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Fixed Identities, Zero-Sum Games and Oppression Hierarchies: The Impasses of Current Debates About Race and Their Consequences for Contemporary Politics

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Abstract
This article examines the persistence of common-sense conceptions of race and ethnic identity and the role they play within contemporary politics in the UK. Drawing on the work of Claire Alexander and Rogers Brubaker, the article reflects on why we continue to see ethnic identity as something fixed and static, and why this persists despite theoretical developments which have drawn attention to identity's fluidity and contingency. Using a conjunctural analysis, the article examines how such conceptions of ethnic identity intersect with two other aspects of the current conjuncture: firstly, neoliberal individualism; and secondly, culture war politics. Consistent with neoliberal individualism, it is assumed that groups compete with each other for recognition and success, mostly within the framework of nation states. Within the divisive politics of culture wars, competition and fixed identities harden into a zero-sum game: greater recognition and rights for one group becomes, by definition, a loss of rights and recognition for another. Solidarity and collectivity become inconceivable, and international politics—particularly international solidarity—becomes unrecognisable within this framework. Ethnic disparity reports are considered, and how these draw attention to how racism is experienced by different groups, but in ways that make it difficult to consider what might be shared. The article then considers two examples from contemporary politics. First of these is a recent controversy surrounding Diane Abbott MP and her claims that racism experienced by those racialised as Black is different from those who can pass for white. Secondly, the article explores reactions to independent candidates in the 2024 election who called for a ceasefire in Gaza. These reactions framed the situation as sectarian politics relating to the 'Muslim vote'. In both examples, where fixed identities, competitive individualism and zero-sum games are mobilised to narrow the scope of debate, misrepresent people and situations and exclude important political questions from discussion, especially international politics. The article ends by reflecting on the continued appeal of fixed identities, and also what narrow discussions about race can exclude. It calls for a reconsideration of anti-racism to move beyond these impasses and categories.

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Introduction

In this article, I examine the persistence of common-sense conceptions of race and ethnic identities as fixed, essentialist and static, and their role within contemporary politics. In the first part of the article, I will explore why these tend to persist despite developments which have drawn attention to the fluid and contingent nature of identity. Using the work of Claire Alexander and Rogers Brubaker, I will also consider how fixed conceptions of group identity reinforce neoliberal conceptions of individual self-interest, such as through assumptions that groups and individuals compete against each other for recognition and success. Conversely, 'cultural difference' can serve as an easy explanation for racialised poverty or hardship (Alexander, 2018, p.1047). The scene for such bids for recognition is assumed to take place within national borders, so that questions of migration, international politics and international solidarity are left out of the discussion. Furthermore, when such conceptions are discussed within the polarised climate of the culture wars, differences between groups become seen as a zero-sum game—so that recognition for one group by definition means the loss of recognition for another. Within more divisive debates, this can turn into a clash of civilisations: one group becomes an existential threat to another.

I will focus on two examples which illustrate the impasses around this narrow conception of anti-racism. The first example relates to a controversy surrounding Diane Abbott MP, in which she becomes caught within media debates about race where the parameters are limited to hierarchies of oppression. The second example relates to the misinterpretation of the election of independent candidates who supported a ceasefire in Palestine as sectarian self-interest relating to the 'Muslim vote'. It is acknowledged these examples come from different contexts but have been chosen because they appear to reflect a central logic to the current conjuncture: of the entrenching of fixed identities which are seen in competition with each other, and where solidarity and collectivity seem inconceivable. In my critical assessment of debates on anti-racism and their divisive nature, I am not calling for a return to class as a unifier as some have called for (for example, Ash Sarkar in *Minority Rule* (2024)). Instead, I am arguing that the way in which race is commonly discussed has become so narrow and circumscribed that it has become ill-suited to discussions of complex matters, particularly those relating to international politics. The case of Palestine solidarity demonstrates just how awkwardly international politics fit into such narrow discussions.

Conjunctural Thinking

Central to Stuart Hall's work and the work of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies was conjunctural analysis. A key text where conjunctural analysis was developed was 'Great Moving Right Show' (1979) where he also coined the term 'Thatcherism'. Drawing on Gramsci's thinking, Hall saw 'the conjuncture' in relation to responses to a given crisis, which went beyond economic conditions and affected the social in a deep sense (Hall, 1979, p.15). Key to the conjuncture were responses to crises by various actors that defined the terrain of struggle. He noted that these did not spontaneously 'emerge' but 'had to be constructed' (Hall, 1979, p.15).

> …a new balance of forces, the emergence of new elements, the attempt to put together a new "historical bloc", new political configurations and "philosophies", a profound restructuring of the state and the ideological discourses which construct the crisis and represent it as it is "lived" as a practical reality, new programmes and policies, pointing to a new result, a new sort of settlement—within certain limits (p.15).

