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Post-millennial local whiteness: racialism, white dis/advantage and the denial of racism

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Abstract

In the tumultuous early 21st century, vigorous appeals to whiteness in Britain are largely attributed to populist ethno-nationalism. This article offers a complementary critical account focusing on the use of ‘racialism’ as a purportedly non-invidious theoretical framework for describing racial differences and resultant societal impacts. Drawing on recent examples, especially the work of David Goodhart and Eric Kaufmann, I consider the deployment of racialism to characterise a benign white ethno-racial communalism based on ‘self-interest’ and a positive preference for ‘co-ethnics’ sharing common values. I suggest that racialist local whiteness is used to pursue two repudiatory projects: first, politically weakening black, Asian and minority ethnic groups by constituting white disadvantage; and second, disarming accounts of pervasive and systemic racism by naturalising racial stratification. Ultimately, I argue that an understanding of racialist local whiteness guards against the racial reification of populist nationalism and illuminates the deeper entrenchment of racism.

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Keywords

Whiteness, racialism, racism, race, ethnicity, nativism

The crisis of leadership in the white community is remarkable—and terrifying—because there is, in fact, no white community. (Baldwin 2010: 166)

Introduction

Attempts to theorize racism in Britain in the current conjuncture are subject to empirical complexity and strong political contestation. Racial, ethnic, religious and national descriptive

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categories proliferate and overlap while varied explanatory theses compete and sometimes intersect. Within a wider context of European Union enlargement, the threat of Islamist terrorism, and the ‘migrant crisis’, far-right political groups such as Britain First and the English Defence League as well as the UK Independence Party and British National Party have fomented discord over mass immigration and its supposed deleterious economic and social impact on Britain. The setting of this anti-immigration agenda and upwelling of populist nationalism has pulled supposedly more moderate political parties, organizations and commentators into its orbit, setting the scene for the government’s ‘hostile environment’ for migrants and ‘Take Back Control’ sloganeering of the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign amongst other pernicious developments.

Much anti-immigration sentiment and concomitant racism combine ethno-nationalist and culturalist racist discourses; for example, concerns articulated over the ‘swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life, wanting to come to Britain’ as expressed by then Prime Minister David Cameron (BBC 2015). The danger posed by those culturally incommensurate others is maintained by the demand that entering migrants ‘integrate’ and ‘assimilate’ and underscored by the internal voluntarily segregated and unassimilable population, such as the ‘young Muslims feeling rootless’ also pronounced by Cameron.¹ Notably however, such ethno-nationalist expressions attempt to disassociate themselves from racial absolutism, let alone being seen to promulgate racist views – ‘...when a white person holds objectionable views, racist views for example’, Cameron declares, ‘we rightly condemn them.’² For Britain First, issues of ‘race and immigration’ result from clashing nationalist and globalist agendas, with overpopulation a problem of ‘space, not race.’ Rehearsing a key refrain of culturalist racism, Britain First denounces racism and presents itself instead as defending British Christian values and way of life. Displaying such a moderated, or at least non-extremist, image is reiterated by Britain First’s self-representation as a movement that welcomes and is supported by ‘British ethnic minorities’ as numerous pictured on their website. Holding the culturalist line is all the more important considering the implosion of the British National Party following its pivot from archetypal culturalist rhetoric that accepted ‘the right of all people to belong to a *specific culture* and to preserve the *local particularisms* which make us truly and fully human’ (BNP 2005, pp. 17, 18 emphasis added) to a full-throated nativist, white supremacist assault on Islam, Muslims, migrants and hyphenated British citizens (BNP 2010).

Nonetheless, ethno-nationalists are not restricted to the extremes of culturalist obscurantism and white supremacy. This article focuses on conjunctural expressions of British whiteness I term post-millennial local whiteness, as an attempt to navigate a rhetorical path between declarations of cultural incommensurability and biological superiority. ‘Post-millennial’ broadly denotes the period from the turn of the year 2000 onwards, and ‘local’ whiteness refers to British expressions of a *racial category* generally conceived of in wider terms such as ‘Caucasian’ or European. I present post-millennial local whiteness through the prism of ‘racialism’, which I explicate as a key practical-theoretical formation intended to enable the articulation of British ethno-nationalism within an explicit racial lexicon while disassociating from or obscuring its racist predilections. However, while commensurate with ethno-nationalism, racialism is deployed to effect specific racialized and racist interventions of which I focus on three. First, in reference to recent commentary, especially the work of David Goodhart and Eric Kaufmann, I demonstrate the disingenuous racialist articulation of a benign white ethno-racial communalism based on ‘self-interest’ that is supposedly pro-self as opposed to anti-other. Second, I argue that racialism is used to constitute race as a zero-sum political resource in order to weaken black, Asian and minority ethnic groups through local assertions of whiteness. Third, this weakening of black, Asian and minority ethnic groups is reinforced by a racialist naturalisation of racial inequality that denies the existence of racism as exaggerated cultural insensitivity. Overall, I conclude that examining post-millennial local whiteness indicates the racial reification of populist nationalism by drawing attention to the disingenuous ‘invocation’ of the white working class. Furthermore, an appreciation of the operations of racialism helps illuminate the intrinsic incoherence and racist tenets of white ethno-racial communalism that is more oriented toward the subjugation of black, Asian and minority ethnic peoples.

