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Trajectories in the Discourse of Migration in Contemporary Britain

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Abstract:

Immigration has always been one of the controversial topics in British politics and public policy. This paper will analyse two seminal trajectories in the discourse on and around immigration in the UK. The argument established here is concerned with major political attitudes in post-World War II towards Commonwealth immigration which are paralleled against the sceptic and uncertain attitudes vis-à-vis the free movement of Europeans across British borders. Westminster's immigration policy is approached from the perspectives of discourse analysis. How were the discourses that sought to staunch the flow of immigration from the Commonwealth and Europe constructed in the political and public domains? It should be highlighted that this paper does not create a timeline or chronology of the British immigration policy, but rather hints to major language changes that reflect an adjustment in the discourse of immigration itself which, despite positive turnouts, remains racialized and suspicious of foreigners.

Keywords: Immigration, Political Discourse, Discourse Analysis, Commonwealth, European Union.

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1. Introduction

There can be no doubt that immigration policy is one of the sensitive topics in contemporary British politics. It is also a tiny, yet crucial, aspect of a larger debate on race relations in Britain and elsewhere. Obviously, in today's public and political arenas, and perhaps more remarkably in media language, the word 'immigration' tends to collocate with a pejorative vocabulary that represents it as an 'issue' to be contained and controlled. In order to analyse the nuances of this discourse, this paper will examine two different levels of policy discussion that correspond to two different time lapses. The first considers the post- World War II period which witnessed mass immigration from former Afro-Asian colonies. And the second one relates to Britain's policy towards European immigration and free movement since the early 1970s up to the Brexit days.

In this regard, I would argue that there were two major narratives which, despite their temporal differences, they shared similar patterns and discoursal traits. The first discourse raised fears about a possible 'radical demographic change' and the 'loss of the British character' due to a mass Afro-Asian immigration in the wake of World War II. Similarly, the tone of the discourse on European immigration was equally reserved and prejudiced, evoking feelings of frustration owing to the assumption that Britain would lose its sovereignty to Brussels. Arguably, the mainstream discourses on race relations in Britain were not always straightforward racist or xenophobic, but there is still considerable prejudice against the newcomers regardless of whether they are normal immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers or 'irregular' immigrants. Indeed, the hostile anti-immigration discourses, which are often embraced by the right-wingers, do incite racial intolerance against both the 'coloured' Commonwealth and the white European immigrants.

This research paper is grounded within the framework of discourse analysis that examines the rhetoric of immigration in contemporary Britain. Hence, the object of this paper is made of references to isolated political statements and views of senior British politicians who left their imprint on the course of the immigration policy. Arguably, their seemingly aggressive stances created a counter-reaction that paved the way for more openness and flexibility in the immigration legislation. To elaborate on this claim, this paper will

attempt to analyse how British immigration policy is framed with reference to language use and the context in which it was constructed. It may be mentioned in passing that it is unfeasible to consider the question of immigration in Britain in isolation from the rest of the world as this has always been a global phenomenon with slight or major disparities from one region to another.

Indeed, the literature of migration studies is very rich and varied. Scholars from across the social sciences and humanities investigated different sociological, psychological and geostrategic aspects of immigration, its progress and repercussions on both immigrants and host countries (see for example, Anderson, 2013; Cohen & Layton-Henry,1997; Fool,1995; Geddes, 1996; Hansen, 2000; Spencer, 2002; Travers, 1999). This research paper contributes in some modest measure to immigration studies where there is a call for the use of the various versions of critical discourse analysis in research that is concerned with extremist discourses, most of which still do not receive adequate condemnation and denunciation. It is not the aim here, however, to review the current literature around discourse analysis which is a thriving and growing discipline. More particularly, discourse studies target controversial situations where there is power abuse, social injustice, racism against marginalized groups and immigrants (see, Fairclough, 2013; Van Dijk, 1997, Wodak & Meyer, 2015). It is worthy of note that this paper does not cover the economic factor which is by no means a fundamental variable in the design of immigration laws.

This paper is divided into three intertwined parts. I proceed with an overview of Britain's policy on the so called 'coloured' immigration during the period that followed World War II. The second part takes Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech as an example to showcase the escalating rejection of the existing immigration regulations. The third part shifts towards another major trend that characterized the debate on immigration with the British-EU rapprochement from the early1970s onward. Immigration since then has become one of the major topics in the hectic discussions around the Brexit.

