

RESEARCH ARTICLES

The Architecture of Race in the British Immigration and Citizenship Regime: The Figure of the Undesirable 'Other'

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Abstract. The entanglements of the colonial-imperial efforts with historical and present-day movement, dispersal and displacement of people across the globe cannot be overstated, and yet they are often overlooked in discussions of contemporary immigration policies. As once the most powerful empire in the world, Britain's immigration and citizenship regime is intimately imbricated with its colonial-imperial ambitions. The paper investigates the making of the racialised subject through movement and membership control, historically tracing the production of race in Britain's policies related to border control, immigration, citizenship and race relations. The author argues that the salience of race is sustained to a great measure through border and membership management, whose subject is marked by racial markers that are unstable and transformative, while always remaining linked to a single basic logic of racial difference.

Keywords: *race, British Empire, colonialism, immigration policy, citizenship policy*

Introduction

Historically, European empires are responsible for a great share of the transcontinental movement of goods, ideas and people that modernity has witnessed since the so-called 'age of discovery'. This includes massive flows of what today we would call 'forced migration': displacements resulting from the colonial-imperial campaigns led by European empires, often driven by their rivalry.

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Importantly, colonialism continues to shape the lives and societies of non-European ‘decolonised’ peoples, an argument that forms the backbone of postcolonial, indigenous and critical race scholars’ critique. Yet, this history remains largely unacknowledged in state and common-sense discourses related to immigration, and figures rather marginally in the literature on migration and citizenship policy. As the ‘Empire on which the sun never sets’, which once held more than two-thirds of the globe under its reign, Britain had a major role to play in this history, especially since the 1800s, and continues to do so as a major economic and military force, as well as through its position as head of the Commonwealth. The twentieth century was a tumultuous one for Britain, as not only did it mark the loss of the Empire’s position as a global imperial hegemon, but also brought colonialism ‘home’, epitomised by the rising numbers of non-white strangers arriving at the ports of England. The century also saw the birth of a consolidated border regime which from the onset was specifically focused, as this paper will demonstrate, to prevent black and brown ‘migrants’ from the (former) colonies. This regime – a composition of laws, policies and practices designed to control the borders, immigration, asylum and citizenship – was to grow more restrictive with time and remains exclusionary of poor, non-European and non-white migrants.

In the text to follow, the author will investigate the historical circumstances which gave rise to Britain’s present-day border regime, with the goal to map the ‘architecture of race’ (after Ngai 1999) embedded in British immigration and citizenship policy. The paper traces the production of race exploring policy documents, laws, parliamentary debates and secondary sources related to border control, immigration, citizenship and race relations, beginning with the earliest formal contours of the border regime in the late eighteenth century, and up until the present. The focus is, however, not on a linear narrative of the history of immigration control, but rather on the ruptures and continuities relating to the subject of such control – the racialised ‘other’. Examining this historical context opens space to argue that not only is the salience of race sustained to a great measure through border and membership management, but that the way the border regime operates – ensuring that those dispossessed by Empire remain with no claim over ‘her’ spoils (El-Enany 2020) – reflects the ongoing role of Britain as a (neo)colonial-imperial power.

The history of colonialism has been much discussed in relation to those who were subjected to it, however, its ramifications in colonising societies are under-researched (Mayblin 2014). This should be remedied, not only because colonialism



affected colonised and coloniser alike, as Albert Memmi (2013) reminds us, but also because former empires (now super powers) have actively been attempting to conceal their historical role in present-day global inequalities through campaigns of collective amnesia, historical revisionism, and even outright denial. Thankfully, scholarly awareness in this regard is rising in recent years, and the embeddedness of British governmentality in its colonial project is increasingly becoming recognized (e.g., Anderson 2013; El-Enany 2020; Mayblin 2017). However, it still remains a marginal perspective that warrants further reflection. The present paper seeks to contribute to these critical debates by investigating the making of race and the construction of the figure of the 'other' through immigration control and membership and diversity 'management'.

