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John Solomos

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Racism, nationalism and the politics of resentment in contemporary England

James Rhodes and Natalie-Anne Hall

Introduction

Questions of racism and nationalism are once again to the fore of Western social and political life. Across Europe (and beyond), the resurgence of exclusionary forms of nationalistic far right and right-wing populist politics and sentiment have mobilised a range of racialized anxieties centring principally upon immigration, terrorism, the purported limits of multiculturalism, and the perceived economic, socio-cultural and political marginalisation of ‘indigenous’ white populations (Solomos, 2013; Vieten and Poynting, 2016; Valluvan, 2017). Vieten and Poynting see the rise of ‘right wing racist movements’ as characterised by ‘nationalist, anti-immigration, anti-asylum seeker, anti-Muslim politics’ (2016:533). Britain, and England in particular, are no exception to these trends. The first decades of the twenty-first century have been marked by a range of enduring and emergent political preoccupations that are working to sustain and reconfigure the discursive regimes of racism and nationalism. Shifting patterns of migration and racial and ethnic demography, evolving forms of racialization, and altered socio-political contexts shaped by globalisation, economic crisis and austerity, are all informing pronounced shifts in the contours of ‘race’ and nation. This has been manifest in the rise of far right and radical right-wing populist parties and movements, such as the British National Party (BNP), the EDL (English Defence League), Britain First, and UKIP (UK Independence Party) (Solomos, 2013; Allen, 2014), and the large followings such movements have developed on social media (Davidson and Berezin, 2018).

Most recently, in the referendum on 24 June 2016, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. While the vote enlisted a range of political constituencies and concerns, central to the campaign and the result, were questions of racialized difference and national identity. The Leave.EU campaign, heavily shaped by UKIP, invoked the spectre of a migration ‘crisis’, the looming threat of terrorism and other purported challenges posed by the Muslim presence, and a nostalgia for the imperial past, as the basis for calls to restore the nation’s sovereignty and wrest back control of its borders (Bhambra, 2017; Valluvan, 2017; Virdee and McGeever, 2018). This worked to mobilize sentiments well-established within
mainstream popular and media discourses. Indeed, the rise in race-hate crime and the emboldening of racialised expressions of national belonging from both the political margins and mainstream in the aftermath of the result, points to the inseparability of nationalistic and racist politics as well as their widespread allure (Bhambra, 2017; Valluvan, 2017; Virdee and McGeever, 2018).

Drawing on a growing body of scholarship that has sought to delineate the nature of both far-right and radical right-wing populist discourse and sentiment, this chapter identifies the key themes that have been viewed as animating the contemporary politics of white resentment in England. Tracing the nature of these discursive trends provides an analytic lens through which to consider both the mutual imbrications of racism and nationalism and its shifting modes of articulation since the turn of the century. Firstly, the chapter focuses on the production of the ‘other’ and the ‘objects’ (Balibar, 1991) of racist and nationalistic discourses, considering the centrality of Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments to contemporary articulations of race, nation and culture. For Balibar, racisms gain particular force in moments of ‘crisis’, acting as a means of moulding and managing popular anxieties. The ‘objects’ of such sentiment therefore are revealing of wider contemporary political and cultural anxieties in the current conjuncture. Secondly, it examines how the national ‘subject’ is articulated through reference to notions of white ‘victimhood’ and marginalization, drawing upon racialized conceptions of the ‘working class’ and ‘indigeneity’, and finding expression through the invocation of an emergent expression of a resentful, nostalgic and defensive English nationalism. The chapter draws on existing literature in situating these trends within the wider politics of ‘race’ and nation in contemporary England.

Producing ‘others’: Muslims, migrants and minorities

Central to both the political rhetoric and appeal of right-wing racist movements are the mobilization of notions of both a ‘nation’ and a ‘people’, which invariably involve the invocation of notions of ethno-racial difference (Brubaker, 2017; Valluvan, 2017; Vieten and Poynting, 2016). As Balibar (1991) has argued, any appeal to nationalism necessarily rests upon an implicitly exclusionary sensibility in which national subjects are constituted precisely through the designation of particular groups as ‘non-nationals’. Such distinctions operate through the construction of a ‘fictive ethnicity’ generally framed in racial terms. So too Anthias (2010:227) argues that racism is central to this process of ‘othering’ representing ‘a set of discourses and practices that inferiorize, subordinate and lead to outcomes relating to exclusionary group boundaries and hierarchies’ (see also Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Barker, 1981; Gilroy, 1987; Goldberg, 2002; Solomos, 2003). Indeed, throughout the post-war period, far- and right-wing populist movements from the National Front (NF) through to more recent groups like the BNP, EDL, Britain First and UKIP have drawn upon an array of racialized ‘others’ through which to define the terrains and terms of national belonging.

The enlisting of ‘others’ serves not only as a means of determining who ‘belongs’ to the nation, but it also cultivates the purported threat posed by those deemed ‘alien’. Valluvan argues that within what he terms the ‘new nationalism’ evident today, nationalist political sentiments operate chiefly through ‘the set of discourses by which primary culpability for significant socio-political problems, whether real or imagined … is attributed to various ethno-racial communities who are understood as not belonging’ (2017:233). However, the tenor and forms of ‘othering’ and the functions they serve are dynamic and subject to both forms of durability and transformation. Stuart Hall (2017) famously viewed both ‘race’ and
the racisms that sustain it as operating as a ‘floating’ or ‘sliding’ signifier, as the meanings ascribed to ‘race’ evolve in relation to prevailing social, historical and political contexts. Gilroy, too, argues for a conceptualization of racism as existing ‘in plural form … assuming different shapes and articulating different political relationships. Racist ideologies and practices have distinct meanings bounded by historical circumstances and determined in struggle’ (1987:43). As a result, the precise forms of racial othering and the ‘objects’ of such discursive practices change over time, speaking to and cultivating shifting concerns.

