Nationalism, postcolonial criticism and the state

Charles Leddy-Owen

Introduction

This chapter explores nationalism and racism by way of a crosspollination of two broad fields of scholarship – postcolonial criticism and nationalism studies – that discuss many of the same social and political patterns, yet generally talk past one another. The first section will introduce postcolonial criticism – as a school of thought that I would suggest is hegemonic in contemporary scholarship of race – which accuses dominant historical and sociological accounts of eliding the central role in modernity played by colonialism and racism. The second section will introduce the nationalism studies literature by way of five of this field’s seminal books, before employing postcolonial perspectives to critique their accounts of nationalism and its modern emergence. The lamp will then be turned the other way and some gaps in the postcolonialism literature illuminated by way of insights from the nationalism studies literature regarding political agency and the state in contemporary society. The final main section will bring this discussion to bear on recent analyses of those who voted in favour of Brexit in the UK’s 2016 referendum on EU membership. It will be argued that the two dominant academic explanations for these voters’ motivations – one positing structural racism, the other a cultural/values divide – could benefit considerably from closer attention to the concept of nationalism in general and, within the field of nationalism studies, to John Breuilly’s analysis of nationalism as a form of politics.

In what follows, the term nationalism refers to ‘a political principle that holds that the national and political unit should be congruent’ (Gellner, 2008/1983, p.1) in relation to which ‘the interests and values of [the] nation take priority over all other interests and values’ (Breuilly, 1993, p.3). Nationalism thus holds that state and nation should be brought into union and that the nation should be prioritised politically by its members and state. The term is therefore not ‘a covering term for objectionable ethnic chauvinism’ (Hearn, 2017, p.20) or ideas surrounding national uniqueness and superiority but, rather, something far more mundane and prevalent – what has been described by some scholars (Billig, 1995; Malešević, 2006) as the dominant political ideology of our time.

Postcolonialism

The basic, core argument made in postcolonial criticism is that most social theorists and historians are guilty, to varying extents, of omitting or evading the critically important role of
colonialism and racism in shaping societies and political structures, past and present. In particular, they argue that the emergence of modern statehood, new forms of political solidarity and national identities in Europe and the West between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries must not be portrayed as isolated processes. Such portrayals obscure the ‘colonial entanglements’ (Bhambra, 2014, p.2) that are fundamental to Western modernity, thereby eliding ‘the processes of colonialism, enslavement, dispossession and appropriation that constitute the conditions of [modern Europe’s] very possibility’ (Bhambra, 2014, p.152). These conditions are partly economically exploitative in character – as Fanon (2001/1961, p.81) famously argues, having ‘stuffed herself inordinately with the gold and raw materials of the colonial countries … Europe is literally the creation of the Third World’ – but they also co-constitutively relate to modern subjectivities and the cultural imagination (e.g. McClintock, 1995). In an eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe saturated ‘by representations of the imperial world and its peoples’ (Hall & Rose, 2006, p.15), racial hierarchies set up ‘others’ against which constructions of ‘home’ and emerging national identities could be defined. During this period, ‘[t]he idea of race … was to become so widespread as to be part of the “taken-for-granted” world in which the people of the metropole lived their lives’ (Hall & Rose, 2006, p.8), as emerging white identities became ‘tacitly and emphatically coded by race’ (Stoler, 1995, p.7). This was partly achieved through crude racist stereotyping and othering, but also more subtly (from white perspectives at least) through moralising ‘Victorian’ discourses bound up with bourgeois sexuality and notions of ‘self-mastery’ (Stoler, 1995, p.8).

From this kind of analytic perspective, therefore, colonialism was crucial for the development of the peculiarly modern forms of ‘solidarity, identification and belonging’ (Gilroy, 2004, p.158) which Gilroy associates with ‘the distinctive institutional ecology of national states’ (ibid, p.x). Here, the key role assumed by the increasingly powerful and pervasive state – a role argued to be fundamental to its very development as the modern state – was to defend its population from heterogeneity, hybridity and the racial degeneration these were feared to provoke (Stoler, 1995, p.134; Goldberg, 2002). It was through racial frameworks that the state classified and regulated its beholden populations, home and abroad, with women, the working classes, and ethnic and religious minority groups such as Jews and the Irish variously and unevenly racially othered in Western contexts, while similarly intersectional processes rendered the white, bourgeois male explicitly or implicitly racially superior within the national mythology. Though varyingly racist in character from instance to instance, the modern European and colonial nation-state was therefore fundamentally racial (Goldberg, 2002). Paradigmatically racist manifestations such as Nazi Germany or apartheid South Africa might be qualitatively distinct in the degree of their racism, but it would be a mistake to treat them as ‘aberrant offshoots’ (Stoler, 1995, p.9) given the racial roots of modern statehood and nationhood.