2. Britain's Approach to 'Coloured' Immigration in the Post-War Period

Understanding the current British political logic vis-à-vis the policy of migration necessitates a swift look at the near past, most particularly the late 1940s and 1950s which was the era of mass immigration from the colonies. The arrival of the passenger liner 'Empire Windrush' to the Port of Tilbury in 1948 is said to have inaugurated a mass immigration of 'coloured' peoples to Great Britain (Dean, 1992, p. 171). Indeed, these immigrants who came basically from former British colonies in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean sparked off a political and public wrangling about the British migration legislation (Clapson, 2009, p. 28). Equally important is the politics of the inter-war period, yet this era of strife and frustration, both locally and internationally, is deliberately ignored due to space limit. The reforms that were introduced following World War II, I assume, would help us to create a timeline that tracks the successes and shortcomings of the British migration system. Accordingly, it is quite interesting in this regard to briefly highlight major trends in British migration discourse that fluctuated between restriction and openness. This selective review would throw light on instances of hostility and intolerance towards foreigners, most notably immigrants of different colour.

The first and most crucial point to be scrutinized is the *de facto* link between race and immigration that was, and is still, at the core of the reform debate over the policy of migration. This again, I would argue, is currently framed with less pejorative racial attitudes than it used to be. During the post-war period, racial prejudice against those who are deemed racially or ethnically different from the 'typical' British citizen greatly influenced the conception of migration. There was a general tendency to tighten control over the borders to curb the escalating number of newcomers from the former territories of the British empire. What is remarkable about the then legal and political language is the recurrent reference to immigrants as 'coloured colonial subjects'. Robert Miles and Paula Cleary write:

> Since 1945, a specific notion of 'immigration' has been constructed within the British political process which represents only particular groups of people as immigrants or migrants. This notion equates 'immigrant' with those who during the 1950s and early 1960s were termed 'coloured

> people' and who are now usually described as either 'Black people' or 'ethnic minorities' (Miles & Cleary, 1993).

In the quote above, there is a clear indication of vocabulary change that reflects a progressive adjustment in the tone of a highly racialized immigration discourse. Whether the latter is heading up towards more tolerance and openness is a matter that requires an in-depth analysis of an amalgam of circumstances over an extended period of time. In today's context, linguistic discrimination in the political, public and even sometimes media outlets is more often implied than explicitly expressed compared to the post-war era. After all, it is this categorization of migrants based on their ethnic background and skin colour that raised questions on Britain's migration system. Indeed, there is a large scholarship on the impact of the race factor on the making of migration related policies (see for example, Carvalho, 2013; Schain, 2008; Panayi, 2014; Spencer, 2002). These previous studies offer insightful analysis of British immigration policy and its development, yet they do not consider how language use, as conceptualised in discourse analysis, moulds and is also moulded by the different contexts that Britain went through. Hence, it is quite intriguing to examine the shifts in this discourse with reference to language use, more particularly when referring to 'other' immigrants and why they are, or are not, accepted to settle permanently in Britain.

One should bear in mind that Britain is one of the leading imperial nations that managed to maintain its influence beyond its natural physical borders for at least four centuries so far. It is this heritage that made Britain home for millions of foreign peoples who had the privilege of free movement from and to the UK. In "Race, Immigration and Politics in Britain" (2006), Stephen Small and John Solomos highlighted four major aspects under which the general policy of immigration was formulated between 1945 and the 2000s. One of these is the British Empire from which a large segment of non-white subjects arrived to Britain causing therefore much debate about the legislation and regulation of immigration (pp, 236-237). Particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, this colonial heritage came to trigger hostile public reaction and fears about a demographic change in the country basically because of those who were labelled as 'coloured immigrants'. Remarkably, the coming of various populations of immigrants, most notably after World War II, created a wide public protest. Such uneasiness was outspokenly expressed by

those standing on the right side of British political spectrum. The subsequent restrictive proposals were crystalized in the 1962 and 1968 immigration acts. Surprisingly, both Labour and conservative governments, albeit with varying degrees of sympathy, were in favour of reducing the number of black immigrants.