In 'The Great Moving Right Show', Hall outlined the various elements of 'Thatcherism': a response to the economic crisis of the 1970 s; the scapegoating of the unemployed, young people, Black people, striking miners; 'law and order' rhetoric, and anti-state and anti-collectivist rhetoric (1979, p. 20). Hall noted that the Right also exploited contradictions within social democracy, particularly between Labour's claims to be the political voice of the working class and its disciplining of the working class when in government. He also observed the success of Thatcherism and the New Right more generally in 'the way it addresses real problems, real and lived experiences, real contradictions—and yet is able to represent them within a logic of discourse which pulls them systematically into line with policies and class strategies of the Right (Hall, 1979, p. 20). Conjunctures are also temporal: bringing past social anxieties and narratives to interpret and shape the present. For example, Thatcherism also built upon moral panics around Windrush-era immigration, bringing these together with narratives around fears of social anarchy and loss of identity central to the backlash against the 1960 s counterculture (Hall, 1979, 16).

The particular conjuncture I will be exploring consists of common-sense understandings of racism and anti-racism. These have produced particular impasses in how matters of racism and anti-racism are discussed within contemporary politics. Firstly, ethnic identities are understood to be fixed and static, and groups are understood to be homogeneous. Structural conditions which produce racial disparities are often explained as cultural differences, which undermines attention to their institutional character. Connected to this, assumptions are made about group self-interest in ways that align with neoliberal individualism (groups are conceived along the lines of neoliberal individuals). Within these conditions, different experiences of racism become discussed as impassable divisions, rather than considering what might be collectively shared. Furthermore, they are framed

in terms of a hierarchy of oppression: of who faces the most discrimination. Within the polarising climate of culture war politics, divisions are intensified, and even in some cases becoming existential: groups become seen as threats to each other, and gains for one group in terms of rights and recognition by definition become a loss for another. Such discussions also tend to take place within a national frame. The international dimension of anti-racist campaigns and struggles is either misrecognised or sits outside the frame of debate. As will be discussed, the matter of Palestine poses particular challenges to this framework and is particularly liable to misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

The Problem with Fixed Ethnic Identity Categories

The first element of the conjuncture I will explore consists of a persistent, commonsense conception of ethnic identities as static and fixed. In 'Breaking Black: The Death of Ethnic and Racial Studies', Claire Alexander reflects on the development of discourses around race in the UK. She considers the history of anti-racist movements which had emphasised solidarity between communities and shared experiences of racism (2018, p.1038). This was more common for anti-racist movements in the UK during the 1970 s and 1980 s but was mostly superseded by discourses which emphasised the distinctness of groups over these shared experiences (Alexander, 2018, p.1038). She notes how this shift in emphasis produced 'tension between issues of racism and issues of identity or ethnicity; a related tension between the recognition of difference and the possibilities of solidarity—we might think of this as the tension between identity politics and the politics of difference' (2018), p.1035). Caroline Knowles also termed this development 'the identities period' of race theory (2010 as cited in Alexander, 2018). Knowles referred to the focus on lived experience of ethnic identities and the downplaying of structural racism. She questioned the political effectiveness of these developments (2010, p.26): 'the politics of identity …[has] offered neither targets for social reform, nor a constituency mobilised in political struggle against racism'.

This development also had effects in practice. Writing about local authority politics, Sivanandan (1985), Kalbir Shukra (1998) and Jenny Bourne (2013) also drew attention to conditions where policymakers also required cultural and community groups to compete against each other for funding. To win funding, they had to demonstrate both the distinct cultural identities they represented and their need for support (Shukra, 1998, p.65).What resulted was an 'ensuing scramble for government favours and government grants (channelled through local authorities) on the basis of [these] 'specific ethnic needs and problems' (Sivanandan, 1985). This led to a loss of independence from the state due to dependence on funding. The competitive framework also exacerbated divisions between groups. The wider internationalist politics and analysis of the previous era, which positioned the UK in relation to wider colonial legacies and inequalities, became less prominent. As Bourne argued, this approach therefore entrenched what she called 'common-sense nativism', which had the effect of stripping 'political culture of group rights, internationalism and history' (2013).

Alexander also reflects on reports into racial disparities, and how these highlight differences between groups in ways that make it difficult to conceive of what they might share. She considers the government's Race Disparity Audit (2017), and a report by the Runnymede Trust and the Women's Budget Group (2017). Both reports drew attention to how racism might be experienced in different ways by different groups. For example, the Race Disparity Audit observed that 'black men are more likely to be arrested and found guilty in court than whites; that Chinese and Indian children do better at school than whites, while white Gypsy and traveller children perform significantly worse; that all BME groups have higher rates of unemployment, but this is particularly true for Pakistani and Bangladeshi women.' (Alexander, 2018, p.1037). Furthermore, the Runnymede Trust and Women's Budget Group report 'found that the poorest black and Asian families have suffered the largest hit by austerity measures', also finding 'significant regional variations' (Alexander, 2018, p.1047). Alexander notes that such reports reveal both the entrenchment of racism and its exacerbation through economic inequality (p.1047). However, by highlighting differences, they point to increasing complexity and fragmentation in experiences of racism in ways that make collectivity difficult to conceive. As will be discussed later, when such reports enter media debates within the divisive climate of culture wars, these divisions can easily turn into a zero-sum game.