The birth of the British border regime

Before the early twentieth century, Britain did not have a consolidated immigration regime, and nor did most nation-states and empires of that period. Control over the movement of people across porous and scarcely guarded borders was weak and only occasionally reinforced in an *ad hoc* manner in the face of crises. During the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century, arguments towards controlling movement were largely motivated by concern with exiled revolutionaries from continental Europe, and the threat of subversive ideas they may bring along. Thus, following the French Revolution, the *Aliens Act 1793* was passed, according to Lucy Mayblin (2017, 24), to prevent potential trouble at home that French subversives may stir among the local population. This is the first time deportation has been enshrined in British law. The *Removal of Aliens Act 1848*, which further increased powers of removal, was brought in similar circumstances and served to protect Britain from refugee republican propagandists. However, the Act expired after only one year and was never used, so for the following decades Britain's metropolitan borders remained largely unregulated. The anarchist movement, which had a stronghold in London, and their increased attacks, including the assassination of the Russian Tzar and the French president Carnot, became the focus of restrictionist campaigns since the 1880s. Such was, for instance, Lord Salisbury's unsuccessful anti-Jewish *Aliens' Bill 1894* that contained a specific reference to controlling the movement of anarchists.

However, this aversion for regulating the movement of 'aliens' was soon to change. As historians document (e.g., Bashford and Gilchrist 2012), US law and the ever-increasing restrictions placed upon immigration to that country in the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the key to the introduction of immigration controls in Britain. However, a similar move among independent colonies of the 'Old Commonwealth', notably Canada and Australia, was equally crucial in prompting Britain to adopt its first comprehensive law introducing immigration control, the *Aliens Act 1905*. Domestically, the Act was designed to prevent the arrival and settlement of a particular group: the numerous Jewish people fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe and Russia. These had been arriving in Britain already since the 1880s, settling in poor, crowded neighbourhoods and stirring 'anti-alien' resentment among the locals in times when anti-Semitism in Europe was rife. The Act exempted first- and second-class passengers on ships from any control, and much like in present-day legislation, a certain amount of financial means was requested as a condition of entry. The Act was, therefore, despite anti-Jewish, also classist, continuing the tradition of centuries of control and restriction of the movement of the underclass, which until this day remains a fundamental underlying logic of immigration control, to which Britain is admittedly not an exception (see Anderson 2013 for this history).

Crucially, the *Aliens Act 1905* is a watershed in British immigration history, as it paved the way for further development of a restrictive and racialising immigration apparatus that began to take its familiar shape since the post-war period. The Act was swept away by the outbreak of the First World War, which carried along anxieties in the face of disorder, economic crisis, and 'enemy aliens' arriving on the British shore. The war increased the salience of nationalist sentiment and the accompanying need to exclude non-members, with a dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' immigrants developing in public discourse. Immigrants of German origin were, therefore, particularly targeted by a new legislation introduced at the onset of the war, the *Aliens Restriction Act 1914*. On the basis of the Act, around 20,000 Germans in Britain were exiled and further 32,000 people classified as 'enemy aliens' were interned (Kushner and Knox 1999, 45). Importantly, in its integral text and in the overall debate surrounding its introduction, immigrants were presented as enemies and a threat to the 'safety of the realm', and the Act's purpose was to enable border control in times of 'imminent national danger'. In this sense, it represents the early roots of a securitising discourse which portrays immigrants as a potential threat to national security as a justification for restriction and control – a phenomenon that is usually discussed in the literature only in relation to the post-Cold War context (e.g., Huysmans 2000; Bigo 2002; Walters 2010).

Before the Second World War, therefore, the relatively lax control of



Britain's internal (metropolitan) border was directed primarily at citizens of enemy countries, political exiles,² Jewish refugees, and the poor. The mobility of Empire's non-white subjects was yet to draw the attention of Parliament, for the simple reason that there were very few arrivals from Britain's possessions to the metropole up until this moment. Rather than restricting their movement, the government in fact reasserted the rights of colonised subjects when it introduced the *British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act 1914* to replace the *Naturalisation Act 1870*. It brought forth a broad definition of who is considered a British subject, and had the purpose of reasserting Britain's hegemony over its dominions and maximise the reach of its colonial rule (c.f. El-Enany 2020). Subjecthood followed from allegiance to the Crown and virtually everybody born on any of the territories under British rule was included under the Act. However, the Act did not exclude the authorities in the colonies 'from treating differently different classes of British subjects' (Section 26[1]).

