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## ‘The island is full. Please don’t come’: narratives of austerity and migration in a UK citizenship class

**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:** Tuckett, Anna (2017) ‘*The island is full. Please don’t come*’: narratives of austerity and migration in a UK citizenship class. [Anthropology Today](#), 33 (5). pp. 24-27. ISSN 0268-540X

DOI: [10.1111/1467-8322.12381](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12381)

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Available in LSE Research Online: January 2018

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**‘The island is full, please don’t come’: narratives of austerity and migration in a UK citizenship class.**

*Anthropology Today* 33(5): 24-77. Special issue, Alternatives to Austerity, eds, Laura Bear and Daniel Knight.<sup>1</sup>

Since 2005, all migrants applying for Indefinite Leave to Remain (permanent residency) or citizenship are required to pass the Life in the UK test. While its original aim was to encourage active and participatory citizenship, when the test was revised in 2013 the then Prime Minister David Cameron claimed that ‘British history and culture [would be put] at the heart of it’. As a result, in its current form the test requires migrants to rehearse an antiquated and essentialized version of British history, culture and society. Based on 24 questions, topics include the Stone Age, the Roman invasion, the War of the Roses, ‘Bloody Mary’, Dolly the Sheep, pantomimes, the Scottish judicial system and countless others. Although a report commissioned before the test’s introduction resolutely recommended that Life in the UK should not be a test but rather a state-funded learning process, in its current incarnation it is an examination based on the government produced handbook – *Life in the United Kingdom: a guide for new residents* – for which no state-funded support is available. The test costs £50 and candidates can take it as many times as they like until they pass. For many, however, reading the Handbook independently is not sufficient to pass the test. In particular, those with weaker English and/or literacy skills struggle to understand and absorb the Handbook’s dry and dense prose. Many individuals take the test several times (at significant personal cost) before passing, while others decide that they are unable to pass the test independently and seek out help to prepare.

‘Filling the gap in the market’ – in the words of one research respondent – are unofficial and unregulated training centres across London and the rest of the UK which help migrants to prepare for the test. These Life in the UK training centres exist in various guises, but are generally run by those from migrant backgrounds. Many also offer English classes. The teachers in these ‘schools’ instruct migrants on how to be ‘good British citizens’ and about the values, principles and historical events that, according to the Handbook, Britain cherishes. In doing so, they take on a state-like role, reiterating the government’s view on ‘good British citizenship’ and ensuring that new citizens toe the line.

These training centres or ‘schools’ occupy a curious role. Through the pedagogical process, the teachers and institutions act as handmaidens for the government and its official message, while at the same time also providing the means for which such a message can be questioned and contested. As I will show, in addition to communicating the official line on British values, principles, history and society, contemporary ideological views about good citizenship, welfare dependency and modern austerity regimes are also imparted through the teaching process (Patrick 2017). At the same time, however, official government messages are also adapted, hybridized and subtly challenged during the classes.

In the lead up to, and aftermath of, the UK referendum on its membership of the European Union, issues relating to migration and entitlement dominated public debates. In a ruthless campaign, the ‘Leave’ camp exploited the implementation of years of austerity policies by explicitly correlating their negative effects with supposedly high migrant numbers. This strategy was encapsulated by the United Kingdom Independence Party’s (UKIP) campaign poster that depicted an image of large numbers of migrants under the banner ‘Breaking Point’. Examining the discourses of scarcity, austerity and deservingness which prevailed during the referendum campaign, this article explores the way in which Life in the UK classes act as spaces for both the reproduction and subversion of these narratives.

On the one hand, migrants in the classes reproduce discourses which scapegoat other migrants for the effects of austerity. On the other, however, powerful messages about the fundamental human right to migrate are also championed.

### **Austerity Britain**

In 2010, with the election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition to government, a ‘new era of austerity’ (Koch 2017:226) was ushered into the United Kingdom. Austerity in the UK has involved drastic cuts to public services and welfare, significantly worsening the lives of the most vulnerable in society. As Clarke and Newman argue, the financial crisis that acted as the catalyst for this new era of ‘belt-tightening’ was ‘ideologically reworked’ into a political problem (2012:300). This reworking, which is also visible across the rest of Europe and North America, ‘has focused on the unwieldy and expensive welfare state and public sector, rather than high risk strategies of banks, as the root cause of the crisis’ (Clarke and Newman 2012:300). This sleight of hand has been called ‘the greatest bait and switch operation in modern history’ by Mark Blyth (2015:73).

