Frames of war and welfare

Ben Whitham and **Nadya Ali**

Crises, austerity, and Islamophobia in the UK

INTRODUCTION: THE UK'S FRAMES OF CRISIS

The political-economic terrain of the UK has been beset by a series of overlapping crises in recent years – from the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2007/08 (and the longer-term crises of public services induced by the decade-plus of austerity that followed), to the global public health crisis of the pandemic and its socio-economic impact. Today, stagnant wages and rocketing inflation have led to talk of a major 'cost of living crisis', with energy bills and basic commodities becoming increasingly unaffordable to many.

The social construction of a crisis, and any response to it, are fundamentally a matter of framing.

> **"To frame events, trends, or trajectories as 'crises' in the first place is to represent them as fundamental disruptions of a status quo, which is itself typically framed as desirable. How we frame specific crises – and especially how powerful voices in politics and media frame them – can determine the kinds of responses that are made possible or necessary."**

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This article explores some of the frames that have shaped recent political-economic crises and crisis-responses in the UK. We argue that successive waves of crisis and austerity in the UK have been framed as universal or equalising moments, even as their impacts have been unevenly distributed. Pervasive racialised inequalities that are normalised, unseen, or ignored in 'normal', non-crisis contexts are exacerbated by both crises and crisis-responses. Austerity Islamophobia - the racialised framing of Muslims in the context of political-economic crises – provides the focal case study for our argument.

NEW CRISIS, NEW AUSTERITY?

The UK government's economic response to the arrival of the global Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 included an unprecedented national furlough programme: the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. From March 2020 to September 2021, the scheme constituted a massive programme of public spending, with employers given up to 80 per cent of staff salaries and employment costs to retain staff while they were 'locked down' at home and unable to work. That one of the most radical Conservative governments in recent history, led by the supposedly self-help Churchillian icon Boris Johnson, could find itself effectively nationalising all industry – albeit temporarily – might have offered a glimmer of hope for political and economic progressives for a radical reappraisal of the economic status quo.

In fact, the pandemic's exposure of the fragility and myths underpinning our market economy was a teachable moment, where the idea of who counts as an essential worker – those whose labour is integral to reproducing the conditions of liveable life in the UK – was brought into sharp focus.[1] It was everyone from bus and train drivers, doctors, nurses, educators, cleaners and social care workers, to those who produce and deliver food and drink, on whom we all count, every day. These are the people who get us where we want to go, feed us, teach us, and mend us, even in the middle of a raging and devastating pandemic. The Johnson government swiftly adopted a new tagline to capture this moment of optimism for a new, post-pandemic economic order, calling it a time to 'build back better'.

> **"the trouble with these framings in terms of who a crisis affects, and how we should respond to it, is that we have never all been 'in it together'"**

Yet from the outset of the pandemic, the spectre of austerity lingered in the air. The invocation of discursive frames from the 2010–2020 austerity era was an early warning sign. In 2020, claims that 'we're all in this together' and that we should 'keep calm and carry on' – frames central to the cultural politics of austerity after the GFC – were revived with gusto, from corporate advertising to political speeches.[2] But the trouble with these framings in terms of who a crisis affects, and how we should respond to it, is that we have never all been 'in it together'. The systemic classist, racist, sexist, and ableist inequalities that pervade UK society in 'pre-crisis' times position some people to be more adversely impacted than others when a crisis arrives.

AUSTERITY ISLAMOPHOBIA, AND RACIALISED INEQUALITIES IN TIMES OF CRISIS

We have previously argued that the enactment of austerity politics in the UK has relied on discourses of racialised disentitlement. Specifically, our research has explored what we called 'austerity Islamophobia' to show how a programme of reduced spending on public services and welfare was at least partially justified through anti-Muslim racism.[3] This often means that racially minoritised people in the UK (including most Muslims) are framed as an 'undeserving poor',[4] who are 'milking' the national welfare system,[5] and as representing a 'reproductive' threat to the white, non-Muslim majority[6] in times of crisis and perceived economic scarcity.

