

Race, class and Brexit: how did we get here?



*Although the anti-immigration feeling expressed by the Leave vote was ostensibly directed at other Europeans, racist hate crime also surged immediately after the EU referendum. **Brendan McGeever (Birkbeck, University of London) (left) and Satnam Virdee (University of Glasgow)** locate the causes of Brexit in neoliberalism, the decline of working-class solidarity, and the emergence of a new politics of racist resentment.*

The neoliberal settlement in Europe, crafted over three decades by conservative and social democratic parties alike, has been dramatically unsettled by the most sustained economic depression since the 1930s. It is the hard right, first and foremost, that has capitalised on these historic developments. From Sweden to Switzerland, from Belgium to Bulgaria, a tide of reactionary populism has been sweeping the European mainland which demands nothing less than a restoration of a mythical golden age of sovereign nation-states defined by cultural and racial homogeneity. Britain has not been inoculated from the turbulence created by this decade-long and still unfinished crisis of late capitalism. The most striking manifestation of that crisis is Brexit.



Bengali New Year in Bethnal Green, 2011. Photo: [Moustaque Chowdhury](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

If confirmation were needed that the Brexit vote was intimately bound up with questions of race, we need only recall the wave of racist hate unleashed against migrants as well as the long-established black and brown British in June 2016. How could it come to pass that the first formal break from the 30-year neoliberal consensus in Britain was marbled through with such racism and violence?

Englishness: empire, decline and class decomposition

We suggest the relationship between race and Brexit cannot be understood without accounting for the invisible driver of Englishness. There is a [compelling case](#) to centre the English story in Brexit: 87 per cent of Leave votes were cast in England. Further, 79 per cent of those who identify as “English not British” voted Leave, as did 66 per cent of those who identified as “more English than British”. This particular vision of Englishness, we suggest, is characterized by a new politics of resentment underscored by structural decline and class decomposition.

[Many have suggested](#) that the Brexit visions conjured up by the official Leave campaign in 2016 were stained through with imperial nostalgia. We agree. However, the racism that animated the Brexit voting public in 2016 has its moorings not just in the aching loss of Empire, but also the structural decline that Britain has undergone since the late 1970s and the onset of neoliberalism. The politics of Englishness today asserts itself against a backdrop of Britain's comparatively marginal position in the world economy. Alongside this are the defeats endured by the social movements of the 1980s and the accompanying delegitimising of socialist politics, which has left a working class profoundly disaggregated by region, nation and ethnicity. In this sense, it is the [transformations of the 1980s](#), rather than the austerity programmes since 2008, that bear heaviest on our present moment.

Significantly, the period of working class defeat under the Conservatives led by Thatcher was accompanied by the loss of alternative class frames of resistance, including those that re-imagined the working class as multi-ethnic. Although the organisations of the working class and the left more generally have a long history of imbrication in the politics of racism in England, these organisations have, at the same time, provided limited but nevertheless important cultures of solidarity that have in turn played a key role in re-imagining black and brown migrants (and their British-born descendants) as part of the working class. Under Conservative rule, the politics of class and the language of solidarity that had underpinned working class politics were significantly weakened. The historic settlement of post-1945 Britain that labour, to a limited degree, was to be protected from capital was reversed. These defeats in turn profoundly diminished those counter-currents of anti-racist class politics, including those aligned to the politics of blackness.

In recent years, the prospect (and reality) of downward mobility has produced class injuries and collective experiences that have been recast through the politics of [ressentiment](#). Whereas thirty-five years ago labour and anti-racist movements could meaningfully intervene, today the realignment of British politics has (in England, at least) left the terrain wide-open to the right, from the neoliberal mainstream to its far-right outriders. In this context, decline, though necessarily a multi-ethnic process, is experienced in a racialised frame and is increasingly responded to by some sections of the working class through the politics of resentful English nationalism. The realignment of politics to the right has therefore created an environment in which racism can be more readily articulated since it resonates with the cultural and political logic of our time.

This racialising nationalism has borne a particularly defensive character since the 2008 crisis.

It is defined not by imperial prowess or superiority, but by a deep sense of loss of prestige; a retreat from the damaging impact of a globalised world that is no longer recognisable, no longer "British". The decline of empire, then, has not led to the overcoming of the English imperial complex, but its retraction into a defensive exclusionary imaginary: we are under siege, it is time to pull up the drawbridge. This was one of the defining features in the discursive architecture of the Leave campaign. As Stuart Hall once put it, "Englishness has always carried a racial signature". We are hearing its familiar refrains in these crisis-ridden post-Brexit times.

As [large-scale survey data](#) shows, the main drivers of political Englishness are Euroscepticism and concern about "immigration". Indeed, it is the racialised question of "immigration" that is arguably now defining the conversation around Englishness. In the 1980s and 1990s, public concern about "immigration" remained relatively low, with no more than 10 per cent of the population seeing it as a key issue during this period. Since 2000, however, the hardening of attitudes has seen that figure [rise dramatically](#) to 30–40 per cent, such that by 2006 "race and immigration" were recorded as [the most important](#) issues facing the country. The toxicity of the 2016 EU referendum has deepened these trends, and brought us to what we would now define as a state of emergency. The interlocking features of racialised nationalism, anti-immigrant sentiment and Euroscepticism – identifiable across the whole of Europe – have come into full view in Brexit Britain, particularly in England. Racism has become normalised in both elite political discourse and practice and everyday life, dramatically diminishing the spaces for Britain's racialised minorities to breathe and live life free from hate.

The emergence of the 'white working class'

Yet while Brexit added an accelerant on those conditions and allowed racism to flourish, it did not create them. Across the political spectrum, from New Labour to Conservative, a powerful narrative has become dominant over the last decade in which the principal losers of globalisation are referred to as the “[white working class](#)”. And this message has been amplified over and over again by the right-wing press who deploy this category for their own instrumental ends, particularly for eroding support for multiculturalism. As a result, the white working class – a descriptive and analytic category whose origins lay in social science research – has over the course of this decade-long crisis been brought to life as a collective social force, such that some working class men and women now understand and make sense of the real economic pain they suffer through such a racialised frame of white working class [victimhood](#).

This construction of the white working class has led to a number of deleterious developments in the field of politics. First, it has helped cohere and then shift those parts of the working class most enamoured of such an identification into the camp of the anti-immigrant right: that is, they have come to invest politically in understanding themselves (i.e. the white working class) as the main victims of globalisation. Second, by juxtaposing the category white working class to immigrant, such a narrative not only privileged one stratum of Britain’s working class over the other on the grounds of citizenship, it also erased those parts of the working class who were black and brown Britons. And through this sleight of hand, the lived experiences of those whose economic austerity was overlain by race and gender discrimination were simply elided and closed off from public scrutiny and debate. Third, and related, this had the effect of further dividing the multi-ethnic working class on racial lines, and in doing so submerged those other explanations for working class pain – the austerity imposed by Labour and Conservative elites alike. This has damaged (but not ruled out) the possibility of a united working class challenge to neoliberal rule.

An urgent question is therefore before us: can a multi-ethnic class politics re-emerge in a juncture where the racist right are in the ascendancy and the infrastructure of anti-racist resistance appears hollowed out and in long-term retreat?

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

[Brendan McGeever](#) is Lecturer in the Sociology of Racialisation and Antisemitism at Birkbeck, University of London.

[Satnam Virdee](#) is Professor of Sociology at the University of Glasgow.