What postcolonial scholars thus aim to provide is ‘a counter-history of modernity which comprehends it in its readily racialised forms’ (Gilroy, 2004, p.x). While the mainstream social sciences and humanities have been institutionally and methodologically geared towards ‘favouring scholars, questions, theories and concepts derived from a (putatively) European – and “Northern” – experience to make sense of the “Rest”’ (Rutazibwa & Shilliam, 2018, p.2), postcolonialism aims to pull the curtain away from such universalist pretensions and Eurocentrism. It critiques the methodological nationalism by which nations are assumed to be ‘the natural social and political form of the modern world’ (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002, p.302) in favour of more cosmopolitan political and methodological outlooks, and it critiques the methodological whiteness that positions national polities and populations of the West as
historically distinct from, rather than formatively related to, the global and multiracial empires from which these states sprung (Bhambra, 2017a, p.224).

Postcolonial criticism therefore poses a significant challenge to the social sciences and humanities. As Rutazibwa and Shilliam (2018, p.1) state,

At a minimum, postcolonial critique stretches our imagining of what politics does and should entail. At a maximum, postcolonial critique impels us to pluralise, enrich and even rethink the methods, methodologies, concepts, actors and narratives we deploy in order to make sense of global politics.

Many of the above-cited authors can be placed towards the maximal end of the scale. Their conclusions are resoundingly anti-nationalist and cosmopolitan in making future-oriented calls for a more democratic future built on ‘new collective endeavours’ (Bhambra, 2014, p.156) and a novel, anti-racist political language (Gilroy, 2004, p.335). The normative consequence of postcolonial criticism for the contemporary world is the political requirement for a reconfiguring of state and society, particularly in places where both seem unwilling or unable to reckon with colonial histories and violence. And it is especially by unearthing and enabling the rearticulation (Bhambra, 2014, p.132) of the subordinated histories and knowledges of those who have experienced and resisted the violence of racial hierarchies that alternative social and political imaginaries can come to the surface, whether through indigenous cultures (De Sousa Santos, 2016), critical archival research (Gilroy, 2004) or everyday sociabilities in contemporary multiethnic cities (Nayak, 2003).

Nationalism studies

This section looks at five studies of modern nationalism which are, both in terms of citations and I would argue general influence, the most important book-length contributions to the post-1980’s resurgence of academic interest in nationalisms’ origins and spread – namely, Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities, Ernest Gellner’s Nations and Nationalism, Anthony Smith’s The Ethnic Origins of Nations, Eric Hobsbawm’s Nations and Nationalism Since 1780 and John Breuilly’s Nationalism and the State. While critiquing these five texts from postcolonial perspectives, and then returning the favour, will not enable a comprehensive treatment of this huge field, I would suggest that even a partial attempt will be useful given the remarkable lack of cross-fertilisation between these areas of study. It is rare for studies concerned with postcolonialism, or racism more generally, to cite scholars of nationalism – other than, occasionally, Anderson – and, as will be demonstrated, this nationalism literature has some apparent gaps in its account of modernity with regard to colonialism. What follows in this section is a necessarily brief summary of these five authors’ accounts of what modern nationalism is, how and where it emerged and, when discussed, what some of the social and political legacies of this history are for the present day.