Contemporary austerity policies should be viewed as the ‘latest in a long line of initiatives aimed at hollowing out the welfare state’ (Forbess and James forthcoming), which began with the Thatcher government and continued under New Labour. Under Cameron’s 2010 Coalition and 2015 Conservative governments, cuts to welfare and public spending under the label of ‘austerity’ have been justified by a political narrative which portrays them as a ‘virtuous necessity’ (Clarke and Newman 2012:303). Austerity is framed as economically necessary and morally desirable in the face of an over-developed state whose ‘recent growth has promoted not social solidarity, but selfishness and individualism’ (David

Cameron cited in Clarke and Newman 2012:310). This narrative demonizes both the supposedly ‘bloated’ state created under New Labour and the recipients of welfare, who have been consistently stigmatized by Cameron in his justification for his government’s programme of welfare reform (Patrick 2017:145).

In ‘austerity Britain’, discourses of deservingness and entitlement have become highly pervasive. Austerity policies are justified as apolitical, inevitable and unavoidable decisions made in the face of resource scarcity. Scarcity, meanwhile, is presented as a material reality, rather than the result of political decisions (O’Hara 2014). In the years preceding the UK referendum on its membership to the European Union, UKIP garnered support on a platform which scapegoated migrants for Britain’s material struggles. Within this context of austerity, migrants were presented as placing undue pressure on struggling public services (see also Martin and Smith 2014): at best as a drain on scarce resources, at worst as ‘benefit scroungers’ taking advantage of an overly generous British welfare state. In the lead-up to the referendum, these narratives became increasingly prominent as they were mobilized by the ‘Leave’ camp in general. Migrants, particularly so-called ‘economic migrants’ from Eastern European countries (with their access to freedom of movement and the British welfare system) came to be represented as ‘the empty signifier of everything that is wrong with neoliberal capitalism’ (Açıksöz 2016:487): the imposition of austerity measures, flat pay, precarious work contracts and shrinking state services (Strathern 2016:492).

As the following ethnography reveals, I found that the same concerns about ‘floods’ of migrants, their supposed abuse of the welfare system and the pressures they place on public services – key tropes of the ‘Leave’ campaign – were frequently voiced by migrants themselves in citizenship classes. Yet, at the same time, these classes were also spaces where these dominant narratives were challenged and altered.

## **Life in the UK classes**

Robertson College<sup>2</sup> in North London, where I conducted fieldwork between 2015 and 2017, is one of the most popular Life in the UK schools. Its popularity in large part is due to its location on a High Street next to a busy bus stop in an ethnically and socio-economically diverse area of inner-city London. A sandwich board sits in front of its entrance displaying a picture of a British passport, offering ‘Immigration, Documentation, Life in the UK, English Classes, Exam Bookings and English B1’ (see figure x). Word of mouth about the effective teaching style also attracts students from further afield. Lastly, the school’s flexible policy, which allows students to drop in and out of classes without notice, is extremely popular: the many students on zero hour contracts with unpredictable shift patterns are still able to attend classes.

Students attending the classes hail from diverse parts of the world, although the ‘school’s’ location does reflect the population make-up of the local area to some extent. Many originate from ex-British colonies in Africa, Asia, Cyprus and the Caribbean. Large numbers of the students at Robertson College have lived in the UK for years if not decades and already hold permanent residency but need to take the Life in the UK test in order to naturalize. During my fieldwork period I met several individuals who had even grown up and been schooled in the country but did not hold British citizenship and were, therefore, required to do the test. For those who already hold permanent residence, ease of travel is the most commonly cited motivation to apply for naturalization. Others, often spouses of British

