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Racism, Ethnicity, Migration and Decolonial Studies (SLSP2690)

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Brexit - a portmanteau of 'Britain' and 'Exit', describing the departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union - came to light on the 23rd of June 2016 and resultantly sparked the imagination of sociologists. Various discourses have gone on to explore the complex relationship between Brexit and race, sovereignty, multiculturalism and class, but of specific interest to us is the debate surrounding the socioeconomic characteristics of 'Brexiteers' – a term used to refer to those who supported the UK's withdrawal from the EU. This essay will examine the relationship between class and the Brexit vote by critically engaging with the often-repeated mantra that the 'left behinds' (i.e. the economically disadvantaged) gave us Brexit (Goodhart, 2017). This stance has immense purchase in both popular and media-generated discourses, yet this essay will problematise this line of thought on numerous grounds. Firstly, this essay will explore what exactly this term connotes, and will argue that to denote the 'left behind' as mainly responsible for Brexit is a fallacious assumption and is further guilty of methodological whiteness (Bhambra, 2017). Next, this essay will proceed by evidencing that the middle-class played an equally important role in the referendum outcome; where some scholars convincingly maintain Brexit to be a middle-class phenomenon (Antonucci et al., 2017). In support of this, this essay shall go on to critically examine the main driving forces that underpinned the leave vote: namely a quest to 'reclaim' sovereignty, tighten controls of immigration, and act against multiculturalism. Therefore, this essay will contend that these attitudes are not a uniquely working-class disposition but rather

cross class boundaries (Virdee and McGeever, 2017): ultimately emphasising that Brexit is best understood as a white – not a working-class – revolt (Bhambra, 2017). Lastly, this essay will go on to contend that the 'left behind' argument is ultimately flawed at its very roots, as it wrongly depicts such a group to be a homogenous entity in both its ethnic makeup and its values. It seemingly misremembers that ethnic minorities and young people are also economically marginalised groups yet overwhelmingly voted to remain in the European Union: perhaps partially as a rejection to the xenophobic values associated with the Leave campaign (Akala, 2017; Demir, 2017).

Firstly, to truly understand this debate, it is necessary to break down who the 'left behind' are understood as. Class has increasingly become brought to the forefront in explaining the outcome of the UK referendum to leave the EU – with regular emphasis placed on the importance of the working-class vote (Butcher, 2019). Some commentators contend that the outcome was a consequence of those who had been 'left behind' (Goodwin and Heath, quoted in Antonucci et al., 2017: p.212) or, in other terms, were 'economic-have-nots', revolting against the establishment, whose dissatisfaction was perceived to be associated with the long-term deindustrialisation of their region (Favell, 2019). To some, therefore, globalization was presented as the issue against which such people were voting - a rejection by those who have been most affected by it - 'losing out' in processes of automation, the increasing prevalence of low-wage immigrant labour, and the outsourcing of jobs abroad (Bhambra, 2017: p.215). The 'left behind's predicament was heavily contrasted with those who have benefited from globalization; with some arguing that the Leave and Remain voters reflected two camps economically opposed. In this sense, the Leave voters are presented as the 'globalization losers' seemingly lacking education and employment opportunities, while Remain voters are 'globalization winners' and reflect the profile of the well-educated and well-off urban voter (Goodwin and Heath, 2016b quoted in Antonucci et al., 2017: p.213). Because of this, the 'left behind' conjures up an image of British citizens who were not just economically marginalized, but also unable to keep up with socio-cultural changes. This divide separates those with a cosmopolitan outlook open to immigration (the '*anywheres'*), to those with more traditional and local views (the 's*omewheres*') (Goodhart, 2017). Consequently, Favell (2019) argues this predicament positioned the North of England as a '*place of simmering racism and xenophobia',* pitting White British, older minority groups, and newer incomers such as asylum seekers against each other, with some ethnographic research going as far to suggest that the white working-class feel that ethnic minorities were prioritised at their expense (Gest, 2016 quoted in Bhambra, 2017: p.221). Nevertheless, whilst we cannot deny that sections of the working-class did indeed vote to leave the EU in the referendum, perhaps prompted by feelings of marginalisation, to contend that such a sharp dichotomy exists is simply reductionist. Associating the 'left behinds' with 'somewhere' i.e. *deprived* areas utilises maps that are of poor statistical visualisation that do not take into consideration the population density of each district (Green, 2017). This ignores the numerous regions that go against this 'anywhere versus somewhere' trend - for instance Tottenham, which, despite having faced deindustrialisation and thus being inhabited by the 'left behind', displayed a seemingly cosmopolitan outlook by an overwhelming 76.2% of its inhabitants voting remain (The House of Commons, 2017) conceivably due to the fact it is home to a large population of second-generation immigrants (UK Polling Report, 2015).