Since the turn of the century there has been a marked shift in the discourses employed by the ‘racist right’ (Solomos, 2013) within British society. While historically groups such as the NF and the BNP drew heavily and explicitly on conceptions of biological racism, in recent decades racist right movements have instead embraced the language of what has been termed ‘new’ (Barker, 1981) or ‘neo-racism’ (Balibar, 1991). Within such formulations, notions of physical difference and hierarchy are disavowed in favour of a set of discursive practices instead focusing on notions of cultural difference and alterity, and the threat that bearers of ‘alien cultures’ present to the nation (Gilroy, 1987). Framed in this way, Barker argues that racism is imbued with a ‘common sense’ logic, reformulated as a ‘theory of human nature’, which posits that ‘it is natural to form a bounded community, a nation, aware of its differences from other nations. They are not better or worse. But feelings of antagonism will be aroused if outsiders are admitted’ (1981:21; see also Balibar, 1991). Such conceptions of racism have been central to the contemporary re-emergence of the racist right, as various movements have positioned themselves as legitimate guardians of both the security and cultural identity of the nation (Copsey, 2004; Copsey, 2007; Jackson, 2018; Kassimeris and Jackson, 2015; Rhodes, 2010, 2011; Solomos, 2013; Vieten and Poynting, 2016). As Solomos makes clear,

[these movements] have been able to develop their political language in such a way as to articulate what they perceive as new discourses about race, culture and national identity that have formed the basis of their evolving political strategies and agendas.

(2013:121)

Central within the emergent agendas of racist right-wing discourses has been the shifting emphasis from what Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) termed ‘anti-Black racism’ towards anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia. Indeed, in the early-1990s, in the context of growing anxieties about rising Islamic fundamentalism and the purported dangers posed to British society, they warned that scholars had failed to take religion seriously as a component of contemporary racism. While throughout the postwar period in Britain, across the political right, black and minority ethnic communities have been portrayed as embodying a ‘threat to the unity and order of British society’ (Solomos, 2013:127), increasingly religion and faith have become key markers of difference and threat and contemporary racist and nationalistic politics increasingly cohere around the figure of the ‘Muslim’ (Brubaker, 2017; Gupta and Virdee, 2018; Valluvan, 2017; Vieten and Poynting, 2016).

Anti-Muslim racism has manifested itself in a number of ways in the rhetoric and the sentiments of racist right-wing groups, as the ‘Muslim’ becomes the embodiment of a range of social, cultural and political concerns linked to terrorism, criminality, repressive gender politics, ‘troubling’ cultural predilections, and sexual pathologies (evident in debates about ‘grooming’). In the wake of the 2001 riots in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham, 9/11, 7/7 and more recent terrorist attacks in Manchester and London, as well as the rise of Islamic State (IS), anti-Muslim sentiment has become central to far- and populist right-wing political
expression. For the BNP, for instance, the perceived threat posed by Islam and Muslims has been central to its calls for the abolition of immigration and multicultural policies which are seen to facilitate the ‘Islamification’ of society (John et al., 2006). Here concerns not simply over terrorism, but also about the use of halal meat, veiling practices, self-segregation, challenges to civil liberties and free speech, are all identified as marking a cultural threat to the nation and its Anglo-Saxon and Christian character. The promotion of multiculturalism by state and ‘liberals’ is seen as compromising the integrity and security of the country (Copsey, 2007; Jackson, 2018; Kassimeris and Jackson, 2015; Rhodes, 2011; Wood and Finlay, 2008).

Similarly, the EDL, which emerged as a street-protest movement in 2009, developed with the specific aim of countering what was identified as the inexorable rise of, and existential threat posed by, Islamic extremism (Allen, 2011; Bartlett, Birdwell, and Littler, 2011; Copsey, 2010; Jackson, 2018; Kassimeris and Jackson, 2015; Pilkington, 2016). Here the movement has engaged in protests against ‘Islamist’ terrorism, but also issues such as Sharia law, child sexual exploitation (‘grooming’) and the construction of mosques across the country. Within its discourses, Muslims are presented as a particular ‘problem’, reflecting the asserted irreconcilability of national and ‘Muslim’ values. Social media and online forums have been identified as particularly significant in the diffusion and mobilization of these sentiments (Awan, 2016; Bartlett, Birdwell, and Littler, 2011; Pilkington, 2016).

Recently, Jackson (2018) has called for a shift in emphasis in the study of anti-Muslim racism and its link to nationalist politics, calling for an analysis not simply of the content but also the functions of Islamophobic discourses. She argues that

Islamophobia upholds Eurocentrism, the dominant contemporary racialised system where Western-identified subjects are awarded a better social, economic and political ‘racial contract’ and seek to defend these privileges against real and imagined Muslim demands. Under such a system, Islamophobia is not an ‘unfounded hostility’, but a rational defence of collective Eurocentric advantages.

