproportionate rates of imprisonment, brutality and death for non-white groups at the hands of police. But campaigns based on this fall far short of building a strategy against the wider processes of dispossession, poverty, exploitation and privatisation that shape encounters with the police, and which uphold the institution of policing. These campaigns therefore rarely go further than calling for, effectively, a better racial distribution of police brutality.

In the case of state-led Islamophobic post-9/11 'counter-extremist' surveillance, a technical approach can campaign against discriminatory targeting of Muslims, and in the defence of civil liberties in general, but it is far less likely to build a strategy based on joining the dots between domestic surveillance programmes and imperialist operations abroad under the 'Global War on Terror'.

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*A technical approach to antiracism can offer tactics for a defensive struggle, but nothing by way of a proactive, broad-ranging agenda for social and political change. Recovering a radical antiracist movement must transcend the institutional limitations of professionalised antiracism, and its methodological limitations.*

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## Race and Racism

From the late 1960s the understanding of 'race' as a unit of analysis in Britain was transformed by developments in the field of ethnic relations research, emphasising the subjective process of how groups defined themselves socio-culturally, by drawing on skin colour, culture, or geography.

Supported by academic bodies<sup>19</sup> this 'ethnic turn' gained more currency in the final decades of the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> It was reinforced as an organisational strategy, helping to foster a tendency towards fragmentation: the process of professionalisation 'hardened' the subjective process of self-definition into ethnic blocs, and the lure of ethnicity-based funding saw these blocs being broken into ever-smaller units.

This shifted the locus of antiracist collectivities, by focusing less on how individuals situated themselves within the wider social landscape, and more on how individuals identified themselves with their in-groups.

In many countries, the prevailing tendency is still for 'race' to be framed essentially as a *sociological category* – a bounded unit that can be mapped and assessed. In practice, this frames race as a neutral category that must be defended against the injury of racism, including through legal recognition and formal protection from discrimination. This allows, and to some degree requires, race to be pressed into service in various classificatory regimes – whether for the purposes of state monitoring exercises like censuses or state surveillance, or into ethnic constituencies for multicultural projects or ethnic lobby politics.

As the hegemonic form of understanding race today, its reduction to a sociological category can also unwittingly creep into a soft *racial realism*. It can serve to stabilise and naturalise race – to make it seem 'real' – and draw attention away from the

inherently unstable processes of exploitation that undergird racism.

### Would 'race' be better understood as a structural relationship?

Race marks out the relationship of particular groups to power and processes of exploitation and extraction, and indexes divisions of labour and social control. This definition emphasises how race operates; it stresses the fact that race is politically, socially and geographically contingent, rather than stable; and is shaped by changes in political economy and geopolitics, rather than just a subjective process of racial identification. This is not to deny individuals' rights to explore their personal identification with race and ethnicity, but to argue that this process of inward-looking self-definition is not the focus of antiracist movements that seek to challenge concrete oppression.

## Fragmentation of antiracism

The way that 'race' is framed in turn shapes the basis of antiracist action and the basis of solidarities formed to achieve it.

The tendency towards fragmentation in the approach to defining race has increasingly been reproduced in the work of defining racism, which is broken down into increasingly narrow manifestations of *Islamophobia*, *anti-Black racism*, *anti-migrant xenoracism* and so forth.

The issue lies not with the emphasis on *specificity* itself – which can and should deepen an analysis of how racism plays out – but the fact that this specificity is coupled with:

- Professionalisation and the organisational approach it promotes, so that specific manifestations of racism are guarded as 'projects';
- The mentality of resource scarcity, meaning that different forms of racisms are taken as competing claims to injury, rather than as points of collective solidarity;
- The move towards narrow exclusive solidarities based on experience and identity, rather than around a project that draws specificity out into universalism;
- The selection of ethnic gatekeepers, reproducing the worst tendencies of paternalism and ego in antiracist movements.

An emphasis on competitive claims to oppression, rather than on building a collective struggle against it, is self-defeating as an organising philosophy. Analytically, it also ignores the dynamic and contingent nature of race-making and racism: of how evolving state strategies of exploitation and dispossession mark out different groups as targets at different times. It also masks how different forms of state racism and violence – policing, immigration control and counter-terror surveillance, for example – mutually reinforce and inform each other, rather than operate in silos.

The undesirability, and apparent inability, to connect various manifestations of racism at an analytical and organising level leaves this focus on specificity like the parable of the blind men and the elephant: ending up with a partial, incomplete and incoherent picture. Ultimately, it produces a flat understanding of the issue, regarding racism as immutable and static instead of understanding it as an evolving system of labour and social control that can be analysed and effectively intervened in.