> **"the reality facing not only Muslims but also other racially minoritised groups was already one of accelerating inequality"**

To return to the moment of national triumphalism that accompanied Johnson's big spending at the onset of the pandemic: the reality facing not only Muslims but also other racially minoritised groups was already one of accelerating inequality. Not only was the pain of the pandemic about to disproportionately hit the UK's racially minoritised populations, but this latest crisis would also compound the damage done to such communities in the previous decade through post-GFC austerity.[7] While some were baking lockdown banana bread in the safe confines of their homes, the

1 HM Government (2021) 'Essential workers prioritised for COVID-19 testing', guidance document. https://www.gov.uk/guidance/essential-workers-prioritised-for-covid-19-testing.
2 Whitham B (2021) 'The cultural politics of crisis in the UK', in Price S and Harbisher B (eds) *Power, Media and the Covid-19 Pandemic*, Routledge
3 Ali N and Whitham B (2021) 'Racial Capitalism, Islamophobia, and Austerity', *International Political Sociology*, 15(2): 190–211
4 Shilliam R (2018) *Race and the Undeserving Poor: From Abolition to Brexit*, New Agenda Publishing
5 Whitham B (forthcoming) 'Political, Colonial, and Libidinal Economies of Gendered Islamophobia', pre-print available at: https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/38896/.
6 Siddiqui S (2022) 'Racing the nation: towards a theory of reproductive racism', *Race & Class*, 63(2): 2–20
7 Hall S M, Mcintosh K, Neitzert E, Pottinger L, Sandhu K, Stephenson M-A, Reed H and Taylor L (2017) *Intersecting Inequalities: The Impact of Austerity on BME Women*, Women's Budget Group and Runnymede Trust

UK's racially minoritised populations were bearing the brunt of the pandemic. In the early days of the pandemic, stories began to emerge of the deaths of Muslim doctors and nurses,[8] which shed light on a broader trend: racial disparities in Covid-19 deaths. People from Black and South Asian groups were more likely to become infected with Covid-19 and more likely to die from it than white people.[9] There were concerted attempts to frame disparities in deaths as somehow to do with pathologies within racialised groups. As Elizabeth Poole and Milly Williamson have shown, one of these tropes was about Muslims supposedly failing to socially distance themselves from each other.[10] In this sense, Muslims were both positioned to suffer more from the crisis, and framed as a cause of the crisis.

> **"racial disparities in Covid-19 deaths were not about the supposed (mis)behaviours of racially minoritised groups. They were about the complex interaction of social, political, and economic inequalities faced by Black and Asian groups"**

However, as Lucinda Platt has shown, racial disparities in Covid-19 deaths were not about the supposed (mis)behaviours of racially minoritised groups.[11] They were about the complex interaction of social, political, and economic inequalities faced by Black and Asian groups. These inequalities map onto two key markers: occupation and housing. Platt notes that Black African populations, for example, were more likely to be working in social care, where the impact of the first wave of pandemic was most viciously felt. Racially minoritised people are also more likely than the white British population to live in 'densely occupied or overcrowded areas'. Platt concludes by suggesting that the pandemic not only generated disparities in health outcomes but also economic ones. The House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee has noted that racially minoritised people were more likely to be on zero-hours contracts than their white counterparts. As their report found:

The coronavirus pandemic has sharpened the focus on the systemic issues with the zero-hours contracts policy, including the disproportionate number of BAME people on zero-hours contracts. The pandemic has highlighted the unequal way that zero-hours contracts operate: employers can deny furlough to employees and instead reduce their working hours to zero. In some cases, workers on zero-hours contracts are ineligible for statutory sick pay.[12]

Such systemic inequalities and their exacerbation through socio-economic crises clearly affect racially minoritised communities in general, but we are particularly interested here in how they intersect with Islamophobia as a specific form of racialised framing and socio-economic violence.

THE FRAMING OF MUSLIMS AT TIMES OF CRISIS

Prevailing, and overwhelmingly negative, representations of Muslims in British political and media discourse – such that Islamophobia is said to 'pass the dinner table test' of respectable conversation[13] - have their roots in what Judith Butler calls the 'frames of war'. The onset of the global 'War on

8   Khan A (2020) 'Muslim minority doctors first to die on front line of UK pandemic', *Al Jazeera*. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/1/muslim-minority-doctors-first-to-die-on-front-line-of-uk-pandemic

9   HM Government (2023) 'Chapter 2: Disparities', *Technical report on the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/technical-report-on-the-covid-19-pandemic-in-the-uk/chapter-2-disparities#:~:text=Linked%20primary%20care%20records%20of,more%20likely%20to%20die%20from

10 Poole E and Williamson M (2021) 'Disrupting or reconfiguring racist narratives about Muslims? The representation of British Muslims during the Covid crisis', *Journalism*. 24(2): 262–279

11 Platt L (2021) 'Why ethnic minorities are bearing the brunt of COVID-19', article, LSE Research. https://www.lse.ac.uk/research/research-for-the-world/race-equity/why-ethnic-minorities-are-bearing-the-brunt-of-covid-19

12 Women and Equalities Committee (2020) *Unequal impact? Coronavirus and BAME people*, House of Commons

13 Warsi S (2011) 'Baroness Warsi's Sternberg Lecture Speech', transcript. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/baroness-warsi-s-sternberg-lecture-speech.