Secondly, therefore, we are presented with another issue that renders the 'left behind' argument as problematic. Whilst the opening of markets and the outsourcing of jobs have indeed added to valid anxieties to populations in the UK, focusing on the apparent preponderance of class in the outcome of the EU referendum erases the impact of other social inequalities, namely *race and ethnicity* (Demir, 2017). Henceforth, although the 'left behind' argument is a powerful narrative and has been successfully co-opted by parties across the political spectrum, it is not without its shortcomings. Virdee and McGeever (2017:

p.1814) highlight this, stressing that the right-wing press increasingly entwined the pain endured by its white working-class constituency to *questions of immigration* for its own instrumental ends. As a result, some working-class individuals make sense of their economic disadvantage through a racialized frame of white working-class victimhood (Ware 2008, quoted in Virdee and McGeever, 2017: p.1814): coercing them to side with the anti-immigrant right and thus being likely to vote for Brexit. By juxtaposing the white working-class to immigrants, such a narrative privileges one subcategory of Britain's working-class over the other, whilst concurrently expunging from public debate the lived experiences of the British working-class who happen to be black and brown whose economic austerity is superimposed by racial discrimination (Virdee and McGeever, 2017: p.1814). Henceforth, the 'left behind' argument is disingenuous because it wrongly homogenises the working-class as wholly white. Nevertheless, Akala (2017, 15:53-15:59) emphasises this was not borne by the discourse surrounding Brexit but rather runs through much Eurocentric scholarship. Presented in this light, class is presumed to be more significant than race and therefore displaces structures of racialized inequality from the conversation. Bhambra (2017, p.227) extenuates, however, that

"class is not the operation of a race-neutral economic system, but part of an economic system which is deeply racialized".

Subsequently, to ignore that certain sections of the working-class have had their poverty compounded by race is the "*very opposite to class solidarity*" (Akala, 2017, 15:40-15:51) and has the effect of dividing the multi-ethnic working-class on racial lines – where Conservative governments have utilised this narrative to help to 'neuter' the possibility of a united working-class challenge to neoliberal rule: undermining a long history of solidarity the working-class has had with ethnic minority people (Virdee and McGeever, 2017: p.1814). Consequently, scholars such as Bhambra (2017: p.227) proffer that it is imperative to move away from such 'methodological whiteness', and instead, we should extend our analysis to include workers who have been left out as well as those who *perceive themselves* as left behind.

However, whilst it is vital to bring up the methodological whiteness inherent in the conceptualisation of who we have come to understand as the 'left behind', other scholars question if this popular emphasis on the working-class vote (and their apparent aversion to the establishment and immigration) is truly warranted. Just as the working-class is not ethnically homogenous, it must be said that the profile of Leave voters is not as socially uniform as popular coverage would concede; both with respect to socioeconomic conditions and to education. Studies such as that conducted by Antonucci et al. (2017) reaffirm this line of thought and reject the dichotomous view of the low-educated, working-class Brexiteer versus the high-educated, middle-class Remainer as argued by thinkers such as Goodhart (2017). Utilising data from a post-Brexit survey based on the British Election Study, they illuminate that of those who voted 'Leave', a mere 17% were skilled manual workers (considered the 'left behind'), and further, those who have intermediate levels of education (high GCSE grades and A-levels) were more pro-Leave than the low-educated (Antonucci et al., 2017: p.211). Moreover, the proportion of Leave voters who were of the lowest two social classes (D and E) was just *24 per cent* (Dorling, 2016, cited in Virdee and McGeever, 2017: p.1803).Thus, such data evidences that it is too crude to propose that Brexit constituted the revolt of the 'left behind': with this oversimplifying, and even inverting, the bigger picture. Rather, the Leave campaign managed to successfully cohere a '*cross-class coalition'* of people (Virdee and McGeever, 2017: p.1803), of which the middle-classes played an undeniable role. Antonucci et al. (2017, p.225) also stress this, and diverging from popular discourse, emphasised that their research uncovered *"an association between identifying as middle-class* [rather than working-class] *and vote Leave"*: with almost three in five Leave voters (59%) coming from the top three social classes - A, B and C1 (Dorling, 2016, cited in