(2018:2)

Indeed, a number of scholars have argued that the power of anti-Muslim racism lies in its transcendence of narrowly framed nationalistic politics, and the way it instead works through notions of a ‘civilizational’ rather than simply ‘nationalist’ threat (Bhatt, 2012; Brubaker, 2017). Brubaker argues that within much European nationalist-populist politics, the ‘nation’ is being ‘re-characterized in civilizational terms’ (2017:121). As Brubaker himself acknowledges, however, in Britain the appeal of nationalism endures both through and alongside this formulation and the territorial and symbolic frame of the nation remains central to the appeal of racist and xenophobic discourses. Jackson has argued that for groups such as the EDL and for those harbouring anti-Muslim sentiments in England, Islamophobia is mobilized as a means of articulating the breakdown of the relationship between state, nation, and ‘native’ citizenry. Drawing on Hage’s notion of white nationalistic ‘fantasy’, she argues that Islamophobic discourses exemplify both a disruption of the ‘indigenous’ population’s position as privileged actors and mark a reassertion of its normative position as guardians and arbiters of the national community. Islamophobia then operates, ‘on the one hand to preserve traditional ethno-cultural dominance and privilege, and on the other to contain challenges to this dominance, believed to stem primarily from Muslim communities’ (2018:105). Pilkington too, in her ethnographic study of EDL activists and sympathisers, found that, ‘expressions of anti-Muslim sentiment … include perceptions that the Muslim “other” constitutes a direct infringement of, or sets itself in a superior position to, respondents’ “self”’ (2016:144).
The centrality of Islamophobia to the contemporary far- and populist right has also been identified as marking an interesting shift in racist and nationalistic discourse, working as it does to purportedly confound traditional political distinctions of left and right (Brubaker, 2017; Vieten and Poynting, 2016). The EDL, for instance, strongly rejects accusations of racism, casting itself instead as an anti-racist group and a human rights movement, working in defence of secular and liberal values, including mobilising around LGBT issues and asserting an openness to diverse racial and ethnic groups (Copsey, 2010; Bartlett, Birdwell, and Littler, 2011; Busher, 2016; Kassimeris and Jackson, 2015; Pilkington, 2016). Similarly, Burke (2018) showed how Britain First, which had garnered almost two million ‘likes’ on Facebook by December 2017, strategically constructed its anti-Islam protest activities as in defence of the Jewish minority, in an effort to position itself as ‘moderate’ and increase its legitimacy. Such discursive strategies are reflected in similar movements across Europe. As Brubaker notes, ‘the joining of identitarian Christianism with secularist and liberal rhetoric challenges prevailing understandings of national populism. It questions easy recourse to labels such as ‘extreme right’ (2017:1210). This is also evident in the rejection of neoliberal policies and the embrace of ‘protectionist and pro-welfare’ policies and liberal social policies. Here, however, the EDL’s disavowal of racism can be seen as symptomatic of the emergence of ‘post-racial’ discourses (Goldberg, 2006; Lentin and Titley, 2011; Pilkington, 2016), in which distinctions drawn on the basis of religion and culture are seen as ‘non-racial’ in character. This position has been widely criticized within academic scholarship. Goldberg (2006) argues that it is within the conceptions of Muslims found across European politics that the link between formations of racism and nationalism remain most visible, while the denial of racism becomes a principle mode of racist expression itself (see also Lentin and Titley, 2011). Indeed, scholars examining the EDL have located the movement’s rhetoric as rooted in racist ideology and practice. Kassimeris and Jackson (2015), see EDL discourses regarding Muslims as a form of ‘cultural racism’, and Allen argues that while relative to groups such as the BNP, the EDL ‘might be more fluid and reflexive than other far-right organisations, it maintains an ideological premise that is typically discriminatory’ (2011:294). Brubaker argues similarly that any claim to possess ‘liberal’ values is ‘strikingly contradictory. Its liberalism is deeply illiberal’ (2017:1210).

While this anti-Muslim discourse and sentiment clearly comprise contemporary expressions of racism, these ideas have gained legitimacy through a growing alignment with more mainstream political articulations of the threat posed to race and nation. Since the 2001 riots, successive governments have shifted away from the promotion of multicultural policies, including specific measures to address racialised inequality, in favour of an emphasis on social cohesion, counter-terrorism, and integration and a renewed emphasis on national culture and values. Reflecting what he sees as these policies’ proximity to older assimilationist approaches, Kundnani terms such approaches ‘integrationism’. Within this political shift, concerns about Muslim communities have become central, traversing the political centre, right, and left, and exemplifying a wider sense of anxiety about the presence of racial and ethnic diversity (Gilroy, 2004; Kundnani, 2007; McGhee, 2008; Lentin and Titley, 2011; Valluvan, 2017; Jackson, 2018). Jackson argues that ‘state Islamophobia’ has constructed the Muslim ‘threat’ as a means of reasserting a sense of nationalism, ‘through a focus on national identity as the solution to Muslim cultural dysfunction’ (2018:32) Similar tendencies are also evident more widely across contemporary British society, in the persistence of negative media representations of Muslims, rising online and offline hate crime. (Runnymede Trust, 2017).
Alongside anti-Muslim sentiment, opposition to immigration remains a key component of the discourses of racist right parties. For EDL supporters, alongside Islamic extremism, concerns over immigration, crime, unemployment and multiculturalism also feature strongly within the politics of white resentment (Bartlett, Birdwell, and Littler, 2011; Goodwin, 2013; Pilkington, 2016). Anti-immigration has been particularly central to the rise of both the BNP and UKIP. Such sentiments have cohered around calls for the restoration of national sovereignty and border controls, as well as invocations of the cultural and economic threats posed by immigrants (Anderson, 2017; Cutts, Ford, and Goodwin, 2010; Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Geddes, 2014; John et al., 2006; Rhodes, 2010; Skey, 2014; Kinvall, 2015). Here, what has been termed ‘nativism’ or anti-immigrant sentiment within far and populist-right groups is seen as located in concerns for the preservation of ‘traditional’ culture, values and privileges (Goodwin, 2011). Throughout the postwar period, the political right of all persuasions have consistently articulated a viewpoint in which non-white immigration – rather than racist responses to it – is a threat to the nation. Successive forms of migration from the Indian Subcontinent, the Caribbean, and East Africa formed the basis of right-wing political mobilizations by groups such as the NF (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Gilroy, 1987; Solomos, 2003, 2013). From the 1990s, these concerns have been augmented by anxieties about refugees and asylum-seekers, linked to disease, crime, and positioned as the unfair recipients of welfare and housing benefits (Anderson, 2017; Fekete, 2009; Solomos, 2013). Gilroy suggests that in contemporary Britain there exists a ‘morbid fixation with the fluctuating substance of national culture and identity’, linked to fears of ‘Europeanization, and a nonspecific subsumption by immigrants, settlers, and invaders of both colonial and postcolonial varieties’ (2004: 13). Within more mainstream politics, this is reflected in emerging forms of border securitization and ‘hostile’ immigration and citizenship policies since the turn of the century, which have targeted both newer and more established black and minority ethnic groups who continue to be frequently conflated with ‘immigrants’ (Anderson, 2017; Redclift, 2014).