An era of anti-black migration control

The post-war arrival of people from the British colonies is a significant period, because it opened way to a new era of borders, strict control of movement, and racialisation of non-European 'others'. The post-war wave of restrictionist immigration policy is well documented in the literature (Spencer 2002; Karatani 2003; Hampshire 2005; Small and Solomos 2006; Mayblin 2017; El-Enany 2020). Here we will focus rather on interpreting these events in light of how they constructed the image of the 'other', the unwanted immigrant. As Small and Solomos argue (2006, 238), while until the 1940s issues of race were discussed behind closed doors and with an awareness of the potential political embarrassment they may cause, since the 1950s race came to dominate the political agenda and immigration was subjected to explicit racialisation. Scholars agree that the political consensus of this period was to restrict immigration, especially 'coloured' migration from the former colonies (Solomos 2003; Spencer 2002; El-Enany 2020). The one exception was the largely liberal *Nationality Act 1948*, which afforded British citizenship to over 850

² While the debates in parliament and the legislation adopted at the time confirm there was concern, in face of European revolutions, that exiles may cause similar disorder in Britain, England was otherwise known as an attractive safe haven for political dissidents throughout the nineteenth century. Some of the most famous exiles who settled in London include the French socialist Louis Blanc, the Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini, the leader of the Hungarian independence movement Lajos Kossuth, and Karl Marx.

million people worldwide, including those in independent Commonwealth countries and those in the British colonies.³ However, the Act was but a powerful symbolic gesture, which sought to sustain the myth of imperial unity and equality in the effort to hold together what remained of a collapsing Empire. No one in Parliament at the time had the faintest expectation that it would prompt in the course of the following decade the arrival of around half a million of racialised subjects, escaping the ravaged economies mainly in the West Indies.

The British government responded to this newly arisen situation with an explicitly racially targeted legislation to curb the arrival of non-whites and, thus, preserve the white character of the country. The first such law was the *Commonwealth Immigration Act 1962*. While retaining the status of Citizenship of the United Kingdom and Colonies, it ended the automatic right of abode, and entry was now based on where the subjects' passport was issued. Effectively, this meant that the majority of non-white British citizens throughout the world were treated as aliens for the purpose of immigration control. White citizens born in Britain or Ireland were exempted from control, while white Commonwealth migrants were subject to favourable conditions. In this way, the Act enshrined in law the association between Britishness and whiteness, one that further acts will reinforce. This association was central to much of the debates surrounding immigration laws introduced between the 1960s and the 1980s. Terms like 'kith and kin' or 'bone and blood' used by MPs to refer to whites in the 'Old Commonwealth' (white settler societies) witness to the centrality of the idea of whiteness in Britain's self-narrative.⁴

It was at about this time that the question of *integration* of black immigrants, and increasingly their children, came to the fore, partly as a result of Labour's effort to balance restrictionist immigration legislation. A series of legislation governing what came to be known as 'race relations' was introduced in 1965, 1968 and 1976. The *Race Relations Acts* were envisaged to ban discrimination based on race, colour or ethnicity and to promote a greater equality of opportunity.⁵ However, they were based on the logic that while *some* public and *some* police were racist, the system as a whole and its institutions were certainly not. This 'one rotten apple orthodoxy' (Bourne 2001) was embedded within a general post-colonial amnesia and a

³ A total of 48 territories, including the metropole.

⁴ These tropes resurfaced decades later in the context of Brexit in statements by Leave campaigners, notably Nigel Farage, the then leader of the UK Independence Party.

⁵ Immigration law itself was never and is still not subject to anti-racial discrimination provisions.



complete lack of acknowledgement of the deep roots of racism in the British imperial ambitions for an economic and racial supremacy over the world. Crucially, the developments towards legally preventing racial discrimination must be understood in conjunction with a simultaneous restrictive and racially targeted immigration policy, as they were based on the idea that racial equality can only be achieved if the numbers of blacks present in the country are kept at the lowest possible minimum. Simultaneously, the adoption since the 1960s of 'race relations' measures intended to outlaw racial discrimination could only be 'enforced' upon white Britons, it was argued, if accompanied with the strictest immigration control, enforced through racist legislation specifically targeting non-whites. This philosophy of stopping racism through racist measures is best captured in Labour MP Roy Hattersley's phrase: 'Without integration, limitation is inexcusable; without limitation, integration is impossible' (as cited in Miles and Phizacklea 1984, 57). There was a remarkable consensus on this subject between the mainstream left and right that marked the post-war politics of race and immigration in Britain.

By 1968, foreign-born arrivals from the Commonwealth accounted for about 2.4 per cent of the general population. Further restrictions of non-white immigration ensued to assuage a public growing restless and increasingly hostile to 'coloured immigrants', by adopting the *Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968*. This piece of legislation was devised with a very particular group as its target, South Asians in East Africa. Having found themselves targets of persecution during the national awakening process in Africa (for failing to fit the criteria for national membership devised in Europe, and chaotically applied throughout the newly decolonised world), they increasingly fled to the metropole during the 1960s. The Act introduced an ancestral link to the country as a condition for the right to enter Britain, again fixating Britishness as whiteness. It exempted from migration control those citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies who were either born in or had a parent or grandparent born in Britain, meaning that white settlers in the dominions would remain allowed to enter Britain. The precariousness of membership in the British polity for non-white citizens was proved once more: the Act effectively made stateless around 200,000 East African Asians, who possessed no other passport than the British one, and deprived more than a million individuals in British possessions worldwide of their right to enter Britain. The effects were exacerbated with the adoption of the *Immigration Act 1971*, which definitively ended the right of colony and Commonwealth citizens to enter Britain, and reinstated the link between Britishness and whiteness by introducing the criterion of 'patriality'. As Kathleen Paul