citizens, had been in the country for less time and were taking the test so they could apply for permanent residency or citizenship. I only came across one student who is an EU citizen: Erica, a Portuguese citizen originally from Guinea-Bissau. Correctly anticipating the election result, she told me that she was concerned that the UK might leave the EU which is why she was 'going for the red book [British passport]'. In the not-too-distant future, Erica intends to move back to Africa, where she says it will be easier for her to raise her infant son, but British citizenship will enable her to more easily move between Guinea Bissau and the UK, which is necessary for the running of her small transnational garment business. Following the referendum, however, the manager of the 'college' informs me that there has been a noticeable increase in the numbers of EU students attending classes who are concerned that their right to stay in the UK might soon be under threat. While the UK is a member of the EU, applying for British citizenship holds no particular advantage and is very expensive, hence the small number of EU migrants I met in the classes before the referendum. The referendum result, however, puts European citizens in a vulnerable position and applying for British citizenship is a way to secure their residency in the UK. These new students tend to be Eastern European nationals, largely Romanians and Poles. In the following case studies, however, other than Erica, none of the other students were EU nationals.

Adam, the teacher, is a 30-year-old Ghanaian man who migrated to the UK just under 10 years ago and, perhaps ironically, is not a British citizen himself. He is always immaculately dressed, wearing a dark suit, white shirt and red tie. He is a charismatic teacher, animatedly moving around the white board where his Powerpoint is projected. In his lecture-style seminars, he seamlessly jumps through topics and deftly connects questions about British history and society to others about current affairs.

‘Question One’, Adam reads out from the projected screen. ‘In 1846 the Corn Laws prevented the import of cheap grain. True or false?’

True’, answers one student. ‘False’, shouts out another.

‘Why, why?’ Adam questions his students, challenging them to explain their answers.

‘Question two’, Adam shouts out, ‘the longest distance on the UK mainland from John O’Groats to Lands End is 870km? True or false?’

This eclectic mix of information is representative of the contents of the Handbook, which covers chapters on the values and principles of the UK, its ‘long and illustrious history’, its ‘modern, thriving society’ and the ‘government, the law and your role’. Given that much of this information is unfamiliar to many of the students, Adam’s ‘secret weapon’ – as he calls it – are his mnemonic tricks. He tells the class:

‘Richard Arkwright. Who was he? A successful factory owner. So how can we remember this one?’ Adam asks the class, before he underlines R-I-C-H in Richard and R-I-G-H-T in Arkwright. ‘Rich, profitable, you see. And right, good. He was famous for making factories that were profitable – *rich* – and worked well – in the *right* way. Get it *Richard Arkwright!*’ Adam explains, as his students nod and chuckle, while underlining their notes.

While the history section is Adam’s favourite part to teach, in his view, the first section on the fundamental principles of British life is the most important. In this section he covers what he calls D.R P.I.T (Democracy, Rule of law, Participation in community life, Individual liberty and Tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs) which, according to the Handbook, are the fundamental principles of British life; and the FREEDOM BUS (Freedom



of belief, freedom from unfair discrimination and freedom of speech). In Adam's view, these subjects are essential for migrants' successful integration and must be respected by those who wish to live in the UK.

### **Reproduction and subversion**

While at times, Adam's teaching of these messages about norms and values appear as universal and general, at others the contemporary political ideology which underpin them is made strikingly clear. For example, in relation to the 'responsibilities and freedoms' which come with permanent residency, Adam tells the class: 'one of the responsibilities is "Look after yourself and your family", so that means get a job, don't take benefits'. Through the process of explaining and interpreting the Handbook to his students, Adam reveals the contemporary political ideological discourse which demonizes and stigmatizes welfare benefit recipients (Patrick 2017). By imparting this message to his students, Adam mediates between the state and migrants, translating and instilling the 'fundamental values of British Life' as prescribed by the Conservative government.

At other times, present-day political discourse is made apparent through the explanation of historical events. Referring to the arrival of Huguenot refugees in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, Adam tells his class:

'Why do you have to learn this? Because they want you to know that Britain was a place that would welcome you. If you are in trouble, you think: Britain. But today, no! We cherry pick! Britain used to be a place of refuge. And it still is... but the island is getting very full. Immigration puts pressure on resources and infrastructure. Soon

we'll have to start sleeping upright! There's no more room for housing. So please stop coming.'