Each of these books is centred in one way or another on analysing how modern revolutions – broadly and roughly those named ‘industrial’ and ‘French’, and that concerned with the development of the centralised state – related to emerging nationalist states and identifications from the late eighteenth century. Gellner argues that ‘nationalism is a product of industrial social organisation’ (Özkirimli, 2010, p.102). The shift from an agrarian to an industrialised society in Europe led to a functional requirement for a national ‘high culture’ providing ‘standardised, literacy- and education-based systems of communication’ (Gellner, 2008/1983, p.53) which, with state support, came to pervade and define modern society
( Özkırmılı, 2010, p.100). For earlier, more horizontally stratified agrarian societies, absent of the context of industrialisation, nations and their standardised cultures are unnecessary social formations. Anderson similarly lays responsibility for nationalism at the feet of revolutionary economic and technological shifts and their cultural impact. He argues that an emerging ‘print capitalism’ helped to standardise and diffuse vernacular languages within specific territories among the rising classes therein (Anderson, 1991, Chapter 3), transforming the social perspectives of these populations by enabling the imagination of and identification with national communities most of whose members would never be encountered. With ‘religious modes of thought’ declining, a sense of the nation moving through history in relation to an immemorial past (despite its radical novelty) provides ‘a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning’ (ibid, p.11). Something unique to Anderson’s account is the claim that Latin American Creole communities in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries preceded European nationalism.

Hobsbawm (1990, p.14) traces the emergence of nationhood in the West, agreeing with Gellner and Anderson that ‘[t]he basic characteristic of the modern nation and everything connected with it is modernity’. For Hobsbawm (ibid, p.10), ‘[n]ations exist … as functions of a particular kind of territorial state or the aspiration to establish one … in the context of a particular stage of [industrial capitalist] technological and economic development’. Any cultural aspects of nationalism are here subordinate to their essential construction (ibid, p.10) ‘from above’ by manipulative elites, with the masses below not necessarily brought along despite the evident success of the programme on a global scale (ibid, p.192).

Breuilly (1993, p.1) argues that nationalism is ‘above and beyond all else, about politics and … politics is about power … [which] in the modern world is principally about control of the state’. He explores the development of nationalism as a form of oppositional politics in the increasingly centralised monarchical states of early-modern Western Europe, before analysing its spread across Europe and the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the crucial modern context of a distinct and specialised public sphere of politics, nationalist ideology ‘provides a conceptual map’ (ibid, p.13) for navigating and potentially solving the ‘puzzles’ set by modernity (ibid, p.54) such as those relating to the distinctions between public and private, state and society (ibid, p.69). However, nationalist rejections of, or attempts to transcend, these highly complex and incompatible distinctions, through for example a claimed fusion of the political sphere with culturally-conceived nationality, represent mere pseudo-solutions – ‘a sleight of hand’ (ibid, p.62). For Breuilly, as with Hobsbawm, though nationalism is unquestionably a hugely successful political ideology, its evident triumphs, and apparent popular resonance, can be skewed in the popular and academic imagination alike by the self-understandings and self-representations of nationalists themselves (ibid, p.382; Breuilly, 1985, p.73).

Smith (1986, pp.130–4) agrees that the modern revolutions of Western Europe were central to the emergence and consolidation of nationalism as we know it today but suggests that a key ingredient of nationalism effectively lies outside of and prior to modernity. He argues that the myths and symbols of most successful modern nations draw a special resonance from durable ethnic cultures with pre-modern roots mobilised in the modern era by nationalist politics and intellectuals (ibid, pp.160–1). From this perspective, a pre-existing ethnic cultural core, revivified in modern contexts for modern ends to provide a collective identity and sense of agency, provides the crucial explanatory dimension for modern nationalism’s rise and durability.

In summary, therefore, when explaining nationalism and its initial emergence, with the arguable exception of the Latin American element of Anderson’s model, modern European
colonialism is far from at the heart of these authors’ accounts. The focus falls squarely within European territory in relation to the modern revolutions in institutions, politics and the economy set out in classical sociology. The next section will discuss the points where colonialism and imperialism are referred to by these authors, thereby further demonstrating how their accounts obscure the fundamentally colonial aspects of modernity described by postcolonial scholars. However, it will also argue that postcolonialism is in danger of downplaying the importance to contemporary politics and society of some of the nationalist inheritances set out within these five books.

Nationalism studies, colonialism and racism

Colonialism is chiefly discussed by these authors in relation to anti-colonial nationalism. Breuilly provides the most sustained treatment of the impact of European empires on colonised lands within the scope of his general analytic model. He argues that it is ultimately the institutions of the colonial state and relationships with these that provide the ‘initial determinants’ for how an anti-colonial ‘nationalist movement develops’ (Breuilly, 1993, p.196). Non-Western responses to colonialism were thus bound up with, and expressed in relation to, the revolutionary form of politics introduced by European imperialism (ibid, p.223).