Excavating racialism

Critics of pluralist multiculturalism have sometimes felt their concern over minority groups’ right to difference and its deleterious implications for civic cohesion has been misrepresented and censured as racist (West 2006). Consequently, such critics have sought a means to refer to ‘racial issues’ without being portrayed as racist. This mission to detoxify race has been achieved in part by the use of racialism, a term with a chequered history dating from at least the 1930s. Initially seen as essentially racist, a spurious conceptual means to justify Nazi anti-

Semitism and an ideological buttress for racial hygiene (Huxley and Haddon 1935), racialism was later somewhat imprecisely regarded as the practical application of racial ideas usually by a racial group for its own advantage but not necessarily linked to racist notions of superiority and inferiority (Banton 1967). This muddled thinking was subject to strenuous critique (see Rex 1970; Miles 1989) and the term fell out of favour, with qualified reference to race or 'race' as ideal-typical concepts and processes of racialization and contingent racial formation enjoying common analytic usage.

The current efficacy of racialism can be regarded in formal, doctrinal terms as well as an informal disposition that espouses its key ideas without explicitly referencing the notion. Moreover, recent uses of racialism have gone hand-in-hand with the re-conceptualisation of race as a coherent category within the emergent post-genomic era and new materialist backlash against social constructionism. Within disciplines across the biological and social sciences ranging from population genetics and epidemiology to social anthropology and science and technology studies, theorists have sought to recuperate race by stripping out its evaluative judgments – be they aesthetic, moral, intellectual – as well as its hierarchical typology and invidious applications (see Andreasen 2004; Shiao et al 2012). Notably, the medical sociologist, Catherine Bliss (2012), points to the emergence of 'race-positive' theory combining an empirical concern purely focused on the human organism with an activist commitment to social inclusion and justice as an 'anti-racist racialism.'³

The modifier in Bliss' reference to racialism is crucial. Racialism still carries the taint of racism and its acceptable use has depended on asserting the demise of its racist application and developing non- or anti-racist credentials. Kwame Anthony Appiah's (1990) useful definition of racialism crystallises its dialectical relation to racism and attendant political stakes. For Appiah, racialism is the view that distinct races as divisions of the human species each have heritable traits that are only found within each specific group. However, and this is the crucial point of contention for its adherents, 'Racialism is not, in itself, a doctrine that must be dangerous, even if the racial essence is thought to entail moral and intellectual dispositions. Provided positive moral qualities are distributed across the races, each can be respected, can have its "separate but equal" place' (1990, p. 5-6).

Appiah declares that in his view racialism is fallacious given that it is based on the invalid notion of discrete, hereditary racial types. Nevertheless, he usefully sets out what

racialism may refer to for its followers and in doing so identifies three important assertions: first, that there are racial groups with specific characteristics; second, that racialism can be ‘dangerous’ – i.e. racist – but needn’t be; and third, that the safe – i.e. non-dangerous, non-racist – use of racialism is justified insofar as if races are not understood in hierarchical terms, then regarding the specificity of each is not inimical to the principle of the equality of all. In other words, in its final iteration racialism supposedly finally realises the elusive objective of racial theorists to understand race as a benign description of literal difference. Consequently, for adherents of racialism, a clear distinction can be made between racism and the racist on the one hand, and racialism and the racialist on the other. Within its current application, racialism has notably been articulated within non-aligned commentary such as BBC reporting and sociological research as well as all positions across the political spectrum ranging from Bliss’ antiracist project, to self-declared left and right centrists such as David Goodhart and Eric Kaufmann, and the far-right. Racialism is pervasive in use from differing constituencies but often for similar iniquitous racializing and racist ends.

Racialist post-millennial local whiteness

Sacking Enoch Powell from the shadow cabinet following his infamous 1968 ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech, the Conservative Party leader, Edward Heath, publicly stated that Powell’s speech was ‘racialist in tone and likely to exacerbate racial tensions’ (cited in Shepherd 1996, p. 351). The following year, when asked by David Frost if he was a racialist, Powell replied:

It depends on how you define the word ‘racialist.’ If you mean being conscious of the differences between men and nations, and from that, races, then we are all racialists. However, if you mean a man who despises a human being because he belongs to another race, or a man who believes that one race is inherently superior to another, then the answer is emphatically ‘No’ (cited in Heffer 1998, p. 504).