Highlighting the disparity between the Handbook's portrayal of Britain as a welcoming place of refuge with contemporary rhetoric that favours being 'tough on immigration', Adam draws on dominant narratives around immigration and austerity. These narratives, which posit that 'out of control' immigration is the reason for failing public services, enable him to justify the apparent contradiction between the Handbook's airbrushed version of Britain and contemporary dominant narratives which demonize migrants and asylum seekers. In the meantime, austerity policies and the political decisions behind them are left unchallenged.

It is not only Adam who regurgitates these contemporary political discourses. Echoing the claim that migration is a 'problem' are the students themselves. In the months leading up to the referendum, in line with the overriding political message championed by the 'Leave' campaign, it was common for students to level this accusation at Eastern European migrants in particular. One such student, a refugee from Sierra Leone, tells me:

'The problem is the Eastern Europeans are coming here and they take all the benefits. They work and earn £1000 and get £3000 in benefits. They come here and they just sit down. And on the bus, they are making noise and British people don't like noise, especially in the morning.'

Others in the class echo her sentiments: 'We can't carry on like this.' 'Germany is suffering too.' 'There are too many.' I attempt to challenge claims that Eastern Europeans receive huge sums of money through benefits, and point out that if they receive Working Tax Credits, it is

because they are not being paid a sufficient wage. These arguments fall on deaf ears. ‘Human rights have gone too far in this country,’ the Sierra Leonean refugee says.

Such exchanges point to a rather insidious process. Teachers, who are migrants themselves, are co-opted by the state to provide a highly ideological take on ‘good British citizenship’ which buys into dominant narratives of austerity, scarcity and underserving migrants. The students, meanwhile, reproduce a rhetoric which demonizes other migrants who are in not dissimilar positions to themselves. Indeed, many of the students in the class (if eligible) also receive benefits in order to top up the meagre salaries they earn as cleaners, carers, depot workers and security guards. The fact that many of these students hail from countries in Britain’s ex-colonial empire is significant. Given that they and their family members must apply for visas, many perceive the ease with which Europeans can cross the border as unjust. Complaints that Eastern Europeans do not speak English, or about other cultural differences such as ‘being loud in the morning’, highlight the tensions created through stratifying global mobility regimes which produce geopolitical hierarchies (Jansen 2009).

Alongside the reproduction of contemporary political ideology, however, the classes also act as spaces where such logic is challenged and critiqued. Teachers do not cleanly impart the government’s message as outlined in the Handbook; rather, it is refracted in complex and contradictory ways. Adam interprets and explains the information in a way he thinks is understandable to his students and, in doing so, creates a hybrid version of the Handbook in which his and the students’ interpretations merge with its prescribed views. The plague, for example, is likened to Ebola, while Adam jokingly wonders if Queen Mary performed voodoo on Edward VI. The discovery of DNA, meanwhile, is explained in relation to its use for paternity tests, an issue which is relevant to many migrants in their applications for residency and citizenship on the basis of family reunification: ‘Sir Francis Crick [the co-

discoverer of DNA], he took the power away from women and gave it to the doctors!’ Adam tells his students.

In other moments, discussion of the Handbook provides space for students to level criticism at British society. For example, when discussing the section in the Handbook on literature, Adam tells his class:

‘They [British people] always want to read books. This is one of the problems with British culture, they always want to read even in congestion time [he acts out someone reading on a busy tube].’

Female student: ‘Yes, because they don’t want to look at each other.’

Or in discussion about the TV license and pub-going:

Female student: ‘Lots of white people don’t even have TVs.’

Adam: ‘Yes, because they spend all their time in pubs. They go to work. Go to the pub and then go home to sleep. So there’s no point.’

The hybridization and subtle challenging of the government’s message also extends to the ideological discourse that underpins much of the Handbook and that emerges in the classes. While Adam reproduces dominant narratives about migration and pressure on public resources, he also relays alternative messages about the human right to migrate. Indeed, just as frequent as discussions about excessive migration are comments about the inevitability of migration. Describing when hunter gatherers lived on the British Isles, Adam tells the class:

‘If someone tells you, “you’re an immigrant”. You say, “you’re an immigrant too”. God gave us legs and so we move. If there is no water in this place then you go and find water somewhere else.’