The other authors similarly position anti-colonial nationalisms in relation to their overall hypotheses regarding nationalism’s essence and historical origins. For Hobsbawm (1990, p.160), like Breuilly, what is key are not anti-colonial conflicts or identities shaped in relation to ethnicity or nationality but, rather, the institutional and ideological context set by European power. The territories of the states in question were ‘overwhelmingly the … creations of imperial conquest’ with political movements initiated within a product of an ‘adopted … western ideology excellently suited to the overthrow of foreign governments’ (Hobsbawm, 1990, p.137). Anti-colonial politicians thus ‘spoke the language of European nationalism, which they had so often learned in or from the west’ (Hobsbawm, 1990, p.136). For Gellner (2008/1983, p.42; cf. p.84), though anti-colonial nationalisms differed in various ways from their antecedents, ultimately ‘the core or essence of nationalism flows from … the premises which were initially laid out’ in industrialising European.

Anderson argues that colonial states and capitalism, carried by the technology of the day, provided ‘models of nation, nation-ness and nationalism distilled from the turbulent, chaotic experiences of more than a century of American and European history’ (Anderson, 1991, p.140) before exploring the effects of late colonial institutions on how postcolonial nations were imagined (Anderson, 1991, Chapter 10). Smith’s brief references to anti-colonialism foreground the resonance of ethnic cultures ahead of any political and institutional pathways (1986, pp.146–7). For Smith, the notoriously contrived, imposed borders of postcolonial states and the uneven distribution of ethnic groups within these, immediately sabotages, at the institutional, state level, the potential for a pre-modern ethnic core to form a viable nation. When set alongside destabilising geopolitical conditions, some postcolonial states, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (ibid, p.212), are therefore considered to lack some of the key elements that enabled the emergence of functioning nation-states in Europe.

This theme of postcolonial intra-state conflict is another relatively common way by which colonialism is touched upon in these books. Gellner (2008/1983, pp.94–5) laments what he refers to as the “African” type of national situation ‘which arises when the local folk cultures are incapable of becoming the new high culture of the emergent state, either because they are too numerous or too jealous of each other’, while Hobsbawm (1990, p.155), specifying the same continent, bemoans ‘ethnonational competition and violence … [which has] emerged in
relation to societies ill-prepared for the dramatic socioeconomic changes imposed by colonialism’. In explaining such conflicts, Breuilly (1993, p.227) again turns to the state rather than ethnicity and to the ‘desperate search for bases of political action in the absence of those appropriate to taking over the colonial state’.

The effects of colonialism on the imperial metropolis are treated very sparsely in these books. Gellner (2008/1983, pp.41–2) argues that European colonialism was economically motivated and, generalising from Seeley’s famous quip, largely achieved in an absence of mind, but otherwise does not refer to its impact on European society. Anderson (1991, p.150) briefly discusses how colonial hierarchies helped to shore up ‘antique conceptions of power and privilege’ in England, while Smith’s only significant reference to relationships involving colonialism and nationalism in Europe (1986, pp.167–8) refer to ‘exclusive’ (we might add the more specific designation ‘racist’) national identities in England ‘fuelled by colonial empire’ in the late nineteenth century. Anderson’s aside (of which more below), race and racism in general do not feature prominently in any of these books. Breuilly (1993, p.60) relates nineteenth-century racism to historicist nationalist thinking in Europe, and in a later analysis of the Third Reich (ibid, pp.310–316) queries the extent to which the Nazis’ mass appeal is best understood as motivated by racism rather than specific political conditions and structures relating to modern statehood.