Alexander interrogates the ways that 'cultural difference' becomes mobilised as a ready explanation for the types of disparities mentioned above. She says that in its benign form, 'cultural difference'… pays attention to the kinds of specificity discussed above [but] can lead to the erection of cultural barricades or the endless refinement of hierarchies of oppression and experience that makes any kind of collective identity impossible' (2018, p.1045). She also critiques how explanations relying on cultural difference become 'used to categorise and divide people who may share similar experiences and concerns and provide a handy off-the-peg explanation for structural neglect and racism' (2018, p.1047).

The 'off the peg' explanation that 'cultural difference' can offer for racial disparities can be based on assumptions about groups as homogeneous units, a tendency that Rogers Brubaker characterised as 'groupism' (2002). He defined this as a 'common-sense' approach which reifies and essentialises groups: 'a tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis' (Brubaker, 2002, p.164). Within debates on race, ethnicity and nationalism, ethnic groups and nations can be treated as 'substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed' (p.164). The cultural and social world therefore becomes represented as 'a multichrome mosaic of monochrome ethnic, racial or cultural blocs' (p.164). Other authors have observed how fixed understandings of race as a fixed objective category tend to persist in commonsense debates about race. As John Solomos has observed, and Sadiya Akram noted many years later, 'a panoply of classificatory variables such as skin colour, country of origin, religion, nationality and language' still underpin many conceptions of race (Akram, 2023; Solomos, 1989). Brubaker noted the persistence of groupism despite a number of theoretical and methodological approaches which stressed the

fragmentary, contingent and ephemeral nature of identity (p.164). Groupism also simplifies the complexity and unpredictability of lived experiences of multiculture.

An aspect of groupism and other similar common-sense characterisations of identity seems to be a built-in common-sense methodological nationalism. As Brubaker has argued, nations themselves can be taken as homogenous and become attributed with interests and political agency (p.164). However, groups are also often typically considered *within* the framework of nations. The stage for making claims for recognition is often national or local, and national statistics are often used to measure ethnic disparities in reports. In many cases such statistics and categories may be the only ones available, but it is worth considering how they might (even unintentionally) limit discussion to the national context. Questions of migration status or the hardships experienced by those subject to immigration controls also tend not to feature, unless immigrants are specifically the subject. With some notable exceptions such as the 2024 report on the historical roots of the Windrush Scandal (GOV. UK, 2024), it is rare to consider racism or anti-racism within a global frame, including responsibilities arising from the UK's colonial legacy.

Brubaker was writing about groups in the context of ethnic conflict in post-Soviet societies. However, it is worth considering how common-sense reifications of ethnic identity interact with neoliberal individualism, another important element of the current conjuncture. Alexander cautions about how cultural difference within certain contexts can '[become] the basis for a narrowly conceived politics of self-interest—a clash of ethicised constituencies and claims, if not of civilizations' (2018, p.1047). She also notes how, consistent with neoliberalism, 'identity has been increasingly individualized, privatized and domesticated into a matter of lifestyle and 'choice' (p.1047). It is assumed that individuals want the conventional markers of success in life, within a presumed meritocracy (see Littler, 2018 for a critique). Examples of this include school achievement, study at prestigious universities, well-paid jobs, etc. Groups are assumed to only want recognition and success, along similar terms individuals. Conversely, the neoliberal emphasis on individualised success and being the entrepreneur of oneself mean that experiences of structural racism and poverty are dismissed as resulting from the wrong choices (Alexander, 2018, p.1047).

A final aspect of the conjuncture is how common-sense fixed group classifications and assumptions around individual and group self-interest also can play into the polarising logic of culture wars. The emphasis on individual identities and group claims for recognition '[opens] the ground for the alt-Right as the more traditional champions of identity politics and the politics of recognition.' (p.1047). Claims around the 'white working class' as an oppressed group are consistent with this. Furthermore, it is only a small step between the idea of groups competing against each other to the idea of a zero-sum game. As Peter Dorey argued in his essay on the 'war on woke', 'to insist that Black Lives Matter is to imply that White Lives Do *Not* Matter, and supporting measures to promote fairness and equal opportunities for ethnic minorities must be at the expense of the indigenous British working class; social justice as a zero-sum pursuit (2025), p.109). Furthermore, conceptions of identity within essentialised terms lend themselves easily to narratives about an existential clash of civilisations. Such narratives hold that, for example, Muslims will always have traditional and backwards attitudes and are fundamentally unsuited

to living in Western democracies; Muslim immigration is therefore by definition a threat to Western society.