summarizes, the Act reconfigured British subjecthood by differentiating in legal terms ‘between the familial community of Britishness composed of the truly British – those descended from white colonisers – and the political community of Britishness composed of people who had become British through conquest or dominion’ (Paul 1997, 181).

The 1970s saw an unprecedented economic decline and unemployment, a burgeoning conflict in Northern Ireland, and the issue of immigration only gained in salience. There was an increasing criminalisation of black youth, as the dominant concern among the establishment became the children of Commonwealth immigrants – the so-called alienated West Indian youth – and their perceived failure to succeed in employment and education. Racial tensions were rising amidst a wide anti-immigrant campaign carried out by the neo-Nazi National Front. In 1979 Margaret Thatcher, the ‘Iron Lady’, became a Prime Minister following a harsh election campaign with promises of ever more restrictions on immigration, partially in an effort to attract National Front sympathizers. Martin Barker describes how in this period the discourse of ‘new racism’ enabled the Conservative Party to focus on immigration, perceived as an agent of the destruction of the British nation, and to theorise the idea that every national or ethnic community is neither superior nor inferior, but different (Barker 1982, 24).

The year 1981 saw the eruption of riots throughout England, most notably in London, Liverpool and Birmingham, in response to rising poverty, unemployment and housing deficits in neighbourhoods where Commonwealth minorities lived. The same year, a landmark legislation, the *British Nationality Act 1981*, was introduced by Thatcher’s government, which El-Enany appropriately describes as ‘the final act of colonial appropriation’ (2020, Chapter 3). It effectively drew, for the first time, a geographical boundary around Britain as distinct from its colonies and the Commonwealth and introduced at last the institution of British citizenship as national citizenship. This was a major shift in a country built around a global imperial multi-racial identity. In spite of the title of the Act, however, ‘nationality’ was not the issue at stake. As Karatani (2003, 182–87) documents, the Act was introduced as a ‘means of immigration control which would not be seen as racially discriminatory’, given how favourable treatment of citizens by their own government was by then internationally accepted as legitimate (as opposed to racist discrimination). To replace the status of Citizenship of United Kingdom and Colonies a new confusing hierarchy was invented, comprising three distinct classes of citizens, only one of which had automatic right of abode. The privileged ones in the first class, those with



a 'paternal' claim, are described as those who are 'closely connected to' and those who 'belong' to Britain. Naturally, the millions of people in the imperial possessions around the world, who have been assimilated into British culture by way of colonial dispossession, were not considered to have a connection to Britain for these purposes. Those who 'belong' were again reasserted as whites.

Coloniality and the politics of asylum

Throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, Britain had a reputation of being open to refugees, particularly those fleeing political persecution. Britain was one of the founders of the United Nations and among the first signatories of the Geneva Convention of 1951, which formalised the right to claim asylum internationally. However, the British government was hostile to non-European refugees already during the preparations of the Geneva convention. Extensive sources exist that suggest the Geneva Convention was informed by the experience of the massive displacement of Europeans during the two world wars and that Western powers did not have any anticipations that non-Europeans should or would benefit from these rights (c.f. Mayblin 2014). Yet Europeans were far from the only refugees at the time: historical events resulting from colonial manoeuvring, such as the partition of India, displaced millions of people at about the same period. Yet, Britain, and other colonial powers, loudly objected the inclusion of colonial subjects not only in the Geneva Convention, but also in the European Convention on Human Rights (1948) which preceded it. In the end, the pressures on the part of colonial empires, headed by Britain, to exclude colonial populations from protection under the Refugee Convention succeeded, despite much resistance on the part of other UN members, mostly newly independent former colonies. A territorial application clause was included that allowed states to decide whether to extend the Convention to all their territories (Article 40, paragraph 1). As Mayblin (2014) documents, at the time of ratification, Britain extended the Convention only to the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, leaving the remainder of its dependencies without recourse to protection under the Convention. This history helps not only to debunk the 'myth of difference' mentioned earlier, but also to illuminate Britain's present-day asylum policy and show how profoundly embedded it is in the white supremacist project that is colonialism.