Racism is only otherwise discussed in these texts with regard to urban migrations to and within the West (Smith, 1986, pp.10–11; Hobsbawm, 1990, p.157) or as an important potential trigger for anti-colonial mobilisation (Breuilly, 1993, p.173, p.186; Gellner, 2008/1983, p.80). It is contextualised in relation to particular periods and places, and treated as relatively peripheral to the central currents irrigating the history of modernity and European nationalism. These authors date the conditions for nationalism’s emergence as prior to mid-nineteenth century racial thinking, meaning that the nation-state and racism are considered conceptually distinct rather than fundamentally related. For Anderson (1991, p.149), who dedicates a chapter to comparing the two social formations, ‘while racism dreams of eternal contaminations’ associated with notions of irredeemable biology, nationalism’s more cultural, historical basis renders it far more malleable and open (in principle if not always in practice). Here, though racism can intersect with nationalism, it is what Smith (1998, p.2) in later work describes as a ‘darker’ force. Racial nationalism is a specific variation (or perversion) of a related but different social formation.

In all five books, therefore, although colonialism features to some extent in each discussion, the authors largely bypass some elements that postcolonial scholars argue should be included in any fuller account of the broad historical period covered (within and outside of Europe), notably the foundational role for conquest, dispossession and exploitation, and the economic, cultural and social impact of colonialism on the imperial metropolis. The ‘colonial entanglements’ (Bhambra, 2014, p.2) and, crucially, the seam of racism running through the core of modernity that postcolonial narratives aim to bring to the surface remain largely submerged. Where connections and relationships involving colonised lands and peoples become most salient in these books is in relation to the global diffusion of Western modernity, with the subordinated knowledges and epistemologies of colonised peoples, where raised at all, only really discussed with regard to the novel economic and political structures and imaginaries set out by Europe.

This seems to indicate that these books succumb to the Eurocentric maladies diagnosed by postcolonialism. However, I would argue that any such conclusion should be tempered. The extent to which modernity’s revolutions were rooted in colonialism remains contested. There is a case for maintaining some focus on the ‘generalised condition[s] which made nationalism
normative and pervasive’ (Gellner, 2008/1983, p.84) and, as part of this, the relatively clearly located geographical origins of these conditions within Europe. In clear contrast to some classical sociological accounts of modernity, the books discussed here certainly do not argue that ‘the rest’ are catching up to a superior stage of historical development (Bhambra, 2014, p.9). Though their analyses of turmoil in postcolonial Africa might veer towards this narrative, any apparent obscuring of non-European society could be seen as a by-product of these authors’ spotlighting of European revolutions which became fundamentally important on a global scale and the attempts of populations to reorient themselves in relation to these – particularly vis-à-vis the unprecedented political power of the modern state.

It is particularly with regard to this perspective on modern political agency and the state that the nationalism literature might offer postcolonial criticism something in return. Though such concerns are of course central to postcolonialism in terms of anti-colonial thought and practice, the nationalism literature analyses how a wide variety of social groups, in a much wider variety of social and political contexts than ‘the colonial’, have attempted (with varying degrees of success) to draw on ideas of nationhood to seize the initiative in challenging political circumstances. Even if we accept (as I, for one, do) that the histories of many nations are fundamentally related to colonialism, when shifting our gaze to the present day, and to postcolonial critics’ desire to reframe contemporary politics along radically cosmopolitan lines, we run into a specific and powerful inheritance – the pervasive and enduring structures and institutions of the state and the ‘conceptual maps’ (Breuilly, 1993, p.13) provided by nationalism. Globalising processes and critiques of methodological nationalism notwithstanding, the nation-state stubbornly remains the dominant source of political sovereignty and the principal enabler and enforcer of resource distribution – as has been conceded by many prominent cosmopolitan thinkers (e.g. Habermas, 1996; Held, 2002). With no significant institutional rival on the horizon, and no serious, popularly resonant anti-nationalist ideological competitor at state level (neo-liberalism aside), it is essential to consider the hugely important existing relationships between the nation-state and ‘the continued capacity of political communities to control themselves in the present’ (Pocock, 1992, p.388).

Therefore, though they may partially obscure the importance to modern history of colonialism and the racialised power-relations it instituted and bequeathed, I would argue that the perspectives on nationalism and the state set out within the five books analysed here bring us somewhat closer to a level of contemporary political understanding of ‘the degree of plasticity in our collective fate … [and] the range within which it can, or might be, modified by our own, or others’ actions’ (Dunn, 2000, p.104). At the risk of being considered conservative or passive with regard to existing political frameworks, I am suggesting that scholars of race should recognise that the ideologies and structures of nationhood and statehood continue to influence our understandings of political peoplehood and public authority so pervasively that viable alternatives can seem almost unthinkable (outside of and within the academy1). Without this recognition there is a danger that postcolonial criticism, while justifiably questioning many of the assumptions of nationalist historiographies, is, in its commitment to cosmopolitanism, evading questions about the extent to which nation, state and related identifications have been, are, and will continue to be crucial in shaping politics and society.