Fixed common-sense ideas of group classification, neoliberal conceptions of individual success, methodological nationalism and the stoking of culture wars are evident in another ethnic disparities report which was published after Alexander's contribution. This was the 2021 Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparities (commonly known as the Sewell Report). The report was a response from the Conservative government to Black Lives Matter and was widely seen as an attempt to deny the existence of institutional racism (see Bhattacharyya et al., n.d.). It exemplifies the tendencies critiqued by Alexander and Brubaker by incorporating (and in fact taking for granted) the classificatory measures and fixed identities critiqued above. For example, the report compared Black African and Black Caribbean communities, with some negative comments about the prospects of Black Caribbeans (as discussed above). Typical of the methodological nationalism highlighted earlier, the experiences of immigrants were primarily discussed in relation to 'immigrant optimism': when migrant parents push their children to succeed academically (GOV.UK, 2021), pp. 30–31). However, there was no consideration of the precarity, or hardship faced by those subject to immigration controls, such as having no access to benefits, or in the case of asylum seekers, the right to work.

The Sewell Report's section on education was particularly stark, in terms of a narrow focus on attainment within a comparative, competitive context. The report compared Chinese to Black Caribbean school pupils and the extent to which they performed better or worse than white British pupils (GOV.UK, 2021), p.55). Conversely, communities were berated when unable to achieve such success. For example, the report highlighted a supposed prevalence of lone-parent families within Black communities, suggesting that these living arrangements might have negative effects on parenting and therefore on school achievement (GOV.UK, 2021), pp.41–42). The report concluded pithily that ethnic minority groups have 'agency to overcome obstacles and achieve success' (GOV.UK, 2021), p.31) without discussing the conditions of such agency. In a nod to culture wars, White British males were presented as more disadvantaged than those who were racially minoritised (GOV.UK, 2021), p.68). Echoing the line frequently used by Right populists, the 'white working class' was also presented as a marginalised group (GOV.UK, 2021), p.7).

To summarise, I have drawn on the work of Claire Alexander and Rogers Brubaker to draw attention to an element of the current conjuncture. This element consists of persistent common-sense understandings of identity as fixed. Related to this, ethnic groups are seen to be homogeneous blocs who act out of self-interest. This common-sense understanding exists within media and political discourse, but also within some aspects of academic research; Brubaker in fact cautions against this (2002); p.66). Reports into ethnic disparities have drawn attention to the complex and fragmented ways that racism is experienced by different groups. However, they can also have the effect of emphasising differences to the point of making collectivity or solidarity inconceivable. 'Cultural difference' can provide an immediate explanation for ethnic disparities in ways that can de-emphasise structural racism. This fits with another element of the conjuncture; neoliberal emphases on individual responsibility, and the blaming of racialised poverty on wrong choices (such as the

lone parenthood disparaged in the Sewell Report). Furthermore, within the context of the culture wars, these tendencies can harden into zero-sum games or even civilisational or existential threats.

Limiting the Terms of Debate to Hierarchies and Zero-Sum Games

I will now discuss two examples within contemporary politics which illustrate these tendencies of the current conjuncture. These examples illustrate the impasses that occur when issues (particularly Palestine solidarity), and actors (in this case, Diane Abbott MP, a politician with a long history of anti-racist campaigning and the UK's first Black, female MP) are discussed within the context of such narrow conceptions of groups, identities and racism.

On 15 April 2023, the journalist Tomi Owolade published an article in the *Guardian* entitled **'**Racism in Britain is not a black and white issue', possibly to challenge some perceptions of racism being only experienced by those of African descent. The article cited academic research, which found that Gypsy/Roma/Traveller (GRT) communities, Irish and Jewish people experience significant discrimination. In a letter to the *Observer* on 23 April 2023, Labour MP Diane Abbott responded that Irish and GRT people did not experience racism and that instead this should be considered 'prejudice'. She noted that these groups were never asked to sit at the back of the bus during the Jim Crow era in the US, that in South Africa, they had the right to vote, and that they were not enslaved as part of the Trans-Atlantic trade in enslaved Africans (Abbott, 2023). This letter was controversial, and Abbott later apologised on X for these comments. She withdrew the remarks, saying that it was an initial rather than a final draft which was mistakenly published and that Irish, Jewish and GRT people did in fact experience racism. Abbott was ordered to undertake a 2-hour anti-Semitism training course (notably, not addressing her comments about Irish or GRT communities). She was suspended from the Labour Party for a year and was nearly barred from standing as an MP in the 2024 General Election, before a public outcry led to a reversal of the decision.