Virdee and McGeever, 2017: p.1803). Henceforth, whilst the 'left behind' narrative is blind to the trajectory of race, it also acted to erase the crucial input of *the middle-classes* in the referendum outcome and instead acts to valorise the working-class. Favell (2019) contends that this rings true, as when the media and politicians searched out an 'archetypical Brexiter', they purposely visited the inhabitants of white, deprived estates of Britain – without stepping foot into middle-class areas that were also significant 'leave' constituencies. Therefore, commentators stress that this ultimately is a "*disservice to the poor"* as it makes them responsible for *"the unsavoury turn in politics"* (Demir, 2017). In reality, it could be said that Brexit is most convincingly explained as the social malaise of the 'squeezed middle' (Antonucci et al., 2017), with the leave vote being disproportionately delivered by the *propertied, pensioned white middle-class* based in southern England, not the northern working-class who are largely held accountable (Bhambra, 2017: p.215).

Furthermore, this is illuminated when we look to what core motivations underpinned individuals to vote 'Leave' in the referendum. Surveys show that voters were less divided on economic grounds than the defenders of the 'left behind' narrative would claim, as the attitudes towards capitalism were similar for both Brexiteers and Remainers (Demir, 2017). Rather, the Brexit campaign was more so a matter of cultural values, including *sovereignty*, where Virdee and McGeever (2017) claim this was underscored by a nostalgia for Empire. However, Dorling and Tomlinson (2019) contest such nostalgia is *misplaced*, as it does not acknowledge Britain's imperial history, and entails anxiety about Britain's current status and an unrealistic vision of its future. Accordingly, the EU referendum campaign was indicative of what Gilroy (2004, quoted in Ashe, 2016) terms as 'postcolonial melancholia' - a narrative crafted by, and for, those unable to reconcile themselves with the loss of Empire but also unable to mourn its colonial legacy (Virdee and McGeever, 2017: p.1806). To deal with this, the nation fashions selective accounts of its past, informing how Brexiteers imagine its future: a restoration of a "*mythical, golden age of sovereign state, defined by cultural and racial homogeneity*" (Inglehart and Norris 2016, quoted in Virdee and McGeever, 2017: p.1803). This is evident when UKIP advocated that Britain should leave the EU, and instead set up trade relations with the Commonwealth, defining it as a '*voluntary organisation of nation states*': with UKIP's Commonwealth spokesman claiming that he is 'deeply ashamed' of how we abandoned our 'Kith & Kin' by joining the EU in 1973 (Ashe, 2016). This conceals the fact that the Commonwealth continuously affords Britain economic and political dominance and is ironic considering UKIP has no intention of laxing its migration regulations, but rather advocates the implementation of a draconian, points-based migration policy (Ashe, 2016). Akala (2017, 10:15-10:34) further questions this newfound love of the Commonwealth, considering the recent charter planes full of Jamaican nationals who were flown back 'home' despite having spent their lives in Britain. Subsequently, intertwined with this quest for sovereignty, Virdee and McGeever (2017: p.1806) emphasise that Brexit was accentuated by an insular narrative of retreating from a globalized world, playing on concerns around *immigration*. Surveys conducted with leave voters found that 80% saw immigration as a force for ill (Ashcroft 2016, cited in Demir, 2017) with immigration control being the second most cited motivation for voting leave, despite its lack of impact on the lives of Leavers (Antonucci et al., 2017: p.214). This was perhaps influenced by the then UKIP leader, Nigel Farage, claiming the EU has harmed Britain by facilitating uncontrolled immigration - exemplified in his "Breaking Point" poster, picturing Middle Eastern refugees queuing at Europe's borders. This selective portrayal depicted migrants as bearers of alien practices who are thus incompatible with being British (or more so, *English*), generating support for their exclusion from the imagined national community (Virdee and McGeever, 2017: p.1808). Nevertheless, this anti-migration rhetoric is arguably evident throughout the twentieth century where Britain has continuously sustained a *cross-class coalition* opposed to its migrant presence, with Brexit being merely symptomatic of this (Solomos 2003, cited in Virdee and McGeever, 2017: p.1807). Accordingly, this shows it is disingenuous to blame Brexit on the seemingly xenophobic working-class, as Akala (2017: 2:46-3:13) highlights – racist ideology was codified not by the poor, but by some of the 'greatest' thinkers of the modern age and utilised by a pan-European ruling class to devastating effect. Bhambra