More recently, the so-called EU migrant ‘crisis’ of 2015 has been seen to reenergise these concerns, as the arrival of migrants in Europe fleeing war and displacement in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan and Kosovo, have been mobilised by far and populist-right parties across Europe, with UKIP, for instance, securing over 12 per cent of the vote in the 2015 General Election in the UK (Anderson, 2017; Gupta and Virdee, 2018). Gupta and Virdee argue that these events have compounded concerns around economic recession, neoliberalism and austerity policies, producing a widely-held conception of ‘crisis’ within Europe that they see as central to the ascendancy of contemporary far right and populist-nationalism. Within the narration of this ‘crisis’, immigrants are viewed as embodying a range of social, cultural and political problems, and threatening the ‘historical authenticity and unitary culture’ of the nation (2018:1756). UKIP’s 2015 manifesto makes specific links between immigration, ‘foreigners’, and crime. The fact that most of these migrants were from majority-Muslim countries, reveals the conflation between ‘Muslim’ and ‘migrant’, a conflation which discursively links the term ‘foreign’ with ‘terrorist’ and ‘Islamic’, as ‘immigration’ and ‘Islamization’ have become symbolically entwined (Gupta and Virdee, 2018: 1756). Here, ‘the “cultural” “common-sense racism” of the contemporary moment positions asylum seekers, new migrants and Muslims as the enemies within and without our borders’ (Redclift, 2014:579). Indeed, Ghassan Hage (2003) has argued that in the contemporary West, dominant modes of nationalistic expression – what he terms ‘paranoid nationalism’ – are preoccupied with immigration and border politics, driven by fears of threat and impending decline.
These concerns over immigration were particularly apparent in the EU Referendum, with anti-immigrant sentiment central within the Leave campaign and the attitudes of its supporters (Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017; Virdee and McGeever, 2018). Virdee and McGeever (2018) note how ‘migrants’ were cast as both an economic threat, through competition for jobs and other key resources and public provisions such as healthcare, as well as a ‘security’ threat, through links made between immigration and terrorism, and the apparently sexually predatory behaviour of migrants. The EU was charged with failing to protect its member states and citizens, disabling nations from being able to control their own borders and immigration levels. Indeed, central to what has been identified as rising Euroscepticism in Britain over the last decade is the linkage between anti-immigrant and anti-establishment sentiment as the EU is accused of promoting immigration and multiculturalism at the expense of ‘native’ populations—a claim made by both UKIP and the BNP (Cutts, Ford, and Goodwin, 2010; Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Gest, 2016). Ford and Goodwin, in their study of UKIP and its support, found a strong interrelationship between Euroscepticism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and notions of a ‘native’ group under threat (2014:188). This is a trend widely observed within the literature exploring far and populist right discourses, as ‘immigrants’ come to be seen as both the ‘symptoms and agents’ of the destructive processes of multiculturalism, capitalism, globalization, and the rise of supra-national entities (Holmes, 2000: 114; see also Rhodes, 2010; Gest, 2016; Thorleifsson, 2016; Anderson, 2017).

As mentioned, anti-immigrant sentiments have a long history. What is interesting is the direction of this resentment, not simply towards ‘non-white’ immigrants but also to migrants from a range of nationalities and regions, including those from other European countries. Analysis of articulations of racism and nationalism in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s, for instance, located this as being oriented towards notions of ‘Fortress Europe’ which invoked both a sense of shared whiteness, territory, and culture as a basis for exclusion (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Gilroy, 1987). Recently, however, scholarship has pointed to the fracturing of this conception, evident particularly in the hostility directed towards Eastern Europeans, in the wake of post-2004 EU accession of states such as Poland, Lithuania, and Romania, targeting ‘Roma’ populations in particular (Anderson, 2017; Fekete, 2009; Fox, Moroșanu, and Szilassy, 2012; Geddes, 2014). Such hostilities, influenced by hostile immigration policy and tabloid media, racialize these groups based on putative cultural and socio-economic inferiorities, in the process creating hierarchies that render some groups more ‘white’ than others, despite their shared Europeanness (Fox, Moroșanu, and Szilassy, 2012; see also Rasinger, 2010). Fekete (2009) has conceptualised this development as marking the emergence of a form of ‘xeno-racism’, which works through ‘non-colour-coded’ registers in targeting migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers deemed unassimilable to or unwanted within the nation. Indeed, in the wake of the Referendum Virdee and McGeever point to the increase in hate crime directed towards visibly white immigrants, which marks a shift in racism and nationalism: ‘What is striking about this wave of racist violence was the way its perpetrators made little attempt to distinguish between black and brown citizens and white European migrants – in their eyes, they were all outsiders (Virdee and McGeever, 2018:1809).

