

The truth about “two-tier policing”

*Rioters, far right activists, as well as owner of X Elon Musk, have been propagating the idea of “two-tier policing”. The claim is that police is overly lenient towards protesters of progressive causes and racial minority protesters, compared to others. **Lilie Chouliaraki** and **Kathryn Claire Higgins** argue that this claim gets things backwards, and identify this is an instance of a communication strategy of reverse victimization by the far right.*

Across the United Kingdom, angry rioters—most of them white men—have taken to the streets. Night after night, they have tried to [burn down hotels](#) housing asylum seekers and refugees, [lodged bricks at local mosques](#), and attacked and harassed people from racial and ethnic minorities.

As of Friday morning, almost 500 rioters have been arrested and at least 100 have been charged with a crime. Prime Minister Kier Starmer has framed the riots as a crisis of “thuggery”, promising a zero-tolerance approach to policing them and threatening anyone who chooses to participate with [“the full force of the law.”](#)

Like all the best conspiracy theories, the myth of a “two-tier” approach to policing public disorder is effective precisely because it contains a core vein of truth.

Online, however, the far-right has reframed Starmer’s stance in line with one of its most popular myths: that of a [“two-tier” approach to policing protests](#), in which progressive and/or racial minority protesters (such as those who participated in the #BlackLivesMatter uprisings of 2020) are treated with “kid gloves” while the overwhelmingly white far-right is victimized by police. This is a myth, or rather, an upside-down truth. There is indeed “two-tier” policing, but its victim is not the far-right.

Myths and truths about “two-tier policing”

Like all the best conspiracy theories, the myth of a “two-tier” approach to policing public disorder is effective precisely because it contains a core vein of truth. If #BlackLivesMatter made one thing indelibly clear, it is that police officers *do* treat

citizens in highly unequal ways, especially when it comes to decisions about how and when to use violent force. As reflected in statistics about the use of [stop-and-search](#), police use of [weapons](#) (such as tasers), [police sexual misconduct](#), and [deaths in police custody](#), the threat of police violence cuts along lines of race, class and gender that are disturbingly well defined. It is women, queer people, and racially minoritized groups who are disproportionately victimized by this violence. According to the 2019/2020 report by the [Independent Office for Police Conduct](#), for instance, 23 per cent of total deaths in or following police custody between 2015 and 2020 (i.e. 20 of 86 deaths) were people of BME background.

During the BLM uprisings, the myth that policing exists to neutrally enforce a set of laws for the even benefit of all citizens came under radical cultural pressure. Many citizens developed a new consciousness about [institutional racism](#) in UK police forces and about how and why the criminal legal system operates as a tool of racial oppression. Of course, abolitionist scholars and organizers had been rejecting the equation of “more policing” with “more safety” for years. But the virality of George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis, and the hypervisibility of the aggressive [police response](#) to those who protested in the U.S. and elsewhere, placed unprecedented public pressure on the legitimacy of police use of force against citizens—especially, protestors.

The far-right has been using the communication strategy of reverse victimization for years.

What we see in the claims of “two-tier” policing is an attempt by the far-Right to appropriate this new consciousness for their own benefit. The myth is, in this sense, a tactical claim to [victimhood](#) that positions white people in general (and white men in particular) as the primary victims of domestic state violence. What it strategically [obfuscates](#) in the process is both [the racial bias documented to be inherent in state institutions, such as the Court](#) in the UK, and the privileged place of white, far-right voices in the UK’s [parliamentary politics](#).

This is not a new trick. The far-right has been using the communication strategy of reverse victimization for years. Look at Nigel Farage’s outrage, following his recent appearance at BBC’s Question Time. Facing the audience’s harsh questions, [he claimed to be a victim of a dishonest political attack](#). Elon Musk, X owner and billionaire provocateur, repeated this pattern of reversal in his recent “[two-tier Kier](#)” post. Many

rushed to put the myth down, labelling it “[complete nonsense](#)” and insisting that police officers treat all British citizens equally, regardless of their race or their politics.

However, it is vitally important that we resist the urge to replace one myth with another. Namely that, as extensive research has shown, instead of white far-right men, it is overpoliced communities of colour (including, crucially, Muslim communities) who inevitably become the victims of expanded police powers to surveil, detain, and use force against citizens. Starmer’s insistence that his government will fight racism and Islamophobia with “[standing army](#)” of “[supercops](#)” (whatever a supercop is) rings hollow, and does not really address the racial politics of policing in the very same way that the far-Right is encouraging.

Defacing a statue or delaying traffic are not the same as setting fire to a building full of people or beating up a passer-by because he happens to be Black.

Blurring the line between protest and riot

Part of what enables this misrecognition, of course, is yet another communication strategy of the far Right that has gradually been normalized in politics and the media: the blurring of the crucial distinction between a “protest” and a “riot”—a blurring that has been strategically cultivated to discredit movements for social justice. By labelling BLM protestors “rioters” in 2020, conservative politicians and media pundits paved the way for the far-Right agitators on our streets to call themselves “protestors” and claim narratives of political suppression that are not their own.

Defacing a statue or delaying traffic are not the same as setting fire to a building full of people or beating up a passer-by because he happens to be Black. Yet calling the former “violence” has made latter less clearly legible as such, drawing a sense of false equivalence that the far-Right now appropriates for its own moral legitimacy. By [insisting](#) that all those “intent on causing public disorder” will be treated with “the full force of the law” regardless of “who [they] are or what [they’re] protesting,” the Labour government is tacitly endorsing this false sense of equivalence. It is failing to insist upon the importance of what makes a far-Right pogrom fundamentally unlike a movement in defence of Black life, even if both contain moments of “disorder.”

A single piece of online misinformation cannot *cause* hate, only set it in motion.

Meanwhile, communities of [anti-racist](#) solidarity have quickly marshalled numbers on these same streets. At rallies around the UK on Wednesday night, anti-racist community organizers begged Starmer and the Labour government to publicly name these riots for what they truly are: not a chaotic outpouring of “[legitimate anger](#)” nor a “crisis of public disorder,” as some conveniently claim, but rather, a crisis of racism, Islamophobia, anti-immigrant sentiment, and creeping fascism.

This crisis did not suddenly spring forth when an online “news” website misidentified the [Southport attacker](#) as a Muslim and an asylum seeker. A single piece of online misinformation cannot *cause* hate, only set it in motion. Rather, the hatred of the far-right has been stoked by the normalization of their communication strategies, such as reversed victimhood and blurred meanings, by our own governments throughout the past decade.

All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Image credit: [1000 Words](#) on Shutterstock