The earlier reputation of openness to refugees began to fade along with the salience of the Cold War. From the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s,

immigration in public debate was largely discussed in relation to what was being perceived as an increase in asylum seekers. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the Yugoslav wars and armed conflicts in Africa indeed contributed to greater movement from these regions toward Western Europe. This coincided with a significant increase in deportations in Britain, which thus far had only been carried out sporadically. Deportation of unsuccessful asylum seekers and other undocumented persons were significantly facilitated under the *Immigration Act 1988*, which effectively withdrew the right of appeal before an independent body and gave immigration officers greater powers. The Act ended the right to automatic entry of dependants of Commonwealth citizens who settled before 1973, and thus effectively halted nearly all immigration from Commonwealth countries. The restriction of access to welfare became a persisting trait of subsequent immigration and asylum policy.

The Labour government after 1997 presided over two diverging patterns: a liberalisation of (mainly high skilled) labour and family immigration, and a simultaneous restriction of asylum, accompanied by criminalisation of asylum seekers and their deprivation of social rights. Further legislation reinforced deportation and detention capacities and had asylum seekers forcefully dispersed across the country to poor and remote regions where they met with a hostile reception. Helping asylum seekers gain entry into Britain and employing workers without regularised status were now criminal offences, leading to a widespread hesitation to hire any immigrants. By this time, it was the image of the brown and/or Muslim asylum seeker that embodied the imminent threat to be addressed when policymakers were devising new immigration legislation.

Britain today is a country with one of the most restrictive asylum policies in Europe. Not only is asylum extremely hard to be claimed and those who fail are being detained for prolonged periods or deported to unsafe countries, but those who do manage to make a claim are being kept destitute through banning them from working, travelling, or even living in a city of their choosing. Britain is also the only country amid its former EU club where detention can last potentially indefinitely. The detention of children is legal in Britain and while it was very rare during the 1990s, during the 2000s each year about 2,000 children were detained with their families (Silverman, Griffiths, and Walsh 2020). The vast majority of asylum seekers in Britain come from its former colonies, which illustrates, as El-Enany (2020, Chapter 4) reminds us, how restrictionist and anti-black immigration policies from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s made the asylum route the only viable option for many.

'Managed migration', domopolitics, and securitisation of the border

Throughout the 1990s, a novel approach to the governance of the border regime was introduced, which strengthened a neoliberal logic of governmentality. Britain's reorientation from a welfare state and social citizenship towards a neoliberal state characterized by individualism, consumerism and enterprise had been shaped under Thatcher's New Right doctrine in the 1980s. New Labour – the Labour governments under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown in the period from 1997 to 2010 – embraced the idea of individual responsibility and like their Conservative predecessors aimed to end 'dependency culture' among those at social risk. This neoliberal worldview was translated in immigration policy under the narrative of 'managed migration'. At its core was a logic not of general restriction, but rather a strict selection of immigrants based on filtering particular 'desired' groups, and firmly closing the doors for others. Under 'managed migration', the securitised border acted as a filter, excluding 'undesirable' migrants, while simultaneously allowing the flow of goods and skilled people required by neoliberal capitalism (Lonergan 2018). Those migrants that displayed neoliberal qualities, such as autonomy, independence, economic productivity and entrepreneurial spirit were desirable. For the rest, notably those with low or no skills and little funds at disposal, as well as those fleeing persecution, there were few legal ways to settle in Britain, particularly since 2008, when the unskilled immigrant route was officially closed. Thus, since the 1990s racialised populations were no longer excluded directly through racist laws, but indirectly through a classist system which, in a postcolonial world, translates in open doors for whites from highly developed countries and closed doors for those in the so-called Global South. Immigrants now must 'earn' their right to enter and settle, but race remains a core element of the regulation of human movement, precisely because of this intersection between race and class.