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*A renewed antiracist movement must be able to analyse the function of racism and organise against the wider processes of exploitation and dispossession that underpin it.*

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## **Race, class and the difficulties of solidarity**

Depictions of class in popular culture separate it from the relationship to the means of production, presenting it as a category or identity that can be mapped through cultural practices, accents or geographical location. In recent years, for example, popular culture and media have dedicated inordinate amounts of time to determining which consumer habits constitute a dividing line between 'working' and 'middle classes',<sup>21</sup> and on seeking out a mythical 'authentic' working-class subject.

The contemporary resurgence of interest in 'class' is often framed in a manner that entirely obscures the processes that produce class, refashioning it as a purely cultural representation. It is a 'class' without class struggle, and encourages the formation of solidarity based around cultural affinity rather than class interests. Severing class from processes of exploitation has allowed the concept of the 'working class' to be mobilised as a constituency for reactionary ends by right-wing and racist actors<sup>22</sup> – and enables class to be 'played off' against race as if they were mutually exclusive categories, and not constituted within the same processes of exploitation.

Within the field of antiracism, the acceptance of race as a sociological category as a tool for organising has had practical consequences for antiracist activism, and militated against solidarity. This often plays out along 'ethnic' grounds. There have been fierce debates about the comparative

degree of deprivation faced by groups defined as 'Black' and those defined as 'Asian', and have led to calls to decouple these groups for the purposes of antiracist organising.

Yet this uncritical acceptance of ethnic categories as they are handed down largely by state agencies obscures more than it reveals.

The sociological category of 'Asian', for example, includes individuals of Indian background alongside those of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and other national backgrounds across Asia – each of whom experience vastly different levels of oppression and deprivation, owing to their respective migration patterns and the class positions they occupy.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, the insular terms of this discussion take racism and antiracism out of their global register and play into methodological nationalism; seeking to define racism within a very limited national frame.

## US-centric models of race, racism and antiracism

An over-reliance on US-centric models of race, racism and antiracism means that quite often the nuances of other contexts are flattened and forced to fit within a US model. Despite its growing international popularity, the US racial taxonomy of Black/White/Indigenous/'People of Colour' – and its attendant acronyms of 'POC'/'BPOC'/'BIPOC' – does not automatically translate to other contexts, where for example border mechanisms of citizenship, subjecthood, immigrant and refugee status may be central to the shifting modes of social control, in contrast to the settler-slave background to US racism.

The increasing reliance on US-centric models appears to be less of an expression of internationalism than a re-inscription of US cultural hegemony. Developing an organising framework of race, racism and antiracism needs to strike a balance

between two goals:

- A local understanding of race and racism, drawn from an analysis of concrete conditions, that can be locally effective – without slipping into parochialism or chauvinism; and
- A global grammar of racism and antiracism to connect with struggles worldwide – not based on any hegemonic assumptions.

There are historical examples of frameworks of race and racism that foreground political processes and social relations rather than categories and 'identities'.

- The tradition of 'Political Blackness' adopted in the UK by South Asian and Afro-Caribbean activists in late 1960s was one such model, which developed an understanding of 'Blackness' defined through a shared experience of exploitation under the British empire and of racism in post-colonial Britain.
- The Guyanese Marxist, Walter Rodney, similarly put forward an expansive concept of 'Black' that drew on a global analysis of power – for him, Black referred to those who were *'not obviously white... and are excluded from power. The black people of whom I speak, therefore, are... the hundreds of millions of people whose homelands are in Asia and Africa, with another few millions in the Americas'*.<sup>24</sup>
- Malcolm X, in his 1964 speech on *The Black Revolution also articulated an anti-colonial solidarity - "Our brothers and sisters in Asia, who were colonised by the Europeans, our brothers and sisters in Africa, who were colonised by the Europeans, and in Latin America, the peasants, who were colonised by the Europeans"*.<sup>25</sup>

These frameworks placed racist social relations of domination firmly centre-stage for the purpose of antiracist organising. They stand in stark contrast to reactionary notions such as 'ethnic blackness' or racial authenticity which find currency today.

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*The aim of antiracism is not to preserve the concept of race but to abolish the global processes that maintain racism.*

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## **The question of internationalism**

Scandalised by the disconnect he saw between his experiences of travelling in Asia against the backdrop of the Korean War, and the anti-Communist propaganda circulated by sections of the Black press alongside mainstream US media, African American journalist and activist William Worthy struck back through his paper, the *Washington Afro-American*. Excoriating the Black political establishment's reluctance to oppose the US invasive war in Korea, Worthy wrote that its failure to 'raise the roof about white supremacy and [the] imperialistic premises' of US foreign policy in Korea exposed just how narrow and 'internationally myopic' US politics really were.<sup>26</sup> This critique, made during the US Civil Rights period and eventually finding its response in the Black Power era, highlights a persistent fault-line within antiracist struggles: whether those struggles should focus narrowly on including previously excluded groups within the national body politic, or adopt a more expansive view of antiracism that puts radical internationalism and anti-imperialism at its centre.

