

Socio – economic Inequality and the Logical Fallacy of Conflation

The logical fallacy of conflating race and class in monitoring and interpreting socio-economic inequality allows those in government and policy makers to conveniently avoid addressing both forms of inequality. In order to understand race and class it is important to understand the two separately before analysing the way the two phenomena interact.

Teresa May in the summer of 2016 launched an audit of public services to reveal racial disparities. Given that it is a duty under the Equality Act for public services to publish this information, and the government has undermined this duty publicly as being red tape, it begs the question why has this audit been launched? The stated aim of the audit is that the public will be able to “check how their race affects how they are treated on key issues such as health, education, and employment, broken down by geographic location, income, and gender” [but not class]. It goes on to say “the audit will show disadvantages suffered by white working class people as well as ethnic minorities”. Note it does not say that the audit will show disadvantages suffered by working class people from white as well as ethnic minority backgrounds. In one statement the audit has racialised ‘white working class’ people as well as stripped ethnic minorities of class. It makes the assumption that class is only relevant if one is white. It fails to acknowledge the fact that BAMER people are disproportionately represented within the working classes.

One may argue it is just semantics and that it is pedantic to pick apart such statements. This would be true if not for the fact that the equalities data and evidence that inform government policy and practice consistently conflate race and class leading to a misguided analysis of both forms of inequality that impact on people’s lives. The audit refers to the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s figures to show “large disparities between how people are treated depending on their race”. It quotes the EHRC report, saying that “people in ethnic minority households are almost twice as likely to live in relative poverty as white people – but it is not just those from minority backgrounds who are affected, with white working class boys less likely to go to university than any other group”. In comparing ‘white working class’ boys to those of ‘any other [ethnic minority] group, it intentionally or otherwise, characterises ‘white working class’ as an ethnic minority, and frames the discourse on social mobility as a fight for resources between the ‘white working class’ and ‘other groups’.

The recent report “Ethnicity, Gender and Social Mobility” produced by the commission for social mobility contains a similar logical fallacy. The report states that “White British and White Other Children from low income [working class] homes are the lowest performing groups at primary school.” It does not clarify if this is in comparison to all pupils from other race and ethnicities or just the pupils from low income homes belonging to other race and ethnicities. It then goes on to make comparisons between White British pupils and pupils of other race and ethnicities without clarifying if it is referring to White British pupils from low income homes or all White British pupils. In referring to ‘disadvantaged White British’ and ‘White British’ interchangeably it misleads one into believing that the ‘White British’ as a race are disadvantaged in comparison to other race and ethnicities within education. The disadvantages faced by White British pupils from low income homes are disadvantages faced due to class as opposed to race, and have an equal if not more of an impact on pupils from low income households of other race and ethnicities. The report states, “in the early years the socio-economic gap is larger for ‘White British’ and ‘White Other’ groups than other minority ethnic groups. However, if the report were to compare ‘White British’ pupils as a race and not just ‘working class’ White British pupils to other minority ethnic groups irrespective of class

it would show a very different picture. Furthermore, in gathering and analysing data on ‘White Other’ groups it fails to take into account the disparities between ‘White Other’ Polish, French, German, to ‘White Other’ Roma, Gypsy, Traveller pupils. Thus in claiming “until Key Stage 4 it is ‘Other White’ eligible pupils who perform most poorly however at Key Stage 4 these pupils do better than their eligible White British peers” it fails to recognise the significant disadvantage and discrimination experienced by Roma, Gypsy and Traveller pupils at all stages of the education system.

In the age old tradition of divide and conquer, government rhetoric and policy racialise the white working class and pose them against other race and ethnicities. Similarly through ridding other race and ethnicities of class the narrative misconstrues the problem as one of different races competing for scarce resources i.e. White working class vs. ethnic minorities, settled migrants vs newly arrived migrants. Racialising and pathologising communities become a tactic to detract from structural inequality and racism.

Following the increase in hate crime after the Brexit referendum Home Secretary Amber Rudd announced the ‘Hate Crime Action Plan’. The Action Plan emphasised punishing those who commit hate crime but ignored the role the divisive rhetoric of politicians played in framing the Brexit debate on immigrations and the free movement of workers. As a result the ‘White Working Class’ is pathologised as right wing extremists and funding is targeted at addressing the ‘problem’ of the White working class. Similarly terrorism is dealt with by pathologising Muslim communities and does not take into account the socio-economic inequalities and lack of social mobility coupled with foreign policy that leads to terrorism.

The suggestion that class should be included as one of the protected characteristics within the Equality Act has often been dismissed on the grounds that it would be difficult to define. However, similar difficulties exist with defining race and ethnicity. It is even more so with caste and yet the inclusion of caste as a protected characteristic is being debated in parliament. Including class as a protected characteristic would provide more clarity in differentiating and addressing different forms of discrimination and disadvantage. Until this becomes less of a radical notion that is dismissed off hand, it is of the utmost importance that the Socio Economic Duty within the Equality Act be enforced to tackle the disadvantages White British as well as other ethnicities face on the grounds of class.