As Sparke (2006) theorises, this trend which Britain shares with other wealthy countries, is a result of combining a securitised nationalism with free-market transnationalism. In other words, when the needs of capitalism for mobility of highly qualified labour meet with the self-preserving need of the nation state (to keep the population as homogenous as possible by discriminating against non-citizens), economically and culturally undesirable groups are demobilised through an increasingly securitised expansion of the border. Walters (2004) calls this link between the securitisation of the border and the calculated inclusion of

economically contributing foreigners ‘domopolitics’. Domopolitical policies and discourses produce the UK as the ‘national home’ of ‘neoliberal citizens’, and those who arrive must be monitored and disciplined to ensure ‘good behaviour’ along these expectations. Social rights are no longer a matter of entitlement – they now must be earned. Immigrants now must prove they are deserving of the right to enter and settle by showing how industrious, self-managing, entrepreneurial, hard-working they are; in short, they are now expected to be nothing short of ‘super citizens’. Thus, while immigration policy under New Labour was indeed relaxed – albeit in very selective ways and with a very restrictive approach towards asylum, as discussed above – the securitisation of immigration and of the border reached its zenith. Labour’s domopolitics rationalized a series of security measures in the name of a particular conception of Britain as the ‘home of neoliberal citizens’ (Lonergan 2018). Immigrants’ detention, which had thus far been rare, was greatly expanded as a result of the *Immigration and Asylum Act 1999*. This practice suddenly increased the need for places, which resulted in a massive expansion of detention centres, many of them managed by private companies for profit.⁶ Immigration policy and anti-terrorism policy became more and more entangled, especially since the 9/11 attacks in New York in 2001. Not only migration, but citizenship is also becoming securitised, as the loss of this *privilege* is now increasingly framed in the context of ‘betrayal’ of ‘British’ values through succumbing to Islamist fundamentalism. Britain leads globally in citizenship deprivation (Macklin and Bauböck 2015).

In sum, both immigration and asylum policy in Britain is subjected since the 1990s to the logic of a new ‘neoliberal authoritarianism’, where borders are supposedly more open to the movement of goods and people, but only within a global expansion of what some authors have recently been calling the ‘border industrial complex’ (Smith 2019; Arbogast 2016; Brotherton and Kretsedemas 2017; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2018). While what is considered useful to capitalist expansion is allowed across borders, simultaneously we are witnessing an increasing system of mass surveillance, an expansion of the border in everyday life, and the sprawling of an increasingly privatised and profiteering system of control, detention and deportation. The justification for this border reinforcement is based on the narrative of national security, which links human mobility to questions of national sovereignty and is increasingly framed within the context of the global ‘war

⁶ The UK was an early privatiser of immigration detention already since the 1970s: seven of the eight long-term detention centres (now euphemistically named ‘immigration removal centres’ or IRCs) are run for profit. They are exempt from minimum wage legislation.



on terror'. This narrative, however, has remained entangled in culturalist and racist presuppositions, which paint Muslims who migrate(d) to Western countries as the prime suspect. In this constellation, it is asylum seekers (who increasingly come from predominantly Muslim countries) that replaced Commonwealth citizens in the position of the racialised subject in the discourse of immigration both in Britain and, more widely, in the Euro-American sphere. In the UK, these anti-Muslim anxieties were embodied in more racial tensions, such as the riots in Bradford in 1995 and in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford in 2001, where the protagonist was now no longer the Afro-Caribbean, but Muslim youth.

Racism, immigration and Brexit

Following the 2004 EU enlargement, when the majority of nation-states in Eastern and Central Europe were admitted as members to the Union, concerns about the consequences of EU free movement came to the fore in British public discourse. The inequalities between the North and West, on the one hand, and the East and South, on the other, led millions of EU citizens to take advantage of the free movement rule and relocate in parts of the EU where their labour would be better valued. The numbers of those who moved to Britain far exceeded the government's expectations: in the 15 years since the 2004 enlargement, the foreign-born population nearly doubled to reach 9.3 million (14 per cent of the total population) in 2018 (Vargas-Silva and Rienzo 2019, 3). Although overall non-EU migrants still outnumbered EU migrants, it was Poland that was the leading country of origin among immigrants (about 9%), followed by India, Pakistan, Romania and Ireland (Vargas-Silva and Rienzo 2019, 2–4). The increasing presence of these European internal 'others' brought to the surface the workings of a within-Europe hierarchy based on an East-West binary rooted in a narrative opposing the progressiveness of the West to the backwardness of the East. Just as the end of the Cold War opened space for the construction of the figure of the Muslim asylum seeker as the racialised 'other', so EU enlargement brought about a new 'other' on which to emit racial anxieties: the Eastern European immigrant.

