

# Interview with Manmit Bhambra: “Young people throughout Europe have a more liberal, more open and inclusive sense of identity”

*In the wake of global protests against racism and police brutality, Europeans have been called to address racial injustice across the continent. In an interview with EUROPP’s Managing Editor, **Manmit Bhambra** discusses what it means to be European in today’s Europe, and the crucial role of young people in shaping an anti-racist future.*

**Ylva Johansson, the European Commissioner for Home Affairs, recently stated that far too many people living in Europe still equate being European with being white. Can racism ever be addressed without first tackling issues of identity and resolving what it means to be ‘European’?**

Europe is increasingly multicultural; we see new waves of migration from different parts of the world, there are second and third generation young people growing up in a country different from that of their parents who still feel that to be European is to be white. This creates a dilemma where having a sense of belonging and being integrated are increasingly challenging. On the one hand there can be pressure for minority groups to integrate and in some cases, assimilate into European culture, but on the other hand the historical connotations of the white European remain entrenched.

Additionally, the rise in populist politics across Europe revives and exacerbates these historical tensions between ‘us’ the (white majority) and ‘them’ (minorities), which fuels racism and hate. When there is little space for a European identity that harnesses the diversity of its people, that has now been revived in its exclusivity through populist politics, it is harder to foster social cohesion, dialogue and understanding, which in my experience, have been the most powerful tools in tackling racism.

**One of the features of the Black Lives Matter movement is the prominent role that young people have played in leading demonstrations. Is there room for optimism about the role of younger generations in shaping an anti-racist future in Europe?**

All of the research I have been involved with does paint an optimistic picture. As part of the [Generation Brexit](#) research team in the LSE’s European Institute, we found overwhelmingly that young people throughout Europe have a more liberal, more open and inclusive sense of identity. Many young people have grown up in a multicultural environment, they have friends from different backgrounds, and these experiences have reinforced the importance of shared values.

These values include a rights-based approach for everyone, protection of minorities and a rejection of far-right politics. The young people I speak to are continuing to mobilise around their passion for these issues and create a powerful collective voice. I am hopeful that younger generations will shape a more inclusive, diverse Europe, but I believe strongly that this can be supported and expedited if we support and provide them with additional platforms and networks to further these goals.

**You are currently working on a project that explores how young people from faith communities navigate inter-faith relations. Has the role of faith, as a category of identity, been underestimated in academic research?**

I believe that faith, as a category of identity, is often overlooked, and underestimated in academic research. Faith is a powerful form of identity and belonging, it shapes how people understand the world around them and their own lives, it is often key in determining a person’s social world and value system.

As a sociologist, and a Sikh, I have always been interested in how the existing theories on self and group processes address religion and its role in shaping our identity; how we view ourselves and others. This is particularly salient in diverse societies, where, as I have discussed earlier, there is continuing fragmentation and tensions between, and within, communities. Faith is central to understanding how people formulate not only their religious practice, but also how they form beliefs that shape their other forms of identity too; when we discuss identity or even intersectional identities, there needs to be more attention to the *formative* nature that religion can take on other forms of identification, belonging and values that make up an individual’s psychology.

If we look at politics, here in the United Kingdom and across the world, we can see that tensions often arise around faith. Faith, belonging and acceptance are both intertwined and increasingly politicised. I believe that we need to understand, in more detail, the sociological and socio-psychological processes that lead to this. Faith needs to feature more predominantly in academic debates and in the LSE’s new [Religion and Global Society Research Unit](#), we are looking closely at how faith shapes not only personal and group identities, but the role of religion in contemporary global challenges.

**You recently contributed to a project comparing public responses to the character Ms Marvel – the alter-ego of Pakistani-American teenager Kamala Khan – in non-Muslim and Muslim Societies. What did you uncover about the role of cultural portrayals in shaping identities?**

The Ms Marvel project, [\(Re\)imagining Young Muslim Women? Comparing Public Responses to Ms Marvel in non-Muslim and Muslim Societies](#), based in the LSE’s Middle East Centre, researched how young people, both Muslim and non-Muslim, responded to the introduction of the new character of Ms Marvel, a superheroine from a minority background. We conducted research here in London, in Singapore and collaborated with researchers in Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates. Ms Marvel is part of Marvel Comic’s endeavour to diversify their characters, alongside other new characters such as Black Panther. Comics are a powerful tool where a wider audience can be introduced to the issues faced by under-represented groups through storytelling and imagery. As a woman from an ethnic minority, I welcome this diversification. I believe that having a superheroine that speaks to the challenges of growing up ‘with’ or ‘between’ two identities in a multicultural environment, gives voice to the tensions we often have to navigate.

We found that Ms Marvel was unifying around some key issues; many young people could relate to her life as a young woman growing up with common pressures from friends and family. Others could relate to her struggle to fit in and navigate her way through dual identities of being ‘American’ and being ‘Pakistani’. Ms Marvel as a character can challenge stereotypes faced by Muslim women and bring to light the similarities between their lives, which are often a source of both interest and scrutiny, and those of other young people; she can build commonality through the understanding of common experiences.

However, I do believe that there is still a need for a cultural portrayal that speaks more specifically to context specific culture and identity. That is why perhaps why we are seeing more female superheroines being introduced such as Emara in the UAE, Burka Avenger in Pakistan and Qahera in Egypt.

***Manmit Bhambra participated in an online public event hosted by the LSE’s European Institute on 12 October 2020: ‘Young People and (anti-) Racism: whose lives matter in Europe?’ A full recording of the event is available [here](#).***

---

*Note: This article gives the views of the interviewee, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [aesthetics of crisis \(CC BY-NC-SA 2.0\)](#)*

---