That conflict played out in different forms in European colonial countries owing to the specific migration patterns in the post-war period. The fact that migrants arriving to Europe were from former

colonies ensured that their activism was organically internationalist and had intimate connections with politics 'back home'.

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*In the case of Britain, the Black Power politics of second-generation post-war migrants was defined by an anti-imperialist internationalism, which drew from the global political upheaval of the time, and revolutionary ferment in some of their original countries. Many Afro-Caribbean and Asian organisations operating under the umbrella of Black Power made a conscious attempt to build an anti-imperialist perspective into their politics and propaganda, joining the dots between domestic racism and imperialist exploitation abroad.<sup>27</sup>*

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The drive towards professionalisation from 1980s onwards undercut much of this radical internationalism in favour of domestic reform politics.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the collapse of Communism and the routing of the Third World project towards the end of the twentieth century took radical internationalism off the agenda for much of the left in the Global North, leaving a growing network of NGOs to take up the mantle of internationalism.

## **Not all internationalisms are equal**

The division between movements that prioritise narrow domestic reform and those organising around an expansive global project is sometimes reduced to the division between 'nationalism' and



‘internationalism’. But this distinction rings hollow. There is no brick wall between ‘nationalism’ and ‘internationalism’ – indeed, the rise of right-wing nationalism has been internationally organised and co-ordinated.

Beyond crude dichotomies between ‘nationalism’ and ‘internationalism’, antiracist movements need to pay attention to the political *character* of their internationalism, and how it fits into a wider political vision for social justice. Internationalism is not immutable – and certainly cannot be reduced to support for or opposition to the EU, for example. It spans traditions from liberal cosmopolitanism to radicalism, NGOism to anti-imperialism, and can be claimed by some who view the world as a field for exploitation and extraction, and by others who view it as a site of solidarity and struggle.

The recovery of movements that place internationalism within the global structure of power, rather than building around abstractions, needs to bring back some notions that have for far too long been left out in the cold by the mainstream left: imperialism and anti-imperialism.

### **Competing expressions of internationalism:**

The treatment of the Palestinian liberation struggle is emblematic of competing expressions of internationalism. If the case of Palestine is reduced to a simple ‘human rights’ or ‘anti-discrimination’ issue and stripped of its dimensions as a struggle against settler colonialism and imperialism, it is dehistoricised and depoliticised. Doing so helps turn over the Palestinians’ cause to the vast NGO network, and silence the more wide-ranging and expansive vision of liberation that is the very essence of the Palestinian struggle.

An antiracist politics is emptied of all meaning if it does not focus on how race-making and racism are central to the operation of imperialism – and how imperialist extraction and resource control marks out those in the Global South as fodder for global capitalism.

Antiracist movements must re-politicise internationalism, seek to rejuvenate international solidarity and nurture a practice of supporting people in their struggles against imperialist powers structures and instruments of domination. They must actively tackle the burning questions of warfare, environmental justice, sovereignty, and the unequal exchanges that shape global supply chains, rather than merely seeking better distribution for racialised groups at those chains’ destination.

## Moving towards an antiracist horizon

As organisers, we need to urgently assess where we are and the moment we face. Taking into consideration the historical challenges outlined above, and the struggles facing us today, there is a vital need for antiracist movements that seek to transform the material conditions of racialised people.

The reactionary trends explored here cannot be resolved by theory or activity in isolation. They call for rebuilding antiracism through – and into – mass movements, with a strong ideological orientation towards collectivist principles, and organisational forms that can develop organisers and scale up campaigning capacity.

Such movements must be attentive to the experiences and realities that mark the lives of its base, but negotiate these through a political framework to identify collective solutions. They should not cast aside ‘difference’ or disagreement as necessarily divisive, but create democratic, organisational forms through which these can be handled constructively in order to enrich its praxis. They must nurture a culture of solidarity and mutual ownership to build movements that are worth struggling in, struggling through and struggling for.

Here follows some direction on how activists in left-wing or progressive politics could develop the antiracist struggle, drawing on the understanding that **the antiracist struggle is one and the same with the struggle against capitalism and the liberation of the working classes.**

### ★ Organisers

The premium placed on individualism is one of the largest challenges facing organisers today, along with the attendant attraction of profiles and egos.

The building blocks of any serious struggle are

organisations, rather than high-profile activists. It is incumbent on us all to build working-class organisations that can effectively coordinate and advance the struggle against racism, and harness the energy of future upsurges.

At a time when being a professional activist can pay the bills, we may need constant reminders that what we seek to do is build and organise a collective mass to disrupt power, not create a profitable brand.