The economic boom that followed World War II made Britain more attractive for job seekers from across the corners of the Empire. Statistics show that the number of African, Asian and Caribbean immigrants increased substantially causing the British government to react with restrictive measures, legislation was postponed several times though. The government's response was, Adrian Favell comments, "hard and populist" (1998, p.103). Paradoxically however, the British society, particularly during the 1950s and even 1960s, was still predominantly white with little contact with other ethnic population from the Commonwealth. Nevertheless, the language of a number of senior conservative figures was explicitly racist in tone.

Theoretically, following the 1948 British Nationality Act, every citizen of the Commonwealth was given the right to reside in the UK. But in reality, there was a strong opposition against the then immigration of non-white peoples from British colonial territories, particularly from the West Indies, which made the question of race a very sensitive issue. By the mid 1950s, Eden cabinet stated that there would be an immanent "danger" if the government did not take action to introduce restrictive legislation. Similarly, Lord Home, serving as Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, declared in 1955 that the flow of Indian migrants is a serious "menace" (Dean, 1992). There is indeed a long list of xenophobic vocabulary expressing anxiety and frustration amongst British political elite and the public alike. Such reserved attitudes, however, were not shared among many other senior conservative politicians such as Alex Lennox- Boyd and Hugh Gaitskell, to name but few. The paradox here lies in the conservative endeavours to present the UK as a leading nation of the Commonwealth and at the same time rallying support for restricting the coming of non-white Commonwealth colonial subjects. This was not an easy task which put British commercial interests within the commonwealth sphere at stake, notably with the spread of the spirit of decolonisation across the world.

Many other legislation examples can be found in subsequent immigration policy that was very selective and restrictive of coloured immigration. Remarkably, these adjustments made Britain's position questionable in front of its former colonies and partners and wielded much pressure on the conservative governments which were very reluctant and concerned with the possible ramifications of the legislation proposals. On the other hand, Labour's backbench opposition was also another factor in the immigration debate, but it was obviously limited in its effect as the reforms were approved and implemented. As it has been mentioned earlier, Labour was also in favour of restriction when in power and its stance turned only later on towards more selection rather than control.

In brief, it could be said that little has changed during the 1960s which could be seen as a continuation of the 1950s logic. Nevertheless, a number of socio-political transformations, notably the civil rights movement and decolonisation, led to the repeal of some of immigration laws that were imbued with racial inequality and discrimination.

3. 'The River Tiber Foaming with Much Blood'

The above title is a verse from the epic poem of Virgil "The Aeneid" that was quoted by former tory M.P., Enoch Powell in one of his most controversial speeches on Commonwealth immigration. In what follows, a comment is made on Powell's Birmingham address, or as it has been labelled the 'Rivers of Blood' speech, which triggered much political fuss and attracted scholarly attention towards the politics of immigration (Crines, Heppell & Hill, 2016; Schofield 2013; Tomlinson, 2018; Whipple, 2009). While this speech is not necessary representative of the then mainstream political stance, yet it offers insights into the mindset of the far-right front that still occupies an important position in the British political spectrum. Hence, the rhetoric of this political text is taken as an example to showcase how fear is constructed to legitimate the restrictive policies of immigration against the darker-skinned subjects of the Commonwealth.

Before tackling this speech any further, one should raise a little question on why political discourse matters in the first place? From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, political discourse is just another form of discourse that could lend itself to analysis with

reference to how language is used in situations where power is abused for political gains, control, dominance and manipulation. What critical political discourse analysis entails is indeed a question that has been abundantly discussed by CDA scholars. Teun A. van Dijk writes:

> Critical-political discourse analysis deals especially with the reproduction of political power, power abuse or domination through political discourse, including the various forms of resistance or counter-power against such forms of discursive dominance. In particular such an analysis deals with the discursive conditions and consequences of social and political inequality that results from such domination (1997, p. 11)

