

# The othering of migrants has negative consequences for society at large

*The othering of migrants is now a mainstay of UK politics. The rhetoric that was once characteristic of the far-right has now entered the general political discourse, mainly through the use of images of protecting and maintaining borders and British waters. This may have extreme consequences for society and vulnerable groups within it, warns **Tabitha A. Baker**.*

On the morning of August 6<sup>th</sup> 2020, Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage posted footage to his online following across social media of migrants reaching the shores of Kent describing it as an “[invasion](#)” and later stating it has led to “[national humiliation](#)”. This new record of 235 arrivals in a single day was met with demands from home secretary Priti Patel [seeking interception](#) and cooperation from France, and a flurry of critique from a split British public who from each side of the political spectrum demanding either compassion or tighter restrictions. Since then, on several occasions Farage has been stationed in Dover recording numbers of boat arrivals and speaking to the British press, critiquing the EU’s Dublin Regulation for the difficulties surrounding asylum seekers. Patel has also been on Border patrol boats in the channel in emphasising “[law enforcement interceptions](#)” rather than “search and rescue operations”. Boris Johnson has echoed these sentiments [hinting](#) at possible law changes once Britain exits its transition period with the EU. Outside of the political arena, the far-right organisation Britain First have released videos that appear to be filmed in the English Channel looking out for migrant boats which Dr Joe Mulhall, senior researcher at Hope not Hate, [described](#) as an act that sought to “vilify people and inflame emotions around a complex situation”.



Images of borders and water can hold strong sentiment in one's mental life. As Jeremy Paxman stated in his book [The English](#) "if such a thing as a national psychology exists, it too may be made of geography". Sociologist Alex Law writes about Britain as a [mental island](#), finding the source of British nationalism amongst myths and symbols of maritime and sea power. Emphasising the image of borders and water, he states that "this kind of island nationalism derives its force not only from land-based 'roots' but also from the imaginary relationship of the collective group to the sea and the coastline". These boundaries provide space where "natives depart" and "strangers arrive". Sea borders can fulfil imagined political, military and cultural fantasies and tensions between "defensive and offensive functions" where power is projected over the sea. Law continues to explain that the English Channel separating the British mainland from the European continent propagates its inhabitants as "island people", where their attitudes towards the outside world can sometimes be reflective of this.

Similarly, historian Paul Gilroy [writes that](#) this re-affirmation of geo-political boundaries enlivens one's imperial fantasies of an 'English nation'. This is often structured around insider-outsider relations, where the 'insider' will consist of nation members and the 'outsider' consists of non-members. This inclusionary and exclusionary notion is a symptom of British nationalism that was exacerbated during the Leave campaign for the EU referendum. Images of the white cliffs of Dover and the infamous 'Breaking Point' poster perpetuated a sense of territory and exclusionary nation membership that has continued into years to follow surrounding immigration discourse. The horizontality of this insider-outsider notion is not to imply that all nations are equal, on the contrary, it implies a sense of superiority to 'inside' nation members and 'outside' nations as inferior. Images of protecting and maintaining borders and British water feeds into the myth of protectionism and control over territory, which proves reminiscent of David Low's ['Very well alone'](#) cartoon published during the Second World War.

Territory is becoming an increasingly significant component in the national imagination, national territory holds symbolic meanings for the nations' members, specifically within an increasingly globalised world where social, cultural, and political processes are transcending national boundaries. Territory is significant to national group identity as it functions as a material base to sustain citizens that is secure and familiar in a psychological 'space'. On Britain's shores, fantasy plays out within expressions of British identity which are often embedded in historical circumstances and war nostalgia; '[We shall fight them on the beaches](#)' dominates the nations' collective imagination which have often been socially and culturally reproduced leading to the inclusion of mythical elements. This means they are not always factual, they can be largely embellished, as Professor Duncan Bell [states](#), myths such as these have "assumed a life-force of their own" and can thus become embedded in the nation's psyche. Similarly, Dorling and Tomlinson in [Rule Britannia: Brexit and the End of Empire](#) argue that Brexit characterises the last remnants of empire exerting its way out of the British psyche.

Many scholars see the adopted notions of "us" and "them" as characteristics of a specific ethno-nationalism, the adoption of "us" and "them" narratives led Brexit to be conflated with a [specific attentiveness](#) to race and racism. Hélène Joffe [explains](#) how the 'the other' can largely apply to those outside of, and subordinate to, the dominant group. These 'Others' may be less powerful groups within a society or identified out-groups (such as, 'foreigners'). Joffe explores how anxiety can be the driver behind such intense forces and responses that occur during times of crisis. Whether an economic, political or pandemic crisis, this anxiety can assume a paranoid quality, those othered out-groups that can sometimes be associated with undesirable social qualities can be perceived as threatening to society. Jonathan Sklar in [Dark Times](#) discusses the emotional dynamics within society and explores the wide range of forces that shape the psyche, including historical gaps, splits in society and anxieties around immigration. In times of uncertainty and anxiety we may abandon complexities and elect a simplistic version of reality which offers a safer or pleasurable alternative which indulges in a "dangerously oversimplified view of the world". This complexity will often be met with a simple solution: leave the European Union, send migrants back to France, send the Navy into the English Channel, or in America's case, build a wall.

Psychoanalytic ideas can be useful in helping understand attitudes towards the 'other', [David Morgan explores](#) how the migrant can come to serve as a perfect projective object where we can dispose our unwanted anxieties, which can often be fused together with excessive racism: "They become the barbarian at the gate". Furthermore, scapegoating offers the simplification of complex fears. [According to Christopher Bollas](#), "Migrants" can thus come to serve as a translation of "any unwanted person". Throughout the Brexit campaign, interpretation of the social world was reduced to black and white, this kind of paranoid thinking bound people together with affect, simplifying complexities into digestible ideas that appear to be cohesive and assumed to be accurate. Through projection, they could rid themselves of unwanted persecutory anxiety and aim this to an Other who could then be eradicated: "a migrant seeking to cross the borders of the mind".

[There is a danger](#) in the way that the othering of migrants is actively reproduced by mainstream politicians, online and offline. The rhetoric that was once reserved as characteristic of the far-right has now seeped back into political discourse. The erosion and de-valuing of both human dignity and human rights has extreme consequences for society and vulnerable groups within it, if its complexities are not handled with care.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.*