We need to be aware that this work is fundamentally meant to be turbulent, uncomfortable and even to an extent unsafe – and build our movements to be able to mitigate this. The draw of individual profit changes the shape of collective organising, creates unaccountability, and can buttress reactionary tendencies always present in mass movements. We urgently need to entrench collective and community-based decision making in our organisations, while building support around a political project that can limit the most reactionary tendencies within our respective communities.

Undoing decades of neoliberal atomisation is no easy task, but having an organised socialist base to exert pressure on the political class is a useful asset, as long as it is combined with organised community action. Without an organised base outside the electoral arena, working within the electoral system is doomed to failure. In recent years, more attention has been paid to working inside the political system than to building a movement outside it, a trend that needs to be reversed urgently.

### ★ Trade Unions

The trade union remains a definitive organisational form for collective organising, despite the massive difficulties unions have faced during the period of trade liberalisation and de-industrialisation. Trade unions have emerged as major players during the COVID-19 pandemic as essential

workers rediscovered the value of their own labour to society and profiteers. Union membership has risen by 50,000 for the National Education Union (NEU) in the UK<sup>29</sup> while in Australia the largest union, the Nurses and Midwives Federation, has seen a six percent rise from the beginning of January to the end of June 2020.<sup>30</sup> The National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union (NEHAWU) in South Africa is planning strike action in response to failure to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) and a shortage of workers during the continuing pandemic.<sup>31</sup>

Alongside seizing this opportunity – and urgent need – for union revival, the need for vibrant, resourced and active antiracist work within trade unions is also crucial in the years ahead. Trade unions must be prepared for militant action as we have seen in the *Strike for Black Lives*, incorporating demands on tackling systemic racism, stronger protections for unionising and expanding health care.

Militant trade unions in the UK like United Voices of the World (UVW) and the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB) and others have had great success in organising migrant workers in the UK. Models like this must be quickly learned from and applied elsewhere to organise workers traditionally left out of – or even opposed by – traditional unions.

Historically strained and difficult relationships of national trade unions with non-white and/or migrant workers must be dealt with, in order to build a movement that is sufficiently agile to tackle the labour exploitation of some of the most exploitable working people.

#### ★ **Non-profit organisations**

In many countries, organisations such as antiracist charities and NGOs are governed by hostile or restrictive legislation, government bodies and regulatory authorities, and are subject to the less visible pressures of

funding conditionalities and demands.

In the case of grassroots antiracist organisations, we can expect these experiments in repression to 'trickle down' to them too. Restrictions are frequently placed on campaign work, including in the areas of racial justice and international solidarity. Tackling legislation that seeks to limit campaigns such as BDS<sup>32</sup> and forms of direct action may be beneficial to grassroots movements, and should be a top priority for these organisations as they navigate the legal terrain.

Many NGOs and other voluntary agencies have challenged government policies of deportation and racism and have defended civil liberties. These interventions must connect with action at a grassroots level, while resisting the counter-productive pull of playing 'good victims' off 'bad' ones in their campaigns.

During the transition away from NGO or voluntary non-profit organising, it is important for existing non-profit organisations to support emerging grassroots campaigns by providing resources and expertise for the development of movements that will take up militant action.

#### ★ **Intellectuals**

The work of theorising racism and antiracism is never finished, and antiracist movements should nurture people and space for intellectual endeavour to better understand the conditions facing the majority. In order to change the prevailing tendency of analysis-by-analogy, movement intellectuals need to create a theory and language that speaks to the local context within a global framework, and allows for a more natural international exchange.

Academics also have an important role, made all the more difficult by their increasingly precarious working conditions and workload pressures, to produce knowledge with and

alongside movements outside their institutions, building up communities to engage in knowledge production and reproduction.

Documenting antiracist histories of the past, ensuring communities are armed with theory and are active agents within the antiracist movement are critical to meet this moment.

This Briefing Paper has used the term ‘antiracist movements’ in the broadest sense, not to prescribe a blueprint or idealised form those movements should take. **It is clear that antiracism is only one pillar of a broad project for emancipation that takes socialism as its horizon and campaigns resolutely against the twin ills of capitalism and imperialism. It must not be siloed.**

Beyond theoretical and organisational clarity regarding what such movements should avoid, local antiracist movements need to analyse their specific conditions, rather than assuming that there exists a universal approach. Nevertheless, any antiracist movement needs to be capable of building and scaling up organisational capacity, rather than simply being a reactive mobilising force. Recent years have seen spontaneous upsurges of antiracism; an antiracist movement does not passively hope that each wave inches up society’s ideological tidemark in its favour but is able to channel these surges into sustainable, organised action.

Arming ourselves with theory, building the coalition and reinvigorating the notion of the universal that Ruth Wilson Gilmore implores us to do,<sup>33</sup> is the task at hand. This will be possible only by reframing our roles in relation to this task, moving away from the transactional solidarity that has come to be seen as normal and returning to the call of Lilla Watson:

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**‘if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together’.**

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**We have only a world to win.**



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