Terror' following the 9/11 attacks in the US led to a framing of Muslim lives as essentially 'ungrievable' or 'destructible', in Butler's terms, as part of a "differential distribution of precariousness",[14] which we argue targets particular Muslim communities in particular. Prevalent understandings of the 'civilizational' nature of the War on Terror, produced through dominant political and media discourses, have framed Muslims as not only threatening to 'our' security (and as fundamentally outside of the national collective 'us' in societies like the US and UK), but also as a multifaceted and monstrous 'problem' – represented as an 'enemy within' and thwarters of "cohesive national selfhood".[15] While negative framings of Muslims in Britain and the wider 'West' have much longer histories,[16] the post-9/11 context has rendered Muslims *within* the West both a particular target of structural socio-economic inequalities *and* a figure of blame for socioeconomic crises.

> ### "despite their over-representation in the lowest and least secure income groups, British Muslims are today often excluded from framings of the 'working class' altogether"

To the extent that Muslims are framed as part of the British national collective self, they are nevertheless excluded from important socioeconomic narratives for understanding crises and crisis-responses in the UK. Perhaps most significantly, and despite their over-representation in the lowest and least secure income groups, British Muslims are today often excluded from framings of the 'working class' altogether. Satnam Virdee's work on race and class in Britain has illuminated the long history of erasing 'racialised outsiders' from the constitution and activism of the British working class.[17] The rise, in the post-GFC austerity era, and especially around the Brexit referendum (itself often read as a consequence of the GFC and/or austerity politics),[18] of an exclusionary construction of a 'white working class' has been well-documented and critiqued elsewhere.[19] The specific exclusion of Muslims is, as Basit Mahmood notes, an important dimension of this framing, reliant upon categorical separations between race, class, and religion:

> ### "But class doesn't operate in a vacuum. When it comes to working-class Muslims in the UK, barriers to success at work, discrimination and financial instability are compounded by a hostile media culture with a penchant for perpetuating Islamophobic stories. The erasure of class as part of our identities as Muslims presents us as a distinct group, separate from the wider struggles for equality of opportunity."[20]

Through this framing, Muslims suffer welfare disentitlement (the 'disallowing' of claims to socioeconomic justice)[21] often being framed as 'benefits cheats' exploiting the national welfare

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14 Butler J (2008) *Frames of War*, Verso

15 Ali N and Whitham B (2018) 'The unbearable anxiety of being: Ideological fantasies of British Muslims beyond the politics of security', *Security Dialogue*, 49(5): 400–417; Bakali N and Hafez F (eds) (2022) *The Rise of Global Islamophobia in the War on Terror*, Manchester University Press

16 See, for example: Said E (1978) *Orientalism*, Pantheon Books

17 Virdee S (2014) *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider*, Palgrave Macmillan

18 See, for example: Fetzer T (2019) 'Did Austerity Cause Brexit?', *American Economic Review*. 109(11): 3849–3886

19 Bhambra G (2017) 'Brexit, Trump, and "methodological whiteness": On the misrecognition of race and class', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 68(1): 214–232

20 Mahmood B (2023) 'Why are British Muslims not considered part of the working class?', *Hyphen Online*. https://hyphenonline.com/2023/02/03/why-are-british-muslims-not-considered-part-of-the-working-class/

21 Bhattacharyya G (2018) 'Austerity and Disallowing Claims', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 41(13): 2293–2300

system, rather than as deserving citizens.[22] The framing of class as a discrete or pristine social category, exempt from racialisation, is the necessary condition for constructing the 'white working class' discourse, and also for ignoring or erasing racialised disparities in experiences of crises.

RACIALISED DISPARITIES AND THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS

As with the post-GFC austerity period, and at the height of the pandemic, the cost of living crisis is framed as a universal problem – another 'we're all in this together' moment. The BBC's response, for instance, was to launch a 'major new brand to help consumers', offering tips and stories for households on surviving the new crisis, under the banner 'Cost of living: Tackling it together'.[23] But, once again, the impacts of this crisis are not experienced equally; we are not all in it together. Research by the New Economics Foundation found that: "on average, BAME households are 1.6 times more affected by the cost of living than their white counterparts", because they are more likely to be on lower and less secure incomes, and otherwise economically precariously positioned.[24] A major Runnymede Trust report, meanwhile, based on research by Daniel Edmiston of the University of Leeds and Runnymede's Shabna Begum and Mandeer Kataria, found that "Black and minority ethnic people are 2.5 times more likely to be in poverty than white people" and that progress on closing this gap has "stalled since the 2007–08 global financial crisis", with the gap "becoming particularly pronounced since the start of COVID-19".[25] The report's authors warn that racially minoritised households will, off the back of these previous crises, be "disproportionately exposed to the current cost-of-living crisis", with an absolute majority of all such households (52 per cent) facing fuel poverty in the winter of 2022–23 as compared to just under one-third (32 per cent) of white-racialised households.