Powell here effectively asserts a distinction between a racist and non-racist use of racialism as identified by Appiah, situating himself within the latter camp. In its supposed benign form, racialism is the universal human consciousness of prior-existing race differences – not unlike Park’s (1950) initial classification of race relations – and therefore an expression of human nature instead of a malignant personal predilection.

This strategic move to establish a non-invidious racialism as a means to speak ‘freely’ about the problems of managing multicultural diversity is mirrored within contemporary literature and debates such as Eric Kaufmann (2017) and David Goodhart’s (2014) characterisation of self-preferential ethno-racial in-grouping. ‘Actually existing people’, Goodhart suggests, ‘are rooted in communities and families.... [and they] will always favour their own families and communities’ (2014, p. 257). Furthermore, noticing racial and ethnic group differences is presented as a facet of human nature, and generalising about other groups, both consciously and unconsciously, is inevitable. Such involuntary communalism and instinctive behaviour form the basis for what Kaufmann terms ‘racial self-interest’ as a ‘normal’ manner of in-grouping. That ‘racial self-interest’ is distinct from racism is supposedly evident in the example of support for immigration controls; Kaufmann argues that the white majority in the UK and US are merely seeking to arrest their population decline – therefore, instead of having an irrational fear of and hostility towards migrant ‘outgroups’ which would be racist, theirs is a racist expression of ‘self-interest.’ Notably, this utilitarian objective to maintain ‘population share’ is accompanied by a cultural concern: white ‘self-interest’ is also expressed through a positive preference for their ‘co-ethnics’ sharing common values. This is ‘group partiality’ and ‘clannishness’, which can be problematically insular and prone to ‘low-level stereotyping’ but does not warrant being labelled racist (Goodhart 2014). Completing the fulfilment of Appiah’s definition of non-invidious racialism, self-interested in-grouping is excused as pro-self as opposed to anti-other.

White Britons are the self-interested group in question, threatened by population change and predisposed to intra-ethnic solidarity while reticent to express conservative views on immigration for fear of being cast as racist. However, accurately identifying this population in substantively ethnic terms is elusive. Broadly speaking, contemporary Britishness is increasingly seen as a tightly interwoven combination of civic and ethnic factors; having British citizenship, being British-born and respecting British political institutions and laws are considered more important than having British ancestry or being Christian (Kiss and Park 2014). Indeed, Kaufmann’s study does not methodologically account for the sampling techniques used to classify specifically ‘white British’ participants thus leaving their substantive basis as a group unclear.⁴ What determines them as white British? Are they British citizens who self-identify as white? Are they white British citizens

by birth or naturalization? Are they white British citizens who understand themselves as having British ancestry? Are they white British citizens who understand themselves as British in distinctively ethnic terms? What counts, precisely, as (white) British ‘ancestry’ and ‘ethnicity’?

Admittedly, these are complex questions and the correct number of generations necessary to establish ancestry or unanimity of any ethnic identity are difficult, if not impossible, to determine conclusively. Whether characterised in supposedly empirical or normative terms, attempts to formulate British national identity as exclusively ethnic are unsustainable in the face of significant internal variation. Wales and Cornwall, for example, with their own claims to ethno-national specificity serve as notable exceptions to a primordial British ethnicity.⁵ And historically, the confected common white British identity emergent during the 17th century served as a means for the Scottish to participate in the New World imperialist project alongside the English without being subsumed within Englishness (Dyer 1997). British identity – let alone white Britishness – is a shifting ‘fuzzy frontier’ politically and socially constituted instead of simply hereditary and is forged across history through varied formative influences from the British Isles and the wider Empire, Commonwealth, Anglophone world and beyond (Cohen 1995). So, for people who presently identify ethnically as Cornish and Welsh as well as those Scottish who crossed the Atlantic to settle the Virginia colony in the seventeenth century, identification as white British denotes a voluntaristic undertaking and/or strategic convenience instead of an exclusive, primordial ethnic identity.

In the absence of an innate, distinctive and monolithic British ethnic identity, the assertion of white Britishness is arguably more extrinsically-oriented than intrinsic. Richard Dyer points out that the considered notion of whiteness cohering multi-national Britishness was also tactically employed as a means for European settlers to mark social distinctions between themselves and the indigenous Indians and imported Africans. Returning to our present moment, the extrinsic concerns informing the constitution of the white British are initially evident in the varied descriptive categories used including ‘white’, ‘white majority’ and ‘majority ethnicity’ as well as ‘indigenous people of the British Isles’ or ‘indigenous Brits’. Within these categories race and ethnicity are either included within the nomenclature, usually alongside a modifier, or rendered opaque through reference to indigeneity and nationality. In each instance, the ‘majority’ modifier and ‘indigenous’ signifier situate white

Britons in relation to minority ethnic groups and migrants. Indigenous and white majority Britons while characterised ethnically, form a group less in intrinsic ethnic terms as the distinctive content is not elaborated upon in depth. Instead, white Britons accrue meaning in an extrinsic sense, in contradistinction to relevant non- or even hyphenated British others, such as the Muslim and African Caribbean menace for the BNP, or Bangladeshi migrants and ‘tenuous hyphenates’ for Geoff Dench, Kate Gavron and Michael Young’s ‘new East End’ (Dench et al 2006).