Similarly, drawing on the Normans and the House of Windsor’s German paternal descent, Adam tells the class:

‘Yes, they were talking about this in the Parliament. The Norman conquerors they were immigrants as well. We’re all immigrants. The Queen too!’

These comments, as well as Adam’s above explanation of why Huguenot refugees were welcome but current migrants and refugees are not, highlight the historical contingency of anti-immigrant attitudes and austerity narratives. The sanitized version of British history and culture presented in the Life In The UK handbook, which the students must rehearse in order to pass the test, clashes with their lived experience of contemporary Britain often characterized by inequality and prejudice. In large part this is due to the Handbook’s ‘silencing’ (Tyler 2012:9) of Britain’s colonial past and its role in the formation of contemporary Englishness and Britishness (Tyler 2012:12; see also Gilroy 2005; Wemyss 2009). This silencing not only omits the violence and exploitation upon which contemporary Britain was formed, but also falsely ‘reproduces the English nation and its history as White’ (Tyler 2012:12). As a consequence, settlers to the UK from the former British colonies and their descendants – many of whom are students in Life in the UK classes – are made to be immigrants, foreigners and outsiders (Tyler 2012:12).

While the Handbook’s depiction of British history and contemporary life present the country as a welcoming and fair place, students’ own experiences with immigration

bureaucracy and in everyday life in general tell a different story. Their experiences of racism, prejudice and discrimination are at odds with the supposedly cherished values of tolerance and freedom that dominate the Handbook. Meanwhile, the Britain of the Wimbledon Championships, Stonehenge and the National Trust – all topics which students must memorize in order to pass the test – is one far removed from my fellow classmates' lives, the vast majority of whom have never visited such places. As Adam tells his class, 'I always say we should do Life in the UK practical, but immigrants work too much to have time for these visits'. In his role of teacher, Adam tries to bridge this gap. At times this means engaging with contemporary political rhetoric, but at others it means challenging and subverting such narratives. Lack of housing, for example, may be explained in terms of over-population caused by migration, rather than due to lack of state funding. Yet in other moments, dominant discourses which stigmatize immigration are challenged. The UK, a country which seems openly hostile to migrants, is explained to be formed through the movement of people: 'even the Queen is an immigrant'.

## **Conclusion**

Life in the UK classes act as spaces for discussions which both reproduce and challenge contemporary political narratives around austerity. In the lead up to the Brexit referendum, as in the rest of the country, discussion was dominated by discourses about high migrant numbers and scarce resources. Austerity measures which characterized UK social policies under the Coalition and Conservative governments between 2010 and 2017 were presented as essential antidotes to overspending. Within this period of virtuous belt-tightening, high numbers of migrants were viewed as placing excessive pressure on struggling public services.

Such discourses were regurgitated by students in the Life in the UK classes, despite the fact that such claims could just as easily be levelled at them.

The recent success of the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn, however, suggests that austerity may be losing its hold over public discourse. And just as public debates around austerity shift in the UK at large, so too does the discussion in the class. In return trips to the classes in the summer of 2017, anti-austerity arguments were finding their way into the students' exchanges.

Discussion in Life in the UK classes, therefore, act as a barometer for the day's dominant attitudes. British values and principles, current affairs and history are discussed and rationalized through the filter of contemporary political ideology. This appears as a rather insidious process through which 'other' others are scapegoated and demonized. Yet, at the same time, in these classes both the teacher and the students alter and transform dominant narratives around austerity and migration, subtly challenging the ideology upon which it is based and providing a space for its critique.

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<sup>1</sup> This research was (part)funded by Grant ES/M003825/1 from the Economic and Social Research Council of the United Kingdom for the project ‘An ethnography of advice: Between market, society and the declining welfare state’, which I gratefully acknowledge. Opinions expressed are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Names of people and places have been anonymized to protect research respondents