

PLENARY

NASAR MEER

WEDNESDAY, 20 APRIL 2022
13:00 - 14:00

THE CRUEL OPTIMISM OF RACIAL JUSTICE

What can we learn from success and failure in the pursuit of racial justice in the UK and elsewhere in the Global North? One answer is that societies adapt to a form of 'crisis ordinariness' (Berlant 2011) in which the regularity of racial injustice prevails without the need for choreographed and pre-meditated racist intentionality. Underwritten by a 'racial contract' (Mills 1997), and propelled by racial mechanics in seemingly disparate and ancillary social spheres (Meer 2022), the work for a better future nonetheless endures. This is the 'cruel optimism' that we may borrow from Lauren Berlant to characterise racial justice struggles today, something animated by affective labour alongside social and political movements. Recognising this is to refuse totalising approaches that foreclose agency, minimise resistance, or collapse racial minorities into mere objects of racist social systems. It is instead to grasp how systems too are 'embodied', and not apart from racial projects. The argument advanced here is that systems, identities and societies bear the imprints of older racial injustices that are not merely restated but re-articulated in ways that may be novel, and yet share common properties with how other racial projects have been curated and sustained. Seeing racial injustice as systemic, therefore, better allows us to grasp the nature of the challenge we face. For, as Milsum (1968) put it more than half a century ago, while 'systems have some stability which resists the initiation of change', this can only be maintained 'until some threshold of forcing stress is reached'. Does our present moment of accumulated struggle promise just such a breach?

Nasar Meer is Professor of Sociology and Director of RACE.ED at the University of Edinburgh. He is co-Editor of the journal *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, and his publications include: *The Cruel Optimism of Racial Justice* (2022); *Whiteness and Nationalism* (ed, 2020); *The Impact Agenda: Challenges and Controversies* (co-authored, 2020), *Islam and Modernity* (4 Volumes) (ed, 2017), *Citizenship, Identity & the Politics of Multiculturalism* (2015 2nd Edition), *Race & Ethnicity* (2014), *Interculturalism & Multiculturalism* (ed, 2016), *Racialization & Religion* (ed, 2014) and *European Multiculturalism(s)* (ed, 2012).