Crucially, this extrinsic identificatory enterprise is local as well as racial, set against the free movement of labour within the European Single Market and the ominous spectre of still more intra-continental incomers courtesy of European Union enlargement. Nigel Farage’s opining that ‘normal and fair-minded’ people would be concerned if a group of Romanians moved in next door, and the numerous cases of ‘hate speech’ and violent attacks targeting central and eastern European migrants, such as the verbal and written abuse directed at Polish migrants and 2016 death of Arkadiusz Jóźwik in Harlow and stabbing of Bartosz Milewski in Donnington (Rzepnikowska 2019), all made no concession to the ostensible whiteness of the Europeans in question. Whether skilled or unskilled, the whiteness of European migrant labour was non-local and thus unacceptable as such. However, Milewski and Jóźwik’s assailants were not concerned with establishing their proper immigration status – Milewski was an undergraduate student so not a labour market competitor; both Jóźwik and Milewski were targeted after being heard speaking Polish in public.

Of course, these reservations over the influx of migrant labour are not simply ethno-national in basis. Wildcat strikes against Italian and Portuguese construction workers being posted to the UK during the Lindsay Oil Refinery dispute in 2009 notably featured banners bearing the legend ‘British jobs for British workers’ – echoing Gordon Brown’s 2007 Labour Party conference clarion call – as well as cruder racist and xenophobic sentiments. Protesters given to racist views did not reserve their enmity for EU ‘foreigners’ but, in one striking case, proclaimed that their descendants’ service in World Wars was not meant to allow the British to ‘be shafted by ethnics and Eastern Europeans’ (cited in Ince et al 2015, p. 149). One can surmise from this scenario that those patriotic national servants and their posterior family are longstanding Britons – read white British – clearly distinguishable from ‘ethnics and Eastern Europeans.’ That ‘British jobs for British workers’ had been a familiar refrain of the National

Front, a fact that David Cameron had chided Gordon Brown over (Parkinson 2007), shows its polysemous articulation via both workerist megaphone and racist dogwhistle.

Asserting local whiteness – racialism as leveraged disadvantage

Attempts to mitigate white nativism as (at least in part) the expression of a class antagonism within the current conjuncture are marked by the pervasive influence of neoliberalism. Working class (local) whites have been portrayed as ‘left behind’ (Goodwin and Heath 2016; Hobolt 2016; Watson 2018), impacted by the rapacious globalization of capital and supranational trade agreements and hit hard by the loss of jobs offshore to cheaper production costs, exponential growth of low-skilled precarious employment, and the influx of cheap (and sometimes illegal) migrant labour competing for remaining work. The Lindsay protests, for example, have been characterised as voicing concerns over globalisation, nation and work played out within the grievances of competent ‘nationed’ labour being undercut by non-accredited migrant labour with insular nationalist and racist sentiments minimized as a ‘minority opinion’ (Ince et al 2015). Such vindication of local whites’ disaffection as symptomatic of structural forces and economic in basis underestimates nationalist and racist sentiments as some form of psycho-cultural addendum and/or individual moral-behavioural failing. However, much important recent work on nationalism usefully rejects such apologia by noting the key influence of English imperial nostalgia and structural decline within the neoliberal era (Virdee and McGeever 2018) and explaining how certain British ethno-racial groups are systematically depicted as outsiders (Valluvan 2019). While nationalism is crucial to the formation of notions of white Englishness, it is beyond the limited scope of this article. My focus here is specifically on applications of racialist discourse in certain contemporary formations of whiteness and, having outlined how such ideas are localised, I now turn to examine why.

Race has always functioned as a social as well as biological marker, for example constituting a ‘badge’ denoting the experience of racism (DuBois 2007) or ‘role sign’ signifying social entitlements or lack thereof (Banton 1967). As a social resource, then, race is either valuable or detrimental, naturalising legal rights and economic advantage or subjugation and exploitation (Guillaumin 1995). Historically, the positive value of whiteness has been marked by both a carefully cultivated invisibility and incorporation into the figure

of the normative human subject, thus obscuring white advantage. Race and ethnicity, on the other hand, have been portrayed as a quality possessed by those others: consider the initial conceptualization of ‘race relations’ situations not as the study of emergent European settler colonial societies, but as the interactions resulting from the incorporation of race within (white) ‘host’ countries by the fractious presence of minorities and migrants; or, the specificity of ‘ethnic’ forms, such as food, hair and dress, as implicitly distinct from the non-ethnic (read white).