**Nationalism, racism and ‘Leave’ voters**

To tease these issues out further in relation to a specific contemporary case, this section brings the preceding discussion to bear on academic research regarding the motivations of those who voted ‘Leave’ in the UK’s 2016 referendum on EU membership. The majority of
analysis has come from quantitative researchers in political science, with the most prominent voices arguing that, in contrast to those more comfortable with a globalised, cosmopolitan Britain, Leave voters feel their identities and culture are being threatened by an increasingly liberal society and perceptions surrounding unprecedented levels of immigration. Far more saliently than socioeconomic anxieties, the referendum’s outcome is therefore best explained by an emerging and entrenched cultural or value divide in the British (especially English) population (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Kaufmann, 2016; Ford & Goodwin, 2017; Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017). Accounts informed by postcolonial criticism, on the other hand, depict the Leave campaign as ‘a proxy for discussions about race and migration’ (Valluvan, 2017; Bhambra, 2017b, p.91). The focus, in the media and some political science analysis, on the English ‘white working class’, ‘left behind’ voter implicitly constructs ‘a new identity politics of race’ (Bhambra, 2017a, p.219) in which the ‘independent Britain’ and ‘island nation’ depicted by Brexit campaigners represents a historically inaccurate, fantasy depiction of a sovereign (and white) nation, thus eliding the state’s multiethnic colonial past and postcolonial present (Bhambra, 2017b, p.92). Here Brexit is, above all, the outcome of a (structurally if not always attitudinally explicit) racist form of English nationalism (Shilliam, 2016; Virdee & McGeever, 2018).

With the exception of Eric Kaufmann – whose PhD supervisor was Anthony Smith – the above-cited scholars almost entirely neglect the nationalism studies literature. Despite the Leave campaign’s stated desire to ‘take back’ sovereignty from the supranational EU, and the referendum result representing perhaps the most starkly nationalist electoral outcome in recent British history, the political science literature has allowed populism and widely discredited classifications of ‘civic’ and ‘ethnic’ national identities to stand in for any in-depth analysis (and often any direct mention at all) of nationalism as a principle and ideology (Bonikowski, 2017a, 2017b). In the postcolonial literature, meanwhile, nationalism is regularly referred to, but mostly as a synonym or outgrowth for and of racism, with the referendum’s outcome seemingly confirming the ‘fundamental interplay between race and nation’ (Valluvan, 2017, p.238). I would suggest that this lack of engagement with the nationalism literature is depriving these analyses of some valuable analytical perspectives. Kaufmann (2018a) has rightly noted that Smith’s critique of globalising and cosmopolitan forces, in the context of his general theory of the durable political resonance of ethnic cultures, foreshadowed the recent upsurge in nationalist populism – though his ethnicist ontology, implicitly accepted in some political scientists’ operationalising of national cultures and identities, is unlikely to be adopted by scholars influenced by postcolonialism (see the hostile early response from academics with cosmopolitan political sympathies (Favell, 2019; Özkirimli, 2019) to Kaufmann’s (2018b) most recent book). I would, however, suggest that other seminal perspectives on nationalism, particularly John Breuilly’s, could add critical insight to both of the broad analytic perspectives on the Leave vote outlined above.

It is instructive, for example, to analyse the ‘threatened identities’/‘cultural backlash’ thesis emerging from political science in relation to Breuilly’s discussion of how nationalist ideology maps but also forms the very terrain of the political landscape (1993, p.381). From this angle, if we consider the notorious and widespread ‘perception gaps’ with regard to attitudes towards immigration in Britain, such as wildly exaggerated estimates of the overseas-born population (Duffy & Frere-Smith, 2014), and the extent to which these attitudes are influenced by ideological diffusion or media exposure to particular parties and messages (Bonikowski, 2017a; Murphy & Devine, 2018) – none of which are properly accounted for in the ‘threatened identities’ research – we might question how much Leave voters ‘identities’ were threatened other than on the terms of nationalism itself. The attitudes that fuelled this vote might therefore be
better explained in terms of the framing and production of a sense of threat through the mobilisation of nationalist, sometimes racist, political ideology. By bringing the active, fundamentally political dimension of nationalist ideology into the equation in this way we can query claims that somewhat passive, deeply-held and culturally-rooted threatened national identities (still less immigration or ethnic diversity) should be foregrounded in these causal models. We thereby enable some of the historical, structural power-relations highlighted in postcolonial accounts to be brought to the surface – though, importantly, here it is nationalist and not necessarily racist political boundaries that are central.