Collectively this anti-immigrant sentiment marks a reassertion of exclusionary forms of nationalism, predicated upon both whiteness and its gradations. Gupta and Virdee note that for racist right organisations, the problematization of immigration has seen calls for both tighter border controls but also more restrictive approaches to citizenship, with an emphasis on the importance of ‘indigeneity’. They see such discourses as representing a ‘long-term programme for purifying the citizenry’, predicated on ‘hierarchies of suspicion’, in which the emphasis on birth and parentage as a basis for inclusion marks, ‘a bid to retrieve an
unambiguously racial basis for citizenship’ (2018:1758–9). They argue that while explicit reference to ‘race’ remains rare, with claims instead couched in terms of notions of ‘nationality’, ‘people’, ‘language’, ‘culture’, and ‘values’, increasingly ‘race is closer to the surface of political discourse now – it is, so to speak, barely coded’ (ibid: 1762).

The national subject: whiteness, resentment and nostalgia

If anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, and anti-minority sentiments animate the ‘objects’ of contemporary political expressions of racism and nationalism, there have also been interesting shifts in terms of how the national ‘subject’ is articulated. Recent decades have seen such sentiments narrated through the figure of the beleaguered, besieged and marginalized white ‘indigenous’ subject. This emergent notion of ‘white victimhood’ inverts historic processes of racism and racialised inequality and exclusion, arguing instead that white communities represent the disadvantaged group, portrayed as being particularly disadvantaged as a result of processes of globalisation, neoliberalism, immigration and multiculturalism and attendant economic and cultural transformations, linked to the decline of manufacturing and the rise of identity politics and a purportedly liberal and cosmopolitan political elite (Holmes, 2000; Hewitt, 2005; John et al., 2006; Ware, 2008; Rhodes, 2010, 2011; Williams and Law, 2011; Oaten, 2014; Gest, 2016; Pilkington, 2016; Mann and Fenton, 2017; Winlow, Hall, and Treadwell, 2017; Mondon and Winter, 2019).

Much of the emergent scholarship in this area has been concerned with tracing the development of this sense of ‘white resentment’ and its relationship to expressions of racism and nationalism. Roger Hewitt (2005) in his study of the attitudes of white residents in Greenwich and the rhetoric of both the New Right but also local BNP campaigns there in the 1990s identified what he named as an emergent form of ‘white backlash’ politics. This form of politics – which Hewitt identified as on the rise also in the US and Australia – was predicated on notions of ‘unfairness to whites’, as processes such as deindustrialization and the dismantling of social housing produced a widely felt sense of insecurity. Alongside this, the rise of multicultural policies deemed to favour ‘immigrants’ and ‘minorities’ became entangled with the demise of class-based leftist and Labour politics and the emergence of a new liberal class of politicians, more distant and remote from traditional, white working class communities. Hewitt argues that Enoch Powell had first expressed this notion of white marginalization as a threat to the nation and its ‘indigenous’ population within his infamous 1968 ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech, but these economic and political developments during the 1980s and 1990s saw it possess an increasing resonance. He argues that while prior to the 1980s racist-nationalist discourses had focused on ‘non-white immigration’ and the issue of repatriation, since this juncture ‘white backlash’ politics have become more vociferously felt, expressed and mobilized.

In recent decades, far right and right-wing populist groups have been keen to mobilize and promote such sentiments. Commencing in the 1990s, for instance, the BNP was able to make political gains through campaigns which advocated for ‘Rights for Whites’ in response to their purported economic, cultural and political marginalization and the existence of ‘reverse racism’ (Holmes, 2000; Copsey, 2004; Copsey, 2007; John et al., 2006; Rhodes, 2010, 2011; Goodwin, 2011; Solomos, 2013). This strategy saw the party argue that the promotion of globalisation and multiculturalism marked the disenfranchisement of the white population, serving to destabilize ‘traditional’ white, indigenous communities who are no longer privileged in the distribution of economic resources, public provisions, political rights, or in terms of cultural recognition. Here it is argued for instance that there is a failure to
address ‘racially-motivated attacks on ‘whites’, that white ‘natives’ are no longer allowed to celebrate their own cultural traditions, and that multicultural policies enacted by the political elite mark the disenfranchisement of a form of ‘native’ disinheritance. The BNP leader, Nick Griffin in 2009 likened multiculturalism to a process of ‘bloodless genocide ... because it dispossesses the native British of their inheritance fostering a deep sense of grievance that will fester for decades’ (cited in Rhodes, 2011:64). The marginalization of the ‘indigenous’ white population gained purchase through the contrast with the purportedly increased and increasing power of ‘minorities’ and ‘immigrants’, particularly Muslims, who it is argued, are favoured by the liberal elite, and benefit through an ‘unfair’ allocation of resources (Goodwin, 2011; Holmes, 2000; John et al., 2006; Rhodes, 2010; Wood and Finlay, 2008). The EDL also mobilizes similar sentiments, with Oaten (2014) arguing that the movement operates through the production of a sense of ‘collective victimhood’, with former leader Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (‘Tommy Robinson’) central to this articulation of the ‘cult of the victim’, constructed as a hero and martyr willing to risk himself for a defence of the safety and integrity of the nation. Here Oaten argues that while ‘victimhood’ invokes notions of powerlessness, conversely, it also can become a motivating basis for political mobilization and assertion. Pilkington also found that EDL activists viewed themselves as being ‘second class citizens’, as a result not simply of the threat posed by Muslims, but due to ‘a weak-willed or frightened government that panders to the demands of a minority for fear of being racist’. Within these accounts, whiteness is recast not as a marker of privilege but of victimhood (2016:154; see also Winlow, Hall, and Treadwell, 2017).