Still, as those others struggled politically against their subjugation, racial alterity has been disingenuously regarded as a beneficial form of political leverage. This perspective is discernible within Kaufmann’s (2017) argument that ‘movement activists’ recognise the power of mobilising around societal taboos – for example, US conservatives organise around opposition to ‘un-American’ or ‘anti-family’ sentiments. Conversely, while Liberal and radical anti-racists ‘have a more expansive definition’ of racism than conservatives, it enables them to mobilise around racism as a societal taboo. But, crucially, this demonstrates the leverage of race-as-disadvantage: ‘... those on the left understand that antiracist norms confer the power to advance an agenda of *weakening stronger groups and strengthening weaker ones*’ (Kaufmann 2017, p. 7, emphasis added). So, racial identity is not just a unique character shared by individuals with a common ancestry and collective affinity that gives rise to a mutual experience. Within western liberal democracies characterised by mass migration, race is a valuable political resource deployed with moralistic art by migrant incomers, aided and abetted by left multiculturalists, to produce an asymmetrical power relation: this present is Powell’s future dystopia realised, with the black man now having the whip hand over the white.

Notably, Kaufmann regards antiracist activism as part of an attritional zero-sum game between ‘stronger’ and ‘weaker’ groups instead of an attempt to address racism and achieve just social outcomes. This sense of an ‘agenda’ to enfeeble the majority white population connects to notions of white victimhood. However, while some populist claims to white victimhood employ the sophistry of colour-blind discourse to depict the supposed preferential treatment of minority ethnic groups (Kolber 2017; Bloch et al 2019), the racist articulation of local whiteness forcefully co-opts race. In order to undermine the political impact of minority ‘movement groups’ as noted by Kaufmann, the local white group is strengthened through an appeal to race, often articulated with the concept of indigeneity. While indigeneity

served as a useful cipher for race within the cultural racism vocabulary – for example, the BNP (2005) promoting extending the ‘celebration of difference’ to include ‘indigenous’ British people as well as ‘British natives’ – assertions of local whiteness require the race modifier, referring instead to the *white* indigenous population.

It must be noted that such racist nativism also surfaces within centrist and non-aligned commentary. In their updating of Michael Young and Peter Willmott’s classic 1957 study *Family and Kinship in East London*, Geoff Dench, Kate Gavron and Michael Young argue that ‘indigenous whites’ in the London borough of Tower Hamlets are diminished by being referred to in locally irrelevant terms as English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish (ESW/Is) instead of as ‘white’ or ‘white British.’ On one hand, the authors bemoan the disuse of ‘white’ or ‘white British’ as British national census terms, and on the other hand their concern is that while miscast as ESW/Is, the indigenous population are belittled ‘as something less than fully British’ and placed ‘on a par with the last immigrant groups off the plane’ (Dench et al 2006, p. 219). Notably, Dench, Gavron and Young’s use of ‘indigenous whites’ is not a direct quotation from research participants but their own chosen conceptualisation of an established population – albeit sometimes placed in scare quotes – constituting an ‘investment in melancholic whiteness... maintained through selective sociological record keeping’ (James 2014, p. 656). Similarly, reporting on the 2011 Census, BBC Home Affairs editor Mark Easton (2013) notes the significant decrease in the ‘white British’ population of London during the 2000s, referencing hypotheses of white flight as characterising ‘the indigenous population forced out of their neighbourhoods by foreign migrants.’ Although Easton qualifies the white flight headline by mentioning working class aspiration for suburban life as a pull factor, his report nonetheless normalises the ontological specificity and categorical integrity of the *indigenous white* British. More important, though, is the extra-theoretical function of asserting local white Britons’ indigeneity: Why is this claim made and what purpose(s) does it serve?

An answer to this question is crystallised in the putative ‘prior status’ of ‘aboriginal peoples’ (BNP 2005). Quite simply, white Britons have a stronger claim to national belonging, rights and resources. In *The New East End*, Dench, Gavron and Young suggest that the 1948 British Nationality Act enabling citizens of British colonies to freely enter, work and settle with their families ‘confirmed the entitlement of quite a large chunk of the world’s poor to share in the nation’s wealth’ at the expense of the white working class who

saw their corporatist dividend ‘so easily opened up for the benefit of indigent outsiders’ (2006, p. 199). And so, for Dench, Gavron and Young, the ‘world’s poor’ are ‘indigent outsiders’ and thus undeserving, while the long struggles of the indigenous white working class in penury and their immense wartime sacrifice are deserving of exclusive benefit. Consequently, they argue that the migration of colonial subjects to Britain, while celebrated in insulated liberal circles, amounted to an unwarranted ordeal for those directly affected ‘ordinary people living at the point of entry’ (Dench et al 2006, p. 202). Turning to the present, *The New East End* then finds that the pervasive rights-based system has spawned a culture of entitlement as well as promoting and subsidising Bangladeshi settlement and the growth of an underclass including refugees and asylum seekers, all perceived by much of the local white working class as detrimental to their interests and well-being.