Particularly since the 2008 global financial crisis, the issue of immigration became one of the most salient political issues and a strong anti-immigrant sentiment was present among the general public (Carvalho, Eatwell, and Wunderlich 2015). Half of all respondents in a survey conducted in 2008 thought the government should encourage immigrants to return from where they came (Ipsos MORI 2008),

and by 2011, two thirds were in support of tougher immigration controls (Ipsos MORI 2011). There was a general idea, not corresponding to reality, that the numbers of immigrants and asylum seekers in Britain were unparalleled and much higher than the rest of Europe. Although EU migration was largely out of the government's control, migration from new members such as Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia was subject to so-called 'transitional controls' – 'a form of everyday re-bordering of the de-bordered space of the EU' (Cassidy 2020) that effectively created a hierarchy of EU citizenship. The government, while trailing in the footsteps of New Labour's domopolitics 'to attract the brightest and the best' (Conservative Party 2010), but rebranding it with a more restrictionist and nativist discourse, gave in to an obsession with numbers. The 'optimal' number of immigrants can be calculated, it was argued, and it was anything below 100,000 a year, with little substantiation of why this number was chosen. From then on, all policy and legislation introduced has been subjected to this goal, most important of which was the introduction of annual limits to non-EU immigrants.

The following decade immigration to Britain was subjected to significant restrictions of an already restrictive regime. These had the purpose to bar poorer and less educated candidates from settling in Britain, but it wasn't only economic concerns that drove this process: increasingly, Conservative's immigration politics adopted culturalist tones implicating migration control with the project of nation-building. For instance, spouses of people settled in Britain now had to prove good knowledge of English, because immigrants unable to speak English were argued to have created 'a kind of discomfort and disjointedness' that has allegedly disrupted communities across Britain, as David Cameron stated in 2011 (as cited in Robinson 2013). In 2013, a mandatory 'integration test' was introduced for applicants for long-term settlement or naturalisation, called 'Life in the UK', that is supposed to familiarise immigrants with the local way of life.⁷ Racist and culturalist undertones permeated Theresa May's infamous 'Hostile environment policy', introduced in 2012. The policy was a product of a deeply xenophobic state-sanctioned hostility towards 'illegal' foreigners, designed to make staying in the UK as difficult as possible in the hope that target individuals will 'voluntarily leave'. The new 'hostile' regime was responsible, together with the intentionally ambiguous anti-black immigration laws from the 1960s-1980s, for the so-called Windrush scandal, which included

⁷ As an indicator for the official policy of collective amnesia, the word 'colonialism' does not figure in the textbook meant to prepare test-takers, even though a significant part of its content is dedicated to the history of Britain and its dependencies.



deportations of hundreds of people from the former British colonies, who had settled in the UK half a century earlier, as well as the loss of housing, access to health services and access to benefits for many more. These measures were later integrated in the *Immigration Acts* of 2014 and 2016, which, among other things, further expanded the border by forcing schools, universities, landlords, hospitals and other civilians to act as border guards under the threat of punishment if lending services to undocumented foreigners. In a nearly surreal attack on human rights, a new criminal offence of ‘illegal working’ was created, which enabled undocumented workers’ wages to be confiscated as ‘proceeds of crime’. Life for those unable to prove a legal stay, including unsuccessful asylum seekers, stateless persons, Commonwealth immigrants who arrived before the 1970s, and ‘overstayers’ was, thus, made short of impossible.

It was in this sort of *environment*, charged with nativist, xenophobic, and racist undertones, that the question of EU membership, actively pushed by interest groups since the early 1990s, finally came to the fore and culminated with the vote to leave the EU on 23 June 2016. The entire campaign revolved around the question of curbing immigration. The nationalist slogan ‘we want our country back’ became a powerful rallying cry, portraying immigrants as an enemy who needs to be expelled. The Leave campaign capitalised on demonising not only Eastern European migrants, especially Romanians,⁸ but also the usual culprit – Muslims. The whole discourse was embedded in a deep colonial nostalgia, which led leavers (notably UKIP’s Nigel Farage) to call for ‘re-embracing of the Commonwealth’ as a way to rebuild Britain’s lost imperial glory. The whiteness assumed under ‘Britishness’, underscored in the many laws governing migration and citizenship that we discussed above, reached its clearest form in the debates surrounding Brexit, which itself was a lamentation of a supposedly lost white supremacy. The prejudice exhibited towards EU migrants from countries like Poland, Romania, Latvia and Bulgaria shows how whiteness comes in shades. The message conveyed is that the orientalist Eastern Europeans, having been deprived of the civilising Enlightenment, with their burden of the socialist past, their lack of experience with democracy, and their economic ‘backwardness’, can never be properly white, or even proper Europeans.