> **"As the cost of living crisis and any new wave of austerity develops, there is a real and immediate risk that racially minoritised groups in general, and Muslims in particular, will face significantly worse outcomes"**

Such racialised disparities in the effects of crises impact upon many racially minoritised groups, but again Muslim communities may be hit especially hard. The Runnymede report notes that British Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities (around 90 per cent of whom identify as Muslim, and who together account for of 3.8 per cent of the UK population, or more than 2.2 million people)[26] are likely to be even more sharply impacted than the wider 'BAME' category. This includes Pakistani and Bangladeshi households being a staggering *66 per cent* more likely than white households to be in fuel poverty in the winter of 2022–23. While other scholars have already demonstrated the pertinence of our concept of austerity Islamophobia to understanding the pandemic crisis and its responses,[27] we can now anticipate its relevance to the ongoing cost of living crisis too. The

22 Whitham B (forthcoming) 'Political, Colonial, and Libidinal Economies of Gendered Islamophobia', in Easat-Daas A and Zempi I (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Gendered Islamophobia*, Palgrave Macmillan, pre-print available at: https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/38896/

23 BBC (2022) 'Tackling It Together – BBC launches major new brand to help consumers with cost of living crisis', news article. https://www.bbc.com/mediacentre/2022/tackling-it-together

24 New Economics Foundation [NEF] (2022) '2.2 Million More People Will Need To Make Sacrifices On Essentials Like Putting Food On The Table Or Replacing Clothes This Year', press release. https://neweconomics.org/2022/05/2-2-million-more-people-will-need-to-make-sacrifices-on-essentials-like-putting-food-on-the-table-or-replacing-clothes-this-year

25 Edmiston D, Begum S and Kataria M (2022) *Falling Faster amidst a Cost-of-Living Crisis: Poverty, Inequality and Ethnicity in the UK*, Runnymede Trust. https://assets.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/633d8007a3bfa49bd4cd0fa8_Runnymede%20Briefing%20Cost%20of%20Living%20FINAL.pdf

26 ONS (2022) 'Ethnic group, England and Wales: Census 2021', dataset. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/bulletins/ethnicgroupenglandandwales/census2021

27 Akhter S, Elias J and Rai SM (2022) 'Being Cared for in the Context of Crisis: Austerity, COVID-19, and Racialized Politics', *Social Politics*, 29(4): 1121–1143

positioning of Muslim lives to be disproportionately impacted, alongside crisis-response framings that position them as essentially 'ungrievable', deny them the status of 'working class', and disallow their claims to socioeconomic justice, all threaten to shape this crisis as they have previous ones.

CONCLUSION

The succession of major crises in the UK in recent years – the GFC and austerity, the pandemic, and now the cost of living crisis – have had deeply unequal impacts. Racially minoritised people are often positioned to be particularly vulnerable to such impacts. Their over-representation among the working class, and below the poverty line, in deprived urban neighbourhoods, as well as in precarious and 'frontline' forms of employment, have all been identified as reasons for this positioning. Muslims have faced particular challenges, and their framing as a more generalised 'problem' (as well as their frequent outcasting from frames of the 'working class'), is at play in their positioning with regard to both crises and crisis-responses. As the cost of living crisis and any new wave of austerity develop, there is a real and immediate risk that racially minoritised groups in general, and Muslims in particular, will face significantly worse outcomes – both in socioeconomic terms and in terms of how they and their experiences are discursively framed (or erased).

Dr Ben Whitham is a lecturer in international relations at SOAS, University of London. His research interests lie at the intersection of critical and cultural political economy, and international political sociology. His recent work has explored Islamophobia, in and beyond the 'Wars on Terror', cultural and 'value' politics in times of crisis, and the dynamics of the so-called 'culture wars'. He is the author (with Andrew Heywood) of *Global Politics* **(Bloomsbury, 2023).**

Dr Nadya Ali is a writer and researcher currently working in policy and advocacy in the charity sector. Prior to this Nadya was a lecturer in international relations at the University of Sussex, researching security, race and borders. She is the author of the forthcoming book *The Violence of Britishness: Racism, Borders and the Conditions of Citizenship* **(Pluto Press, 2023).**