Asserting local whiteness is not to claim disadvantage as well as black Asian and minority ethnic people. Rather, a zero-sum game is established whereby local whiteness is synonymous with disadvantage *instead of* black, Asian and minority ethnic people. Indeed, Dench, Gavron and Young characterise the impact of post-war mass immigration on the standard of living as ‘a marginal improvement for most immigrants’ directly set against ‘a disproportionate loss for indigenous Britons’ (Dench et al 2006, p. 225). Whether explicitly or implicitly, this perspective asserts white Britons’ prior right and preferential regard at the expense of the minority population; it is not just that claims are made to local whiteness, but that these claims as well as their attendant rights and benefits must be pursued against and at the cost of others. Britain First, for example, assert that multi-faith religious education should be replaced by a Christian-focused curriculum. But ultimately, the zero-sum game can be obscured as an egalitarian racialism whereby ‘the white working class, rather than expressing some primordial racism, began “to learn, in the multicultural climate, how to be ethnic too”’ (Gusterson 2017, p. 212). So, the intentional weakening of black, Asian and minority ethnic people is wilfully obscured by claims to local whiteness as simply levelling the field for playing the race card.

Racialism and the denial of racism

Restoring the desired normalcy of white Britons’ pre-eminence therefore requires strengthening the majority ethnic group and weakening minorities. One means of

accomplishing this is through denuding the oppositional political force of black, Asian and minority ethnic peoples by de-racializing them within ethno-nationalist and culturalist discourses. And so, these groups are consequently cast as ‘communities’ – cultural, faith, migrant and so on – as well as individuals who just so happen to be members of those communities to profound effect. However, while dominant New Labour discourses of ‘community cohesion’ de-racialized minority groups, they were nonetheless racialized in codified terms, what Taguieff (2001) terms the racialization of culture, for example through reference to practices such as arranged and forced marriage (Worley 2005). These ethno-national communities’ social outcomes are then regarded as over-determined by their cultural characteristics: poor integration is exacerbated by some communities practising significant levels of transnational marriage involving a foreign-born spouse, leading to a ‘first generation in every generation’; certain ethnic minority groups’ high residential and educational concentration creates an insular monocultural parochialism; and poor English language proficiency contributes to low levels of labour market participation and integration as well as social deprivation (Casey 2016).

Another means of weakening black, Asian and minority ethnic groups is to refute the existence of racism. Racialism performs this negative function by asserting that the significance of race is underappreciated while charges of racism are overused. As a corrective, Goodhart calls for ‘more race literacy, less paranoia about racism’ (2014, p. 256), whereby increasing race literacy means understanding black, Asian and minority ethnic people’s sense of experiencing discrimination as a deficit of ‘general cultural familiarity’ (2014, p. 253) as opposed to pathologically suspecting racism as the cause. Within this atmosphere, racism can be re-presented as more vacuous, individualised forms such as ‘hate crimes’ and ‘unconscious bias’ with notable impact: many media reports attributed the ‘spike’ in ‘hate crimes’ in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum to the aberrant behaviour of isolated ‘thugs’ and ‘yobs’ which, as a law and order issue, required a criminal justice response instead of any anti-racist intervention (Burnett 2017). Relatedly, ‘unconscious bias’ arguably absolves the racist of responsibility for their actions by denuding their agency while attenuating racism as bias. Furthermore, the organisational initiatives designed to address bias focus on individual behaviours thus eliding differentiated racisms as well as institutional structures and cultures thereby rendering ‘unconscious bias training’ as of negligible anti-racist value (Noon 2018).

Depicting social class in racialist zero-sum terms forms another key weapon in the racism-evasion arsenal. In 2010, the Communities Secretary John Denham, cautioned against associating race (read black, Asian and minority ethnic groups) with disadvantage, noting the progress made against racial discrimination and complexity of inequality caused by a series of factors including social class. However, pointing to the necessity of countering the BNP ‘propagating the idea that minorities get special treatment, that white working class people are being neglected,’ Denham associates working class whiteness with disadvantage, even if by allusion. Elsewhere, Denham details this sentiment within his characterisation of a major fault line within the New Labour government:

the failure to understand how in a rapidly changing society, which was already deeply unequal, where family and personal security varied enormously, where class still mattered, and where community and cultural identity was not only important, but one of the key things people held onto in a changing world, migration on the scale we had was bound to challenge deeply held notions of fairness, entitlement and obligation (2011, p. S48).