(2017: p.222) further asserts that this opposition to immigration was chiefly culturally (not economically) based, with it extending beyond a white working-class to also comprise the *middle-class*. Accordingly, a deliberate misrepresentation of white majority political action relabelled as being the action of a more narrowly defined white working-class is fallacious and classist, as Brexit is best understood as a *white* revolt: with 'whiteness' ultimately trumping class position (Bhambra, 2017: p.219).

Inextricably linked to this concern of sovereignty and anti-immigration sentiment is also a concern over *multiculturalism.* Using the same survey conducted by Ashcroft (2016), multiculturalism was the main reason that Brexiters elucidated to that swung their vote, even surpassing immigration – with 81% of voters seeing multiculturalism as a force for ill. Therefore, as aforementioned, this goes on to further dispel the idea of Brexit being caused by the economically 'left behind'. Rather, as Demir (2017) claims, it is more to do with feelings of resentment over long-term shifts including gender equality, LGBT+ rights, but also importantly racial diversity, multiculturalism, and thus a declining homogenous national identity. This is illuminated when we unpack what multiculturalism entails, as it involves the acceptance of other cultures as *equal*, and thus moves beyond mere diversity. As Demir (2017) accentuates, multiculturalism necessitates two central issues: firstly, the rejection of the assimilationist policies of the old order, but rather dethroning the idea of national homogeneity; and secondly, a demand for the equal participation of minoritized groups as political citizens, able to make transformative claims about the national identity. By these standards, multiculturalism in practice includes protection from racism and the provision of cultural accommodations (Modood, 2007). Subsequently, the resistance to this multiculturalist ethos, encapsulated in the 'I want my country back' sentiment led by the Brexit camp, can be interpreted as a *white backlash* against such demands for equality, and thus against a *loss of privilege:* essentially a yearning for the restoration of 1950s Britain with white Christian Britons topping the social hierarchy (Demir, 2017). Hence, this anti-multiculturalism provokes a longing to take the country back not just from EU 'immigrants', but from all 'other citizens' who dare question the overarching power the dominant subjects held (Demir, 2017), acting to establish the past as a 'white' nation, into which "*racialized others have insinuated themselves and gained disproportionate advantage"* (Bhambra, 2017: p.214). Nevertheless, some scholars argue there is nothing wrong nor racist with this 'racial self-interest' – such as Kaufmann (2017) who proffers that it is simply about identifying with one's own: essentially a 'group partiality'. Considering that all other minority cultures express cultural belonging, Kaufmann (2017) deems the stigmatisation of the white majority populations unfair, when they only wish to do the same. The problem with this, Bhambra (2017: p.219) explains, is that it fails to understand that minority 'group partiality' occurs in the context of structured racial discrimination by the majority other. The difference between minorities and majorities expressing group sentiments is that the former arises in hopes for inclusion and equality, while the latter are a consequence of a wish to exclude and dominate – essentially, to maintain white supremacy (Allen 2005, citied in Bhambra, 2017: p.220). Consequently, while it is clear to see that Brexit reflects *cultural* voting, particularly voting for an authoritarian agenda, we lack evidence that it represents a class and therefore 'left behind' vote (Antonucci et al., 2017: p.214). This is emphasised by Marr (2017), who contends that "*the connection between cultural conservatism and voting to leave the EU is undeniable*" - more so than any factor, including income.