On the 20th of April 1968, Enoch Powell delivered a speech to a conservative association meeting in Birmingham criticising the government's reluctance to impose more restrictive measures on immigration. In it, he insisted on tightening controls on the Commonwealth flow of immigration, he stated " We must be mad, literally mad, as a nation to be permitting the annual inflow of some 50,000 dependants, who are for the most part the material of the future growth of the immigrant-descended population. It is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre" (1968). In this speech, Enoch paints a gloomy picture based on future scenarios that portray Britain under attack from foreigners who could potentially threaten stability of the state and social order. Interesting enough is Enoch's reference to a conversation he had with an unnamed, 'middle-aged' citizen who expressed his willingness to leave the country because of his fear of the future. Enoch quotes the man ""If I had the money to go, I wouldn't stay in this country… In this country in 15 or 20 years' time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man" (1968). The future is also used once again here to suggest that Britain "will not be worth living in" for the native generations to come. Despite the fact that this anecdote is a very persuasive rhetoric device, the one cited here does not seem to represent a general pattern in 1960s Britain. Powell was indeed unsatisfied with the whole post-war consensus which was in sharp contrast with his political convictions.

Powell further declared that "In 15 or 20 years, on present trends, there will be in this country three and a half million Commonwealth immigrants and their descendants. That is not my figure. That is the official figure given to parliament by the spokesman of the Registrar

General's Office". Once again, Powell makes reference to future events and changes in British demography and power relations in favour of coloured newcomers, who will make the native population, as he proclaims, "strangers in their own country". The appeal to authority in the above quote is also another rhetoric strategy that strengthens the prejudice against the 'other' Commonwealth subjects and represents them as a potential enemy to the local population.

In Western culture, the word 'evil' is inherently laden with and also conjures up strong negative connotations. This was mentioned four times in Powell's speech. The implication is that more Commonwealth immigrants and their descendants would represent, in the near future, a constant threat to the very foundations of the British nation. In Powell's speech, Adrian Favell states "Immigrants were thus pictured as invading hordes who, with their peculiar practices and origins and predilection for crime and moral turpitude, would never be able to assimilate" (1998, p.105) Enoch's speech was followed by huge demonstrations where people hold banners like "Stop immigration", "Enoch is right", "Britain for the British" and the like. In the years to come, the discourse of restrictive legislation based on race and segregation against 'coloured' immigrants was debated and rather negotiated with the former colonies. Instances of linguistic racism were voiced rather explicitly in a number of occasions by high rank senior politicians from Labour and the Conservative party. It should be noted in closing that Powell's speech offers an interesting clue on the frustrating and rapidly changing circumstances of the post-colonial era. It was clear that race relations and escalating Commonwealth immigration, including Britain's shifting identity and place in the new world, were reshaping British politics and future choices.

In brief, the discourse of immigration in the 1950s and 1960s was a result of a wide range conditions that were brought by World War II. Nevertheless, Britain was still unprepared for the acceptance of non-white immigrants. There is another phase of development in the discourse of immigration which came as an outcome of the British rapprochement with Europe starting from the early 1970s. The movement and mobility of workers from Europe opened another chapter in the immigration dossier which was the least to say, characterised by uncertainty and strong sense of Euroscepticism. It will be discussed in some brevity how the entry and exit of Britain

from the European Union was profoundly shaped by attitudes towards the question of peoples' mobility across the British borders.

Hence, the next part of this paper continues with the second major trajectory in the British immigration discourse. The point here is to consider the nuisances and continuity, if any, of the former anti-immigration ideology with Britain deeply involved in the European realm.

4. Britain in the European Orbit: From Limitation and Restriction to Selective Openness

Further to what has been discussed in the first section of this paper, I shall cast light here on another aspect of the discourse of immigration where attention is drifted from the 'coloured' subjects of the Commonwealth to the 'white' immigrants coming from Europe. The argument that is worked out here has two intertwined facets and one suggested implication: first, it is to worth emphasising the relevance and thus importance of the immigration policy in the process of Britain's integration in the European institutions (i.e., the communities that preceded the creation of the EU) and more significantly its subsequent withdrawal from the union. Second, to point out the lexical change in the discourse of immigration which reflected, and also came out as the result of, tremendous socio-cultural and economic transformation, and this was especially so under Thatcher. The implication I suggest in this context is the fact that skin colour and ethnic background were not always a key element in the immigration debate. The Brexit has brought to the fore major ideological and political fissures between London and Brussels and accelerated Britain's secession from the European orbit. Before discussing these points, it is perhaps needed here to say a few words about the story of this union. This experience is considered, in many different respects, as an 'unhappy marriage' which ended with a 'messy divorce'. These two metaphors were indeed used quite often in the literature indicating a sense of uncertainty and, as it were, an utter lack of trust between Europe and Britain.