The following year, Abbott took part in an interview with James Naughtie's *Reflections* programme on BBC Radio 4 in which she said she did not regret the comments that she had made. She posted to her X account shortly after:

> 'Clearly there must be a difference between racism which is about colour and other types of racism because you can see a Traveller or a Jewish person walking down the street, you don't know … but if you see a Black person walking down the street, you see straight away that they're Black. They are different types of racism. I just think that it's silly to try and claim that racism which is about skin colour is the same as other types of racism' (Dinenage, 2025)

In the interview, Naughtie made an equivalence between racism experienced by Jewish people and Black people: 'The same if you are going to a synagogue on a Saturday morning and you have to have guards outside because some people might come along and want to insult you or even throw things at you…he fact [that] one is a person of colour and one isn't is neither here nor there. If you suffered it, it's still

damaging.' (Vidal, 2025). Abbott replied, 'It is here, because you can spot that person of colour from hundreds of yards away. That is what is different' (Vidal, 2025). Following the interview, Abbott was suspended from the Labour Party. Although she has not been permanently banned, at the time of writing, a search is currently underway for her replacement (Adu, 2025).

Responses to Abbott's suspension have included defences of the factual nature of Abbott's comments, whilst also acknowledging the limitations of seeing racism only in terms of skin colour. Author Jason Okundaye pointed out that 'in the same way that while my Blackness is immediately and unambiguously read, my sexuality (I am a gay man) could only be inferred by context, stereotypes or by my own confirmation. Similarly, you may not know that a white person is Irish until you infer it from their name, accent or simply ask them' (Okundaye, 2025). Writing in the *Independent*, Ava Vidal acknowledged 'there's clearly a marked difference in how a Black person or person of colour suffers racism compared to someone who is 'white-passing'. When there were riots in Southport last year, racist thugs didn't double-check the identity of the Black or brown people they were attacking—they worked solely on the basis of skin colour. (Vidal, 2025). She also acknowledged that 'the GRT (Gypsy, Roma and Traveller) community may be able to walk down the street as individuals and blend in to mainstream society in a way that I can't, but that doesn't negate the horrendous levels of discrimination they face within the education system, the legislative changes and even just trying to have a drink or a meal'(Vidal, 2025). Vidal also added that 'the fact is, if you go to the synagogue on Shabbat and are Jewish, and have white skin, the latter is not going to protect you from any anti-Semitic attack'. (Vidal, 2025).

The interchange between Naughtie and Abbott follows the logic of a zero-sum game and oppression hierarchy. Abbott's attempts to argue that the experiences of Black and Jewish people were not exactly the same can be easily interpreted as dismissing the experiences of Jewish people. Naughtie's line of questioning also implies that any differences in the experiences of Black and Jewish people by definition places Jewish people lower on the oppression hierarchy. Conversely, to acknowledge Jewish people's experience of racism is to deny racism experienced by Black people—possibly explaining Abbott's response to Naughtie's questions. However, the implication of Abbott's response, as well as her original letter to Owolade, is that those who are not visibly different—in terms of skin colour—do not genuinely experience racism, which is disappointing and divisive, and also ignores the long history of constructing groups as white or as non-white (Virdee 2014). Abbott is an inspirational figure and has spoken out courageously against racism and xenophobia when other politicians have not, and continues to do so. However, within a polarising climate, she has become caught in the impasses which she normally would challenge. Academic research on ethnic disparities, such as the report cited originally by Owolade in her Guardian article—unfortunately also becomes subjected to this polarising media climate. Within this climate, any discussion of disparities quickly turns into a zero-sum game.

It is important to acknowledge the continued media hostility Abbott has faced, and the lack of support from the Labour leadership. The Forde Report (Labour Party, 2023) revealed a culture of factionalism and systemic racism in the Labour

Party. It catalogued the ways in which Muslim and racially minoritised party members, MPs and voters were marginalised within the party, and the domination of Labour Party structures by white men (Labour, 2023). The report also found hierarchies of racism; in part due to previous controversies around the former leader (Jeremy Corbyn MP) anti-Semitism was given greater attention and other forms of racism were ignored (Labour, 2023), p.81). In the lead-up to the 2024 General Election, intense scrutiny was placed on racially minoritised Labour candidates. For example, Faiza Shaheen was barred from standing as a Labour MP in the London suburb of Chingford, due to her reposting a tweet on X critical of the Israeli government's 2014 ground offensive in Gaza by American comedian Jon Stewart (Sommerlad, 2024). Such scrutiny was not applied equally to all MPs, particularly those on the Right. Shortly before this incident, the Labour Party welcomed Natalie Elphicke, a (white) former Conservative MP who had vigorously defended her ex-husband when he was convicted of sexually assaulting two women (Wheeler, 2024). As Prime Minister, Keir Starmer delivered a speech in which he referred to the UK as an 'island of strangers', and which was compared to Enoch Powell's infamous Rivers of Blood speech (Lynch, 2025). This suggests that such hierarchies have persisted with Labour in government. Vidal noted she felt a 'significant shift around the time of the Brexit vote, Trump's first victory across the pond, and Jeremy Corbyn becoming leader of the Labour Party. This is when, instead of being able to speak about my own lived experiences, I was being called upon to compare them to others—forced to participate in some sort of 'oppression Olympics' for which I hadn't trained or signed up' (2025). Such comments, as well as Abbott's experiences demonstrate the limitations of a situation where experiences racism may only be discussed in comparative terms.