Additionally, these values of '*nationalism, xenophobia, and often outright racism*' that played in the Leave campaign (Akala, 2017, 1:01-1:07) help to explain as to why a disproportionate amount of black and minority ethnic (BME) individuals rejected the Brexit vote. As Demir (2017) states - for ethnic minorities, the xenophobic undertone of the pro-Brexit camp was likely more repugnant than any abstract idea about sovereignty. This is evident when we look at the breakdown of voting action by ethnicity: where 73% of Black and 67% of Asian

people voted to Remain in the EU, compared to just 47% of white people (Ashcroft, 2016). In addition, this pattern remains similar when we look at minorities in a religious sense too, for example, 70% of Muslims voted remain, a heavy contrast with 42% of Christians (Ashcroft, 2016). Even in cities that voted Leave, such as Bradford, wards made up of ethnic minorities voted differently: with some areas being over 60% Remain, such as Manningham and Toller (Rosenbaum, 2017). Consequently, this rejection of Brexit by the ethnic minority vote makes us question the repeated mantra of Brexit being about the 'left behind'. This is especially considering the empirical category of the 'left behind' (understood in terms of socio-economic disadvantage) contains within it a substantial BME population. As highlighted by Bhambra (2017: p.216), BME communities are more likely to suffer the effects of austerity, as well as have worse outcomes in health, education, and employment compared to white populations. This trend is evident for religious minorities too, where 46% of Muslims reside in the bottom 10% of the most deprived local authority districts in England (Sundas et al., 2015: p.18). When we come to question this overrepresentation of BME individuals who voted to Remain in the EU, Akala (2017, 12:33-12:58) emphasises it is unlikely explained by an undying commitment to European unity, as many black Britons are not blind to the fact that such a phenomenon was fostered by the pan-European project of racialised enslavement. Whilst there are no doubt multiple motivations that swung the voting action of BME individuals, Akala (2017, 2:07-2:15) states that such "*xenophobia, anti-intellectualism and ahistorical analyses*" played an undeniable role in the rejection of the Brexit campaign by such populations. In addition to this, as Haastrup (2016) points out, whilst Commonwealth citizens may have been inclined to vote for Brexit to achieve a fairer immigration system (as the principle of free movement enables white Europeans unrestricted access to the UK, whilst concurrently limiting migration from the non-white Commonwealth), she points out that *non-EU* migration currently outnumbers migration from *within* the EU – therefore it is difficult to see how Brexit would benefit those coming from Africa, the Caribbean and parts of the Pacific. Not only this, but many BME individuals may have rejected Brexit by arguing that the superficial fear over EU immigration was simply utilised as a proxy for wider concerns over multiculturalism and, essentially, hatred towards anyone who is not White British. Khan and Weekes-Bernard (2015:2, cited in Demir, 2017) contends so: as ethnic minorities born in Britain know full well that "*when 'they' talk about immigration, we know that 'this is still about us*".

Moreover, another reason as to why we should be cautious of the argument the 'left behinds' gave us Brexit, is that it is ignorant to the voting action of younger people. Whilst BME individuals overwhelmingly rejected the Brexit vote, it is fair to say that so did the younger generations, despite being constitutive of the 'left behind', with many being over-qualified and forced to compete with other EU citizens for employment opportunities. As Calhourn (2016: p.50) points out - 75 percent of those aged 18 to 24 voted for a future in Europe, illuminated further when we look to voting data by constituencies, with the highest Remain vote being 87.8% in central Cambridge: an area with a high student population (Rosenbaum, 2017). This contrasts starkly to the sixty-one percent of those over 65 (along with a majority of all those over 45) voting to Leave the EU (Calhourn, 2016). Arguably, therefore, this goes on to further prove Brexit was grounded in nostalgia, with Richards et al. (2020: p.79) evidencing that old age is associated with higher levels of both the types of nostalgia they identified: the first being an "egalitarian nostalgia," characterized by a dislike of economic inequality and the 'professionalization' of the political class, but also "traditional nostalgia", essentially a longing for a restoration of an ethnically homogeneous nation, with traditional family structures and gender roles. The latter form of nostalgia is arguably the more applicable and visible form, considering the majority of older voters state significant damage