It could be said with little hesitation that Britain's relationship with Europe has always been difficult to comprehend. Yet, it was obvious that there was a strong sense of suspicion and uneasiness amongst a large segment of the British public and political elite, especially

during the Thatcherite era. Since the early 1970s, when the rapprochement between Europe and Britain became a reality, the Eurosceptics were very much concerned with, among many other things, the question of sovereignty, autonomy and British identity. The immigration factor was equally present as a major topic since then, and thus it reverberated in the hustles that preceded the 2016 Brexit referendum.

In retrospect, the most famous immigration act which preceded Britain's successful application for membership of the European Communities was that of 1971 under the conservative government of Edward Heath. Obviously, the new legislation introduced non-discriminatory treatment of all newcomers, but it was, in some respects, a continuation of the restrictive policy that started in the 1960s which aimed at tightening controls on 'coloured' Commonwealth immigration (Julios, 2017). This was the time when Britain started to distance itself from the leadership of the Commonwealth which underwent deep structural changes. What was remarkable about the then immigration law is its non-racist jargon. Yet, many scholars criticized the unvoiced discrimination that excluded the African and Asian immigrants who had no family roots in the UK in proportion to the Canadians, New Zealanders and Australians. In Brief, the act was framed in subtle ways to curb black immigration. To wit, the language used was less racist but the objectives of the act were discriminatory.

Immigration was one of the key issues in the Brexit debate of 2016 which consolidated the cause of the Leave campaign (Vargas-Silva, 2016). After more than two years since Britain's exit from the EU, the movement of people from and into the British Isles is still problematic. However, the Brexit seems to affect more EU nationals who work or reside in Britain than Britons living in Europe. The economic impact of such decision was also seriously examined (see for example, Portes, 2022).

Data of the Office for National Statistics show a sharp rise in people's mobility from Europe to the UK before the referendum. However, this was not the case in the aftermath of Brexit. The factors behind such swift change, Portes (2016) argues, were the slow motion of the employment market, the diminishing value of the British pound as part of the immediate repercussions of the Brexit, and finally the

uneasiness felt by the EU migrants due to the political reality brought by the Brexit (see also Forte and Portes, 2017). I would emphasise the last point as a major factor rather than a marginal one as the Eurosceptic discourse of the Brexiteers was louder, and more efficient, than that of the Bremainers. Simon Susen declares that "the outcome of the referendum suggests that the rhetoric of the Leave campaign was far more effective than that of the Remain campaign. In the opinion of a vast number of voters, the former came across as far more positive and optimistic than the latter" (Outhwaite, 2017, p.160). With Britain's turning away from the Commonwealth to the European realm, the immigration policy became even more restrictive, yet open to skilled labour force from the Continent. Again, this policy of 'selective openness' came to an end with the rise of support for the secession from the EU.

5. Conclusion

Throughout much of its history, Britain genuinely welcomed people from within and outside its colonial territories and spheres of influence. It was also home for thousands of asylum seekers and refugees coming from many disturbed places around the world. On the other side of the coin, many native British citizens left to settle elsewhere and form new communities in the colonies. Certainly, British migration policy was not always the same and underwent some slight or radical changes from time to time. Indeed, the discourse of immigration has substantially altered its tone since the post-war period reflecting a profound changing perspective of Westminster's policy on the question of citizenship and movement of people from and to the UK. The political discourse of senior politicians and party leaders was often preoccupied with British sovereignty, nationhood, citizenship, the limits of political engagement and economic ramifications.

It has been advocated in this paper that the post-Windrush discourse was prejudiced and reserved towards coloured immigration due to fears of changes to the very fabric of the predominantly white population of the British Isles. Similarly, the attitudes towards the European immigration to the UK were cautious and highly sceptic. To some extent, such reserved stance was less concerned with the ethnic dimension than with Britain's political sovereignty and autonomy in decision making.

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