Misrecognising Palestine Solidarity as the 'Muslim Vote'

The second example refers to an aspect of the conjuncture which has become central to global politics, the conflict in Palestine. In this section, I will discuss the phenomenon of 'misrecognition' (Dobernack et al., 2012) within some of the reactions to independent, pro-Palestine candidates who stood in the 2024 UK General Election. This included a tendency to frame the issue in narrow terms of 'the Muslim vote', ignoring the reasons that such candidates stood, why citizens (including non-Muslims) support Palestine solidarity or the scale and seriousness of the crisis in Palestine. Similar to the previous example, this example tells a cautionary tale around the simplification of complex issues to fixed identities and ethnic self-interest. In this case, discussion of international politics becomes conspicuously absent.

On 10 October 2023, Labour leader Keir Starmer said on the LBC radio station that 'Israel has the right to withhold power and water from Gaza' (McShane, 2023). This took place in the immediate aftermath of the 7 October Hamas attacks and the retaliatory moves by the Israeli government to cut off water and food to Gaza. In response, 23 Labour councillors quit the party, which was dismissed by the leadership as 'shaking off the fleas' (Rahman, 2023). Attempts to manage the controversies caused by these statements only served to deepen the controversy. Notably,

Starmer visited a mosque in South Wales in which he was challenged directly by congregants, but posted about the visit afterwards on social media, characterising it as a more anodyne discussion. The social media post was seen as a misrepresentation by those present at the meeting (Rahman, 2023).

Continued discontent and disappointment, as well as grave concern about the scale of the crisis, led to independent candidates who called for a ceasefire in Palestine standing in the 2024 General Election. Five of them defeated Labour candidates: Shockat Adam (Leicester South), Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr), Adnan Hussain (Blackburn), Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) and Jeremy Corbyn (who was barred from standing for the Labour Party but won his seat of Islington North as an independent). British Palestinian independent candidate Leanne Mohamad also nearly defeated Wes Streeting in Ilford South, with Streeting winning by only 528 votes. South African anti-apartheid campaigner Andrew Feinstein (also the son of a Holocaust survivor) stood in London Holborn and came second after Keir Starmer, taking 17% of Starmer's vote share (BBC News, 2025).

The news media tended to present the concern as a specifically 'Muslim' issue, rather than an issue that both Muslims and non-Muslims may feel strongly about. The BBC, Independent, and Evening Standard all framed the matter in terms of Labour losing seats in Muslim areas (Ross, 2024; Morton, 2024; Burford, 2024). The *Telegraph* featured a headline about 'why the Muslim Vote campaign is a glimpse into a horrifying future'. This was further emphasised when Jonathan Ashworth, the defeated Labour candidate in Leicester South, made many inflammatory comments to the media in which he specifically blamed his defeat on Muslims, although only one third of the constituency identified as Muslim (Childs, 2024). Still others—such as Ayoub Khan—affirmed Palestine as a Muslim issue through campaign rhetoric and vote-seeking entrepreneurialism. The Muslim Vote campaign also perpetuated narratives about Muslims voting as a bloc. Despite this framing, polling at the time of the General Election showed that 69% of the British public supported a ceasefire and 56% supported suspending arms to Israel (YouGov, 2024), a statistic which must have necessarily included considerable numbers of non-Muslims.

There are two issues which provide context here. First of these is the framing of anti-Semitism within the context of culture wars in the UK and elsewhere. This phenomenon can be observed within the media climates of the UK and other Western countries which have historically supported Israel, and have also been affected by right populist politics. Anti-Semitism within this environment is framed firstly as predominantly a problem for the Left rather than the Right. This is in part because of conflations of criticising the Israeli government with hatred of Jewish people; from this perspective, Palestine solidarity (as expressed by many on the Left, although not limited to the Left) is therefore by definition anti-Semitic. Within the context of culture wars, Palestine or anti-Semitism are seen through the lens of a clash of civilisations. As author Nadeine Asbali observed, 'the question of Palestine has long been positioned as one of 'Muslim versus us': a crusade to protect the last western outpost in the Middle East… By extension, to support Palestine means to go against Britishness itself' (2025). Conversely, if one supports Palestinian rights, then it is assumed one opposes the state of Israel as a matter of principle and hates Jewish people. Attempts to associate Palestine

solidarity with terrorism and religious fanaticism also contribute to this narrative. As Asbali discusses, there has been a mischaracterisation of pro-Palestine protests as 'radical and menacing', including comments by former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak as 'extremists hijacking democracy', and by former Home Secretary Suella Braverman characterising them as 'hate marches', with a former government advisor accusing them of rendering central London as a 'no-go zone for Jews' despite the presence of people of all faiths on the march (2025).