Much of the scholarship has focused on the linkages between racism, nationalism and class. If racism and nationalism are increasingly seen to find articulation through notions of white victimhood, the ‘white working class’ has been mobilised as an archetypal imagined group and subject within these discourses. The BNP and EDL have significantly targeted ‘white working class’ groups and communities (Copsey, 2004; Goodwin, 2011, 2013; Oaten, 2014; Pilkington, 2016; Rhodes, 2010; Winlow, Hall, and Treadwell, 2017). Within EDL discourse, Oaten notes how the ‘white working class’ are cast as ‘the EDL’s ideal victim, vulnerable, helpless and suffering ... The EDL requires a steady stream of ideal victims and it focuses on the English working class only in so far as the latter can provide a narrative of victimization that can be embraced within the EDL’s collective victimhood’ (2014: 342). So too have UKIP and the Leave campaign sought to appeal beyond Eurosceptic conservatives to also engage with ‘white working class’ voters, with former leader Nigel Farage warning in 2014 that immigration and EU membership threatened a social and political context in which there was a danger of the ‘white working class becoming an underclass’ (cited in Virdee and McGeever, 2018:1815). Mondon (2017) notes how in a similar vein to other radical right-wing populist parties, UKIP has claimed a purported ‘left behind’ working class as a symbol of the ‘people’. The result is that the notion of the ‘people’, ‘has become the embodiment of a nationalist reactionary wave’ (2017:356).

Academic work has also focused on the fact that support for these groups and sentiments has been disproportionately located amongst the ‘white working classes’ (Cutts, Ford, and Goodwin, 2010; Ford and Goodwin, 2010, 2014; Gest, 2016; Winlow, Hall, and Treadwell, 2017). Justin Gest in his comparative ethnographic study of the US and the UK, notes the way in which collective ‘white working class’ identities are articulated politically through a sense of ‘minoritization’ which coheres around notions of becoming demographically outnumbered, being excluded from mainstream political representation, and a belief that they are subject to ‘conscious or unconscious prejudgement by members of ethnic minorities, as well as by middle- and upper-class white people’ (2016:21–23). Ford and Goodwin (2014),
too, in their study of UKIP support, found that the appeal of the party and its xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment was located principally within a ‘left behind’ constituency of older, predominantly male, ‘white working class’ people located disproportionately in the formerly industrial areas of England. Here it was argued they were responding to deindustrialization and attendant economic insecurity, the breakdown of the link between the working classes, trade unionism and the Labour Party, as well as the rise of what are deemed to be a more cosmopolitan and progressive set of liberal, political values. So too do Winlow et al, in their recent study of EDL supporters, see neoliberalism, austerity and deindustrialization as central to the growing appeal of racist and nationalistic feelings; ‘the sentiments and discourses behind the EDL are connected to the concrete localised consequences of the changing economic and cultural circumstances of the white working class’ (2017:10).

While much of this work has generated important insights into the shifting articulations of racism and nationalism, there is a danger that this foci risks obscuring more complex relationships between whiteness, class, racism and nationalism. Mann and Fenton (2017), for instance, in their study of the rise of the politics of resentment across the nations of the United Kingdom, argue that rather than being located within any one wide class demographic, the politics of resentment contingently appeals to a range of class fractions and those experiencing downward or insecure class trajectories across a range of social groups. Other studies too have pointed to the cross-class appeal of the sentiments of white ‘backlash’ and resentment, as support for the BNP, EDL and UKIP all transcend any neat class distinctions. Indeed, analysis of the support for the Brexit vote revealed a broader constituency that was not restricted to the white working classes. Rather, support for Brexit, and nationalist-populist sentiments more generally, appeal to those that feel a sense of economic, but importantly cultural marginalization (Bhambra, 2017; Gidron and Hall, 2017; Mondon, 2017; Mondon and Winter, 2019; Virdee and McGeever, 2018). In his analysis of the EDL, Copsey (Copsey and Macklin, 2011) also argues that it should principally be viewed as an ‘identitarian’ movement rather than one rooted in material interests, although clearly such sentiments often become difficult to disentangle.