The use of historical and economic context as a means to frame white Britons’ affective experience of social change places reservations over migration as principled concerns with the just and equitable distribution of social resources. This disquiet is presented as materialist and cultural in basis, but not racist, and so gestures towards the marginality of the white majority while ignoring questions of racism. Contrasting divergent reporting of New Labour debates on social cohesion in broadsheet newspapers such as the *Telegraph* and the *Independent*, Kjartan Páll Sveinsson finds that social class is deemed relevant when racialized in relation to multiculturalism – ‘the white working class is losing out to ethnic minorities’ – but disparaged as noxious ‘class war’ when used in relation to inequality – ‘the white working class is losing out to the middle classes’ (2009, p. 3). More recently, in relation to Brexit, class analysis and explanation are narrowly applied through the prism of ‘methodological whiteness,’ focussing on the white working class over the wider diverse working class population and issue of racism (Bhambra 2017). From this white racialist perspective, populist nativist sentiments are minimized as neither racist in intent nor effect and excused as symptomatic of materialist, structural class concerns.

In addition to its minimisation as phantasma derived from individual deviant behaviours or primary cultural and economic phenomena, claims of racism are also summarily dismissed as overstated and defamatory. Goodhart argues that charges of racism should be reserved for ‘proper racism’ and active hostility as opposed to its common misapplication to relatively harmless instances of prejudice and stereotyping or racial impoliteness and insensitivity. The pervasive overuse of racism from instances of genocide to simple clannish preference leads to its diminution and banality which also ‘ends up calling into question what most people regard as *perfectly normal human feelings*’ (2014, p. 251). Consequently, as racism is to be referenced sparingly only in ‘extreme’ circumstances, black, Asian and minority ethnic people’s experiences of racism are invalidated; the focus shifts to local whites’ disadvantage characterised in racialist terms as profound changes in demography, in work, in lifestyle that are deep and dissonant. As this view would have it, caricaturing the white anti-immigration Brexiteer and Trump-voter as racist ignores their lifeworld and justified anxiety (Kaufmann 2017; Gusterson 2017). Benign clannish local white populations are intimidated and silenced by the threat of being labelled racist by the omnipotent and omnipresent plural multiculturalist, race equality and antiracist institutional apparatus and cottage industries. This contortion reiterates contemporary notions of the ‘actually-existing postracial society’ where racial discrimination and racism are said to be diminished to the point of being effectively eradicated (St Louis 2015). More ominously, this move not only seeks to render antiracist and ameliorative social justice initiatives redundant but enables a deeper entrenchment of racisms now hard to discern and still harder to counteract given the erasure of race and racist effects.

Ethno-nationalist discourses and racialism work in tandem to minimise the existence of racism. Nationalist and racialist notions of white Britishness each perpetuate notions of primordial groups with distinct characters that determine their respective social positions. However, racialism is an important conceptual device to understand the confection of post-millennial local whiteness. Even if understood as imagined, British and English nationalisms present as positivist claims to a national identity. Those others with their alien cultures, incompatible social mores and so on provide a contrast class, set against the prior assertion of the quintessential national sensibility and those Britons who really, truly belong (Valluvan and Kalra 2019). On the other hand, white Englishness, in the racialist mode of local whiteness, serves as a means to claim disadvantage against those others and elide their racist subjection. But, unlike the cultural exceptionalism and ethnic absolutist tenets of English

nationalism, British local whiteness lacks such a strong sense of unanimity. As Steve Garner (2012) assiduously points out, the moral economies associated with behaviour and social interaction underpinning notions of British whiteness are often related to immigration, integration and the question of whether migrants' needs warrant public provision at the expense of the majority. However, this local British whiteness is variegated by class, locale and situational perspective instead of a characteristic national-racial homogeneity as the white British middle class often position their working-class peers as others alongside migrants. 'The white middle classes' Garner argues, 'often whiten themselves by reference to a less sophisticated and excessively white working class' (2012, p. 453). As such, claims to *white* British racial identity are strategically extrinsic, oriented towards identifying and excluding others deemed to be unwelcome and undeserving rather than accurately asserting a meaningful ethnic community, let alone white unanimity. As a proclaimed benign form of race-thinking, racialism is strategically naturalised as negation, focused on weakening black, Asian and minority ethnic groups and denying the existence of racism.

Conclusion

Local whiteness isn't particularly new. In the mid-nineteenth century, Robert Knox's (1850) detailing of racial character included disparaging the indigenous Amerindian and North American Red Indian while carefully referring to the plurality of European races and distinguishing between the Celt and superior Saxon; in the late nineteenth century, Paul Broca noted the inferiority of Mongolian and Negro types against the superior European but nonetheless balked at accepting German brains as, on average, heavier than the French and thus indicative of the former's higher intelligence (see Gould 1997, p. 121-124); and the gradual accession of Celts, Hebrews, Teutons, Mediterraneans, Slavs and others to Caucasian status alongside the Anglo-Saxon in the US illustrates a form of localised, trickle-down whiteness (see Jacobson 1998). These localised preferences demonstrate crosscutting ethno-nationalist sentiments and the white racialization of material interests. Whiteness, then, as well as differentiating white from non-white races for geopolitical purpose, legal privilege, material gain and psychosocial gratification, has a history of internal distinctions and the current conjuncture is no exception.