Relatedly, debates about Palestine and anti-Semitism have become co-opted by similar civilisational thinking as gender and sexual equality: where they are seen as the property of Western societies (Ferris, 2014; Puar, 2007). Disavowing anti-Semitism can become a test of belonging to a Western liberal society and, in some cases, national belonging. Therefore, immigrants and minorities are seen to be suspect and of needing to demonstrate they are not anti-Semitic. This is not limited to the UK; in Germany, Chancellor Christian Merz made a statement about migrants 'importing anti-Semitism (Connor, 2025), an extraordinary statement considering that country's history.

Second, the construct of the 'Muslim vote' can also be understood by the lens of 'groupism' and the perceptions of Muslim voters as a bloc, and as exercising political agency for only communal or sectarian faith purposes, rather than considering the common good. Dobbernack et al. 2012) have characterised the construct of the 'Muslim vote' as an example of *misrecognition*, which they define as a distortion which may be based on a partially correct perception but which ignores features that are important to the group thus (mis)recognized (2012, p.4) Drawing on work on recognition (particularly the work of Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth) they attempted to theorise misrecognition as distorting the reasons for Muslims' political agency. Key to the misrecognition of Muslims is the conception that they are disinterested in the common good and only act out of sectarian self-interest. This accusation is notably not made towards non-Muslims or white politicians, even in areas with significant immigrant populations (Dobbernack et al., 2012), p.13). Drawing on the work of Les Back and John Solomos on Labour politics in Birmingham (1992), they observed that Muslim and other minority Labour candidates have had to continually demonstrate their commitment to the common good, beyond faith matters. There are echoes here in the construct of the 'Muslim vote' of older Orientalist narratives around Asians being too communal and collectivist to be able to meaningfully participate in democracy. For example, arguments about Indian citizens' communalism and unreadiness for democracy were made by Enoch Powell against Indian self-governance (Shilliam, 2020). The current controversy around the election points to the persistence of such colonial narratives, and their mobilisation to mischaracterise Muslim voters and reduce Palestine solidarity to Muslim sectarian self-interest. Such narratives also intersect with more general perceptions of voters within similar terms as market demographics. Voters are seen to possess preexisting and static viewpoints based on demographic traits; their views can be sought through focus groups. Such perceptions of voters mean that the role of political parties is primarily to appeal to preexisting viewpoints rather than to change hearts and minds or provide new narratives. This perception of voters lends itself easily

to the view of Muslim voters supporting Palestine for sectarian reasons, and also that support for Palestine is largely limited to Muslims.

Since the election, as the crisis has worsened, it has become more apparent that Palestine solidarity is not limited to Muslims. A recent (June 2025) poll by YouGov demonstrated that 45% of UK respondents backed the establishment of a Palestinian state; this included a plurality or majority in regions (such as Chester North and Liverpool Riverside) without significant Muslim populations (Walker, 2025). The mass arrests of people who have publicly endorsed Palestine Action, despite its designation as a terrorist group, included a Catholic priest and a Baptist minister (Martin, 2025). Such developments mean that the narrative about faith allegiance will become increasingly difficult to maintain.

Conclusion: Can We Get Beyond Fixed Ethnic Identities and Presumed Group Self-Interest?

In the concluding section, I will reflect on the appeal of fixed categories of identity and the interests they serve. I will also discuss what perspectives are left out of such narrow discussions. Framing debates around race and ethnicity in terms of fixed identity categories and self-interested competition acts to depoliticise the issues at stake. Diane Abbott is an inspiring politician who has long been committed to a more expansive understanding of anti-racist politics and an internationalist. But faced with a media and political climate in which there can only be oppression hierarchies and zero-sum games, she is reduced to countering one hierarchy with another. Within such a climate, it becomes impossible to both recognise the different oppressions of those who can and cannot 'pass for white' and to imagine any kind of collective solidarity. It has become impossible to see one without seeing one as cancelling out the other. Both Vidal and Okundaye call for 'grown-up conversations' to take place about race (Okundaye, 2025; Vidal, 2025). However, such a 'grown-up' conversation must also include ways that different experiences of discrimination can be discussed without positioning them in a hierarchy. To do so means examining the legacy of neoliberal competitive individualism and the divisive logic of the culture wars in foreclosing on the possibilities of solidarity and collectivity. It also means placing greater scrutiny on the media perpetuating both competitive individualism and social divisions.