Recently, Bhambra (2017) has identified a problem that she sees as characterising much contemporary political, media, social scientific and other academic discourse exploring the rise of right-wing populism and Brexit. She notes a phenomenon she labels ‘methodological whiteness’, and identifies this as being problematic in a number of crucial ways; firstly, in limiting racist and nationalistic sentiments to a purported ‘white working class’, it obscures the appeal of such exclusionary politics to also the middle classes and elites. Indeed, a recent attitudinal study by Flemmen and Savage (2017) revealed that racism and nationalism is also the preserve of sections of the middle classes, who hold racially exclusive conceptions of national belonging. Secondly, Bhambra argues that it also further contributes to a political terrain in which the imputed marginalization of the ‘white working class’ is explained with an emphasis on the ‘white’ aspect of this identity, with recourse to multiculturalism and immigration, rather than class-based forms of exclusion and inequality. This can work to limit possibilities for interracial political action, mobilized around issues of inequality (see also Mondon, 2017; Mondon and Winter, 2019; Virdee and McGeever, 2018). Mondon and Winter (2019) warn of the dangers of the ‘racialisation of the white working class’, in fermenting political conflict along racial and nationalistic lines. Thirdly, Bhambra states that within the discourses forged upon ‘methodological whiteness’ there is a tendency to ‘re-centre’ ‘white interests’, marginalizing the concerns of black and minority ethnic communities and ongoing experiences of exclusion and inequality, while at the same time the political grievances of whites are legitimized. Here she argues that within these conceptions,
the white working class, the argument goes, has been forgotten – their histories silenced and their claims for a redress of the injustices they face ignored. This has led, in turn, to calls for racial self-interest by the dominant groups to be seen as legitimate and not to be labelled racist.

(Bhambra points, for instance, to Eric Kaufmann’s (2017) report on ‘white self-interest’, which argued that it was ‘natural’ for white groups to ‘look out for their cultural, economic and demographic interests … [this] does not deserve the racist “appellation”’. For Bhambra, equating the sentiments of whites with other forms of ‘minority’ political mobilization, ignores the fact that,

claims by minority citizens occurred in the context of conditions of structured racial inequality, a redress argued for in terms of inclusive justice rather than partiality … To be clear, ‘white’ people are not a minority in Britain who must make claims together as a group in the face of discrimination and marginalization by a majority other.

(2017:S217)

This tendency is more widely observable, and over a decade ago Vron Ware warned of the dangers of legitimizing expressions of ‘white resentment’. She argued that politicians have been willing to locate the reasons for rising white resentment in relation to immigration and multiculturalism ‘as the trigger for alarming levels of social unease [this] effectively blocks a more rigorous analysis of the material conditions that those communities are facing’ (2008:1.7). Indeed, recent decades have seen this notion of ‘white victimhood’ and marginalization used by politicians across the spectrum. It has been deployed to call for more restrictive immigration legislation, to legitimate the move away from state multiculturalism to integration and, informs a retreat from political mobilizations around more inclusive conceptions of collective class identities (Mann and Fenton, 2017; Rhodes, 2011; Ware, 2008).

If notions of a national ‘subject’ cast as both white and marginalized have been central to the contemporary politics of racism and nationalism, this has increasingly found expression through the emphasis placed on ‘Englishness’. An interesting finding in the wake of the Brexit vote was that those who more strongly identified as ‘English’ rather than British were much more likely to vote Leave (Bhambra, 2017; Black, 2018; Virdee and McGeever, 2018). While for much of the postwar period, far and populist right-wing parties have mobilized a sense of Britishness and its symbols (i.e. the Union Jack), over recent decades, there has been a marked shift as groups such as the BNP, EDL, and UKIP have both targeted and found greater levels of support in England rather than within Britain more widely (Copsey, 2007; Ford and Goodwin, 2010; Kenny, 2014; Mann and Fenton, 2017; Rhodes, 2010; Wellings, 2010; Winlow, Hall, and Treadwell, 2017). Kenny (2014) too has suggested that ‘populist-nationalism’ expressions of Englishness, by groups such as UKIP and the EDL, represent one of the key narrations of English nationhood in the contemporary period, forged through hostility towards the political establishment (particularly the EU) and a ‘beleaguered English nation’ (2014:117). Aughey (2010:506) argues that English nationalism inherently comprises a series of ‘political and cultural anxieties’, oriented to a lack of sovereignty and a sense of being silenced, and often expressed through a sense of inequity in relation to other forms of British nationalism post-devolution (Aughey, 2010; Black, 2018; Kenny, 2014; Skey, 2012; Wellings, 2010).
In seeking to account for the linkages between Englishness and the contemporary politics of white resentment, Virdee and McGeever note the way in which it increasingly offers a framing and outlet for the expression of economic, social and cultural marginalization, locating, ‘contemporary manifestations of Englishness in the structural decline that Britain has undergone during the neoliberal era’ (2018:1809). Here,

Experiences of downward mobility, alongside the persistence of class injuries … have produced a politics of nationalist resentment. Coming in the wake of a momentous working class defeat, Englishness has been reasserted through a racializing, insular nationalism, and it found its voice in the course of Brexit.

Mann and Fenton (2017) note an increasingly popular expression of Englishness expressed through a form of ‘discontented nationalism’, which coheres around a widely felt sense of national decline and deterioration, focusing upon processes such as immigration, ethnic diversity, multiculturalism and European integration, alongside rising economic insecurity and a sense of diminishing public services and cultural and moral values. They note a dominant form of English nationalism both ‘defensive’ and ‘resentful’ in its character, invoking a sense of decline and a perception of the inability to legitimately celebrate Englishness. Here also claims to indigeneity through Englishness rest upon a racialised conception of belonging with English identity much more closely linked to notions of whiteness in comparison to Britishness, which is viewed as more ‘multi-ethnic’ and ‘progressive’ in its character (see also Leddy-Owen, 2014). Here, the historic subsuming of English nationalism within notions of Britishness, its lack of political articulation vis-à-vis the devolved nations, as well as the tendencies for it to be denounced by elites as rooted in xenophobia and racism, make it particularly amenable to articulate a sense of white resentment and victimhood (Black, 2018; Garner, 2012; Kenny, 2014; Kundnani, 2000; Leddy-Owen, 2014; Mann and Fenton, 2017; Skey, 2012; Virdee and McGeever, 2018).