Breuilly’s approach thus both dovetails with and raises questions of postcolonial interpretations of the Leave vote. His critique of nationalism’s pretensions to offer anything but pseudo-solutions for those wishing to fuse society, culture and state again chimes with postcolonial scholars’ suspicions that even a smooth, successful Brexit would be unlikely to stave the fantasies and anger of many Leave voters. However, crucially, Breuilly’s analysis does not encourage much optimism about the supersession of nationalism as a form of politics. Most would concede that cosmopolitan politics, in Britain and globally, remain fragmented, inchoate and lacking any popularly resonant institutional basis or politically effective identifications. Most would also concede that, as Breuilly and many other nationalism scholars argue, collective and effective political and cultural movements or groups are, in the modern world, difficult to locate or imagine in ways ‘distinct from [a] public state’ still largely imagined in national terms (1993, p.396). In this context, postcolonial approaches premised on political and methodological commitments to cosmopolitanism and radical democratic futures risk bypassing the enduring and resonant structures and identifications of existing political communities. Contemporary democratic institutions and processes, party politics and elections have, for example, been virtually ignored in recent years by British scholars of race (at least until the referendum result) whose attention has been fixed on micro-level politics, identities and the mapping of increasingly fine-grained hierarchies (Alexander, 2018). While it remains imperative to analyse the anti-racist, anti-nationalist local cultures of England’s multiethnic urban areas, and while postcolonial critiques portraying the British state and English nationhood as a bundle of fantasies and repressions riddled with structural racism may be phenomenologically accurate, such approaches might also be characterised as conducting a somewhat rhetorical ‘righteous demolition’ (Pocock, 1995, p.301) on the page rather than contributing as much as they might to urgent debates on collective identifications, viable political action and change.

Conclusion

These two fields draw on very different theoretical influences and utilise different methodological tools for the purposes of somewhat different research questions. However, in the several locations where their interests overlap they have the potential to enrich one another, and the aim of this chapter has been to open up some paths in this direction. I have suggested that the five seminal books from the field of nationalism studies analysed here are, thanks to their elision of modern Europe’s foundational relationships with exploitation and racism, vulnerable to some of the central critiques that postcolonialism applies to hitherto dominant historical and sociological accounts of modernity. However, I have also argued that the depth to which the history and general concept of nationalism has been researched within the field of nationalism studies might be further drawn upon by scholars influenced by postcolonialism.

In particular, I have argued that crosspollinating nationalism studies and postcolonial criticism bears especially vital – if perhaps from postcolonial perspectives unwelcome – fruit with regard to our contemporary political predicament. While we can find examples...
of post-national sociabilities and subordinated knowledges in the archives and through ethnographic observation of contemporary society, and while we may succeed in partially destabilising or transcending the nation-state through a commitment to anti-racism and political and methodological cosmopolitanism, the capacity of states to change lives remains institutionally unrivalled and the crux of state politics remains nationalist (cf. Leddy-Owen, 2019). If a key question today for those opposed to nationalism and its many racist manifestations is how to engage with nationhood and the state in order to work towards an anti-racist, cosmopolitan future, then I would suggest that many of the most effective answers will involve working more closely than the postcolonial literature presently implies within the scope of nation-state frameworks and nationalist identifications. Even if our ultimate aim is to abolish the nation-state project, its borders and disagreeable legacies, those postcolonial scholars who emphasise connected histories and contemporary racism are in danger of missing the crucial need to locate some of our most important political analysis and action within the awkward political lines set down in European modernity.

Note

1 See Bartelson’s [2001, 185] identification of such patterns within some influential critical scholarship, notably Foucauldian, exploring the state and its relationship with modern power-relations.

References

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