to the British economy is a '*price worth paying'* (Smith, 2017) so long as we depart the EU, but also their wide opposition to multiculturalism, with only four per cent of those over 65 seeing it in a positive light (Ashcroft, 2016). In contrast, those who are under 35 grew up in the slipstream of the anti-racist struggles of the 1970s and 1980s and encountered a Britain transformed by the anti-racist movement (Virdee and McGeever, 2018: p.1816). Consequently, younger people generally have a wider acceptance of an everyday multicultural reality; especially in urban England where the majority of Britain's minority populations live. Thus, the voting action of the younger generation can be perceived as them rejecting the racialised world that some of their predecessors wish to remain in, indicative of Gilroy (2004: p.131, quoted in Virdee and McGeever, 2017: p.1816) stating how "*convivial metropolitan cultures of the country's young people*" may serve as a "*bulwark against the machinations of racial politics".* In a similar vein of thought, Back (1996: p.134 quoted in Virdee and McGeever, 2017: p.1816) in his study of South London, found that young whites vacated both 'whiteness' and 'Englishness' due to the inability of these identifiers to comply with the multi-ethnicity present at the everyday level. Therefore, despite an anti-immigrant rhetoric existing in some pockets of Britain, the voting action of the youth gives a glimmer of optimism for a future where multiculturalism is rightly embraced.

To conclude, whilst the mantra that the 'left behind' caused Brexit is often repeated and has immense purchase in popular discourse, it remains a vastly problematic argument for various reasons – as shown throughout this essay. The 'left behind' is often depicted as (and has thus become synonymous with) the white working-class inhabitants of deprived, northern estates perceived as protesting against both the establishment, but also immigration. Whilst there is some limited basis of this argument, it is guilty of methodological whiteness, seemingly forgetting that the economically deprived, 'left behind' are not an ethnically homogenous group (Bhambra, 2017). Although we cannot deny that a significant section of the white working-class did indeed vote for Brexit, who voted 'remain' and who voted 'leave' is not as strongly divided on a class basis as some scholars would concede, as Brexit successfully cohered a cross-class coalition of voters; of which the middle-class playing a noteworthy role (Antonucci et al., 2017). This is especially evident when we examine the main issues that Brexit voters elucidated to that swung their vote: namely sovereignty, immigration and multiculturalism – which are culturally, not economically, based. These concerns, of course, are problematic in and of themselves, being indicative of 'postcolonial melancholia', that in terms of race does not

"[…] adequately confront difficult histories, nor develops an understanding of how those histories have shaped the present" (Akala, 2017, 16:53-17:00)

To some, therefore, Brexit is more sufficiently understood as a *white* rather than a working-class revolt exemplified by the clear racial divides of the referendum vote. As shown, BME individuals overwhelmingly voting to remain in the EU despite being an economically disadvantaged group themselves. This is perhaps most fruitfully explained by the xenophobic and overall authoritarian nature of the Leave campaign; which the younger generation of Britain reject en masse also. Ultimately, this goes to demonstrate that we must always remain critical of the argument that Brexit is best explained by the voting action of the 'left behind', as this is firstly based on classist presumptions which allows the middle-class to make responsible their poorer counterparts (despite voting for Brexit themselves), and secondly, ignores how ethnic and age dynamics interplay with class to produce divergent voting patterns. Thus, we must continually problematise the quest for sovereignty and anti-multiculturalism rhetoric that underpinned much of the Brexit campaign, whilst simultaneously understanding that other possible concerns which influenced voters to side with Brexit are not inherently invalid nor rooted in xenophobia.

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