Kundnani, writing at the turn of the century, noted how in the context of concerns over asylum and immigration, multiculturalism, globalisation, the rise of the EU and devolution, ‘Englishness’ emerged as a particularly potent political symbol for the right (see also Wellings, 2010; Kenny, 2014; Skey, 2012). These transformations as well as the publication of the Parekh Report which called for a re-envisioning of ‘British’ national identity and a rejection of a racialised conception of Englishness, produced a response in which the white English were positioned as the most marginalized group. These expressions articulated a view in which, ‘if racism is the result of institutions ignoring the specificity of particular racial groups, then surely, the Right argued, the most discriminated against group of all are the English, for they can claim no special privileges’ (Kundnani 2000). At the time, Kundnani argued that such sentiments lacked an organised political outlet, with a similar claim also made by Aughey in his statement that Englishness was reflected in a ‘mood’ rather than a ‘movement’ (2010:506). However, recent political developments suggest that this has changed. Mann and Fenton link the politicisation of Englishness to the rise of UKIP since 2010, an organization deemed to be the closest to an English nationalist movement there has been (see also Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Kenny, 2014). Commenting on the electoral success of UKIP in the 2015 General Election, Virdee and McGeever argue the party was able to ‘gain traction by tapping into a sedimented racist nationalist populism that has been a feature of the English social formation for a number of decades’. Such views gain currency ‘not simply through the circulation of racist ideas but because such ideas have been part of the lived habitus of the English social formation for so long’ (2018:1812).
Alongside and related to the emergence of Englishness, contemporary discourses of racism and nationalism have also been identified as mobilizing an emergent form of racialized nostalgia, that works through invocations of both the nation’s imperial and industrial past (Black, 2018; Kenny, 2017; Mann and Fenton, 2017; Thorleifsson, 2016; Virdee and McGeever, 2018). Virdee and McGeever note ‘a striking confluence between English national feeling and the longing for Empire. The ease with which both nation and empire can sit together … is one of the salient but unspoken dimensions of Brexit and its racist aftermath’ (2018:1804; see also Black, 2018). Gilroy famously termed these types of sentiments ‘postcolonial melancholia’, which he identifies as developing in the postwar and postcolonial period operating through,

an obsessive repetition of key themes – invasion, war, contamination, loss of identity – and the resulting mixture suggests that an anxious, melancholic mood has become part of the cultural infrastructure of the place, an immovable ontological counterpart to the nation-defining ramparts of the white cliffs of Dover.

(2004:15)

Virdee and McGeever note that the Vote Leave campaign mobilized notions of Empire, within the theme of ‘Taking Back Control’, re-envisioning the colonial era as one of imperial greatness, based on an erasure of its brutality and destruction, as linkages are made between national sovereignty and imperialism (see also Black, 2018; Kenny, 2017). Since the referendum, too, support for Brexit has been articulated with reference to the past, with Bonacchi, Altaweel, and Krzyzanska (2018) illustrating how Facebook users leveraged historical discourses, centred around myths of origin and particularly in relation to the movement of people, to construct pro-Brexit political identities. Indeed, Kenny notes how, ‘Politically orchestrated forms of nostalgia appear to be integral features of anti-establishment populism, and have helped project strong objections to liberal elites, and the policies of economic openness, tolerance and cultural diversity associated with them.’ (2017:258). For Virdee and McGeever, the entanglements of Englishness, marginalization, and imperial longing, so apparent in the Brexit campaign, mark both the endurance but also potentially the widening appeal of racialized conceptions of nation and citizenship.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored what the contemporary academic literature reveals about the shifting articulations of racism, nationalism and the politics of white resentment in England. Focusing on the political discourses and sentiments associated with far right and populist-nationalist movements such as the BNP, EDL, and UKIP, emergent discursive frames have been delineated which reveal key formations through which the relationship between ‘race’ and nation is expressed. As asserted, both racism and nationalism operate through processes of ‘othering’ and forms of negative identification as the ‘we’ of the nation and its ‘people’, necessarily rests upon particular modes of exclusion and inferiorization. In terms of the ‘objects’ of contemporary racism and nationalism, ‘Muslims’ and ‘migrants’ emerge as particularly powerful figures, presented as threats to the economic, political and cultural integrity of the nation. These groups – often conflated both with one another and with established black and minority ethnic communities – are seen as abetted by a liberal political elite deemed to be unwilling to protect the ‘indigenous’ population. Alongside this, the national ‘subject’ is increasingly narrated through notions of ‘white victimhood’, with the
'native' population cast as a ‘minority’, marginalised through processes of globalization, multiculturalism, and immigration. Within these formulations, the ‘white working class’ has emerged as the archetypal embodiment of the nation’s ‘people’, seen as indicative of the nation’s decline and insecurity. Finally, the chapter focused on the emphasis increasingly placed on Englishness rather than Britishness. Here, white resentment finds expression through the reassertion of a form of national identity deemed marginalised. The recovery and reassertion of a white English national identity can be seen as indicative of a renewed assertion of racialised discourses of belonging and indigeneity.

References


Racism, nationalism and resentment