Subsequent scholarly analyses of the whys and hows of Brexit tend to stress the profile of Leave voters and, thus, rationalise it as a consequence of the plight of

⁸ UKIP’s then leader Nigel Farage once declared: ‘Any normal and fair-minded person would have a perfect right to be concerned if a group of Romanian people suddenly moved in next door’ (BBC, 16 May 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-27459923>).

the (white) working class, terrified at the prospect of economic insecurity and losing jobs to immigrants (e.g., Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017). While those with lower education and out of employment were indeed more likely to vote leave, the 'methodological whiteness' (Bhambra 2017a) in this perspective erases the significance of racism and of the sense of white superiority drawn from the imperial 'golden times' that drive both anti-immigrant sentiments and the desire for 'independence' from EU. As Gurminder Bhambra (2017b, 91) reminds us, the focus on 'poor white English people' points to an analysis of class that is deeply racialised and ethnicised and this reading neglects the racialised workings of the capitalist economic system. The vote to leave the EU and the circumstances in which it unfolded, thus, cannot be separated from the peculiar intertwining of the national and the colonial projects in the British case.

Conclusion

This paper traced the figure of the 'other' in British immigration regime. Since the onset, this regime was always particular with regards to its target group – the undesirable outsider who was conceived as posing some kind of threat to the imperialist core. This role would shift from one racialised body to another, along with the socio-political concerns of the day, and, more broadly, in line with Britain's wider colonial ambitions. From the French subversive after the French revolution, the anarchist in late nineteenth century, the Eastern-European Jewish exile in the early twentieth century, to the German enemy during the First World War, these outsiders would set the pace for the racially targeted immigration legislation that will follow in the wake of the post-war world.

The construction of this figure of the undesirable 'other' would take thereon an explicitly racial form, first embodied in the black West Indian and the brown East Asian in the post-war period, then in the feared Muslim from the 1980s, and finally, in the orientalist Eastern European in the years preceding the break from the EU. Of course, these figures coexist simultaneously and together feed the imagination of racial difference, the salience of one over the other only fluctuating contextually. For instance, if blacks from the former colonies embodied *the* undesirable 'migrant' in the decades after the Second World War, at the dawn of Brexit they were part of 'us'. In the narrative of the Leave campaign, the good example for their successful 'integration' was activated as a weapon against the alleged opposing dis-integration



of Muslims and the detriment of cheap workforce for white British workers that EU free movement supposedly entailed. Yet, not long before, in public discourse black Britons were the epitome of criminality, joblessness and failure. And having to navigate on an everyday level a space reserved for a white 'us' affirms the precariousness of their belonging that, once thought achieved, can so abruptly be re-denied, as the Windrush scandal demonstrated.

Importantly, the making of racial difference through immigration and citizenship governmentality is deeply imbricated with another system of oppression: that of class and the capitalist order. Although since New Labour's 'managed migration' regime and Thatcher's neoliberal doctrine that preceded it classism may seem to have become dominant for its role in the control over movement and access to national membership, the effects of class difference are inseparable from those of racial difference. The larger side of the globe that is home to the world's poor is also the realm of formerly colonised non-whites. It is, in fact, their century-long exploitation at the hands of European colonisers that have brought them on the lower end of the euphemistically termed 'development scale'. Therefore, replacing racist legislation with laws targeting the poor still leaves roughly the same populations without access to the wealth Britain has amassed on the backs of their ancestors. Moreover, the accent on the 'best and brightest' and the construction of the desirable immigrant as the wealthy, highly educated, entrepreneurial foreigner remain – considering the extreme global inequalities along the North-South line – a politically correct way to describe white immigrants from the Global North. As such it serves to conceal, while actively reinforcing, the salience of racial difference.

Race and class, therefore, are integral to the logic of Britain's immigration and citizenship regime. Through their intersection, grades of differences are produced between the white and the racialised, the wealthy and the poor, the unwanted and the desirable immigrant. Today, for all its multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural composition, Britain remains a 'white man's country' (Miles and Phizacklea 1984). At least that is the message conveyed in public discourses on migration, in immigration and citizenship policy and law, and as the case of Brexit shows, in geopolitics and foreign relations, too. Non-whites, both immigrants and citizens, are visibly present, but for all intents and purposes, they do not and cannot count Britain as their 'home'. They are, to use C.L.R. James' expression, *in* but not *of* Britain (after Hall 2003). If the racist measures undertaken in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were explicitly conceived to keep non-whites away from the metropole, since the 1990s racialised populations are being excluded more implicitly through a classist

neoliberal system, driven by surveillance technologies and a securitising narrative, which effectively keeps out poor, non-European non-whites. But their exclusion is but one of the effects, a more dangerous one being the very production of difference through discourses and practices governing entry and membership, where race as a category of difference is not only being used as a basis for exclusion, but is simultaneously being reinvented, redefined, reinforced.

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