Seeing the presence of independent pro-Palestine election candidates as sectarian self-interest meant that the wider, and more difficult issues raised by the Palestine situation are left out of the frame of debate. Central to these questions is how the conflict will affect future international relations. What are the consequences for the UK and other Western governments if they turn a blind eye to war crimes or genocide? Furthermore, what are the implications for such governments when they continue to engage in trade and sell weapons to a country that has committed war crimes and broken international law? Does this then legitimise other authoritarian regimes who choose to do the same in the future?

Another difficult issue is the role of racist and civilisational narratives in framing the conflict. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has referred

to Palestinians as 'human animals' (Goldenberg, 2024), 'children of darkness' (Sukarieh, 2023) and called on 'civilised nations' to oppose an International Criminal Court ruling (Williams, 2024). EU commentator Shada Islam observed that 'the same dehumanising logic applied to racialised Europeans and refugees from Africa, Asia and the Middle East is now in plain view in the EU's abandonment of the Palestinian people' and pointed out 'the glaring disparity between Ukraine and Gaza' (2025). Framing such matters as group self-interest shuts down the space for debating these issues.

More generally, it is worth considering the appeal of fixed identities and zero-sum game competition within the current conjuncture. They possibly provide ontological certainty in response to a volatile world, which is only likely to become more chaotic with the climate crisis and the expansion of right populism. Fixed identities and zero-sum game competition provide simple answers to complex social and political problems, conjuring up a world of heroes vs. villains and existential threats. However, they are at odds with the complexity and fluidity of what Stuart Hall has termed 'multicultural drift' (1999) where multiculturalism has become a fact of lived experience. Although there is not enough space to discuss fully, it may be worth considering parallels with the appeal to fixed conceptions of gender (as represented by the antipathy towards those identifying as transgender or non-binary) in response to lived experiences of gender fluidity. Furthermore, perceptions of a zero-sum competition between groups are consistent with the individualistic nature of neoliberal political subjectivity, in which one's relations with others are seen as primarily competitive. Zero-sumn games may have an immediacy and familiarity to those who already see themselves and others within these terms.

I will end by considering what is missing from such a narrow and impoverished framing of identity and anti-racist politics. In particular, the misunderstanding of Palestine solidarity and the misrecognition of the 'Muslim vote' reveal the particular challenges of discussing internationalism within such a narrow frame, especially one which is narrowly limited to the nation-state. There is a longer history within anti-racist activism of a more radical and more expansive approach, which emerged out of anti-imperial struggles; it was also motivated by an analysis about the ways in which capitalism relied on racist exploitation (Kundnani, 2023; Robinson, 2021). For example, the UK hosted a series of Pan-African conferences between 1900 and 1945. Black Power movements, the Asian Youth Movement and other grassroots struggles sought liberation within the former colonies and challenged racism within the UK. Bordering practices and restrictive immigration affecting those from the global South were considered to be part of this struggle rather than existing outside of it. Connected to this, there is also a longer global history of Palestine solidarity and anti-racist movements. These were connected to anti-imperialist politics; it is notable that of the 84 countries to first recognise a Palestinian state when it was proposed in 1988, half were African countries (Malik, 2025). The civil rights movement, Black Power and the anti-apartheid campaign all saw Palestine as central to global liberation. Speaking in 1997, Nelson Mandela said that 'our freedom will be incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinian people.' The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests renewed this, in what Robin DG Kelley has termed the 'Gaza-Ferguson nexus' (2019).

The current conjuncture offers an important opportunity to critically reflect on the terms and categories for discussing race and identity, and for imagining alternatives which could take us beyond these impasses. We need to ask about the work such categories do, and the interests they serve in the current moment. They have been used to give specificity to lived experience, but if they are now primarily used to pit groups against each other and produce oppression hierarchies, then how useful are they within a climate of a resurgent far right? It is therefore worth considering how categories themselves could be revisited and re-imagined so that it is possible to both acknowledge the specificity of lived experiences of racism, but also how they could be 'expanded, stretched, entangled and traversed' to enable imaginative possibilities (Raghuram, 2020). The history of an expansionist and internationalist understanding of racism and anti-racism could serve as an important resource to enable us to move beyond fixed identities, competition and zero-sum games. However, this needs to be accompanied with some critical reflection about legacies of neoliberalism and how it has has entrenched racial inequalities between and within groups, in ways that have made it very difficult to see this in any other terms than individual competition. The legacy of neoliberalism means we cannot simply re-stage older forms of solidarity. However, we can begin to do the work of re-imagining solidarity and collectivity within and beyond borders, and across differences.

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