Contemporary claims to white Britishness can be understood in many ways: as part of a racialized post-imperial malaise (Gilroy 2004; Virdee and McGeever 2018); an organizing principle of far-right nativism (see BNP 2005, 2010); the vanguard of a backlash against plural multiculturalism and race equality initiatives (Hewitt 2005); or as a means to secure social privileges (Bhopal 2018). While these indicative examples provide plausible accounts of the basis for claims to whiteness, it is important to treat the racialized category and concept of white Britons with care. Accepting white Britons as an empirical entity, a coherent group that acts and reacts in specific ways to an exigent reality serves to ascribe an ontology to whiteness that risks reifying white racial communalism and justifying its associated absolutism – ‘left behind’ local whites are thus disaffected *because* of mass immigration and immigrants.

As James Rhodes (2012) has usefully argued with regard to the ‘white working class’, it is important to understand the *invocation* of the ‘group’ as well as its constitution. In other words, not just to understand *what* the group is, or is claimed to be, but *why* it is asserted. In the above, I have sought to demonstrate the invocation of some contemporary claims to British whiteness, beginning with *how* it is achieved. These identity claims have emerged within the discursive context of a wide-ranging re-normalising project that seeks to denude race, and those white racial realists espousing it, of negative association; the justification of a specific ‘racialist’ discourse attempts to establish a distinction between harmful (racism) and harmless (racialism) reference to race thus separating the artless racialist from the malicious racist. This move endeavours to situate a non-invidious British white identity; in two notable recent examples explored above, this ‘harmless’ (racialist) white identity is conceptualised through the notions of ‘racial self-interest’ (Kaufmann 2017) and self-preferential ethno-racial in-grouping (Goodhart 2014) that are ostensibly pro-self (racialist) as opposed to anti-other (racist).

Turning towards the invocation of white Britishness, I argue that its constitution as an ‘indigenous’ identity is aimed to establish the group as *the* original population with prior rights over and above subsequent others. As such, the white British are placed in zero-sum relation to minority ethnic (inside) outsiders, principally black and Asian but not exclusively so – note the antipathy towards European migrants hence the specific claim to *local* British whiteness. In racialist terms, this move is extrinsically focused and exclusionary towards others as opposed to intrinsically inclusive of white Britishness. Drawing on the formulation

of race as synonymous with disadvantage, the pre-eminence of now racialized white Britons as an embattled indigenous population serves as an exclusionary principle to marginalize outsiders and abrogate their experience of racism. The parlous social situation of black, Asian and minority people is found to principally result from their own inveterate deficiencies and cultural outsider status, thus exempting racist claims to local white Britishness from charges of racism.

Understanding the application of racialism and invocation of post-millennial local whiteness illuminates the specious basis of claims to white Britishness. Putative attempts at exercising Weberian value relevance to understand ‘local whiteness’, such as in *The New East End*, are disingenuous and dangerous: disingenuous because they conjure then ventriloquise ‘the people’ (that is, ‘local white’ people cheated by elites and parasitical outsiders) as righteously indignant, and dangerous because the actions such ventriloquism can incite have grave political portents. Tzvetan Todorov (1993) sounds a cautionary note in his critical distinction between racialism and racism as doctrine and behaviour respectively, with racialism veering between a limited form of benign race-thinking and the theoretical basis for the more virulent strains of racism. The post-millennial racist invocation of local whiteness is far from benign in constituting the marginal and silenced ‘native’ majority over and against the insidious, ascendant minority of ‘tenuous hyphenates’ and migrants. If positive preference for ‘one’s own’ and impassiveness or disregard toward others are propagated as ‘perfectly normal human feelings’ then racialism normalises and justifies racialized antipathy, wilfully ignores the reality of racism, and sets social conflict in train.

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¹ 'PM's speech at Munich security conference', February 5, 2011.

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² 'PM's speech at Munich security conference', February 5, 2011.

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³ Bliss asserts that race positive approaches to ethnopharmacology, for example, recognise the dearth of minority ethnic participants in clinical drug trials and argue for the inclusion of under-represented groups in redress instead of race-blind recruitment.

⁴ Outlining 'The Study', Kaufmann refers to his 'Policy Exchange/YouGov survey of over 1600 British and 2600 Americans' (2017: 12).

⁵ In 2014, the UK government formally recognised Cornish people as a protected national minority with a unique and distinctive identity under the Council of Europe Framework for the Protection of National Minorities. On the day of the announcement, the Communities Minister Stephen Williams stated: 'The Cornish and Welsh are the oldest peoples on this island and as a proud Welshman I look forward to seeing Saint Piran's flag flying with extra Celtic pride on March 5 next year.' 'Cornish granted minority status within the UK', April 24, 2014.

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