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# ‘Post-race’ racism in the narratives of ‘Brexit’ voters

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## Introduction

Understood as a watershed moment (Becker, Fetzer and Novy, 2017; Hozić and True, 2017), few events have divided and shocked the nation on the same level as 'Brexit'. It seems that the pollsters, academics, self-styled 'experts', and much of the political elite and mainstream media grossly misread the mood of the British public in the build up to the Referendum. The British electorate took to the polls on the 23 June 2016 and voted 51.9% in favour of leaving the EU. Since the result, researchers (as well as commentators and politicians) have grappled to understand the outcome. Much of this research has sought to understand who voted Leave, often by engaging in quantitative analyses of voter demographics, and suggests that the outcome was mediated by a range of (intersecting) factors, including: income, education, age, political (dis)engagement, (un)employment, and housing (Becker et al., 2017; Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Swales, 2016). The early popular commentary tended to construct Leave voters as less educated and of lower income than their Remain counterparts, and motivated to vote Leave by feeling 'left behind' (Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Hobolt, 2016; Swales, 2016). Yet claims that 'Brexit' represents a backlash by the (white) working-class do not hold up to scrutiny (Bhambra, 2017; Dorling, 2016; Rajan-Rankin, 2017). Not only were the middle classes more likely to vote Leave than the working-classes (Dorling, 2016) but the focus that scholarship has given to the 'legitimate' claims of the narrowly-defined white working-class operates to legitimise 'analyses that might otherwise have been regarded as racist' (Bhambra, 2017: 214). Whilst there is a growing body of scholarship which centralises the racism, nationalism and post-colonialism underpinning the vote (Bhambra, 2017; Burnett, 2017; Rajan-Rankin, 2017; Virdee and McGeever, 2018; Wilson, 2016), there has been less consideration given to the subtle, subterranean and seemingly non-racial – or 'post racial' (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Goldberg, 2015) – ways racisms are articulated in the accounts of Leave voters.

Given that there has been even less scholarly attention directed at localised research, this article reports on a project which focused on the Greater Manchester city of Salford. This is a city that saw 56.8% of the electorate vote in favour of leaving the EU, a figure significantly greater than the national average of 51.9%. The Leave vote in Salford has been presented by some as contributing to a negative perception of the city (Cowburn, 2016), which has over recent years endured stigma, in no small part due to its long-standing association with so-called 'gang' crime and the notoriety of the 2011 'Salford riots'. Drawing upon data generated – as part of a broader mixed-methods project – through 13 semi-structured interviews, this article centralises the voices of Leave voters in Salford. In so doing, it examines the ways in which our interviewees couched their xeno-racist views in seemingly non-racial ways – that is

to say, the ways in which they employed economic arguments and emphasised their proximity to racially minoritised and/or migrating people to mitigate their racism.

We begin by offering an overview of existing research that seeks to understand 'Brexit', before laying out the theoretical framings for this article by bringing into conversation bodies of scholarship on the 'post-racial' and 'new racisms'. We then introduce the research project from which the data presented in this article derives, before offering our analysis of this data. In our analysis, we first explore the key motivators behind our interviewees' votes, before examining how Salford Leave voters sought to distance themselves from accusations of racism, framed whiteness as victimised, and minimised their white privilege. Ultimately, we argue that under the cloak of the 'post-racial', racisms may no longer be explicit but instead, assume new modes of articulation and emerge from the shadows at key moments, such the EU Referendum.

### **Voting to leave the EU**

As Curtice (2017) observes, the British public never fully embraced its membership to the EU as determined through the 1975 Referendum. Unlike other EU nations, very few British citizens developed a strong European identity (Swami, Barron Weis and Furnham, 2018) and instead, a Euroscepticism has simmered below the surface for some time. Whilst this Euroscepticism is in part based upon a perception that the UK receives little socio-economic benefit from being an EU-member state, it is also clear that domestic politics greatly influenced the Leave vote, with early analyses focusing on Leave voters disenfranchisement from a liberal elite government (Ford and Goodwin, 2017; Wright and Case, 2016). Some analyses of the individual and area-level drivers of the Referendum suggest that those voting Leave were typically: older in age; from a white ethnic background; with no formal educational qualifications or whose highest qualification was at CSE or O-level; with a monthly income of less than £1,200; and living in social housing (Becker et al., 2017; Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Swales, 2016). Thus, the narrative that has gained political traction is one that constructs Leave voters as belonging to social groups that feel 'left behind' or, as McKenzie (2017) prefers to say, 'left out' - that is, those that have in the last 30 years suffered comparative economic, social and cultural impoverishment. However, the 'left behind' motif is a contested one. Indeed, whilst the white working-class have been positioned in the public imagination as driving the Leave vote, Dorling's (2016) comprehensive analysis demonstrates that it was in fact the middle-classes who were more likely to vote Leave. As Antonucci et al., (2017) contend, in recent years the so-called 'squeezed middle' have perceived their socio-economic positions to be in decline because of economic changes resulting from globalisation. The

Leave campaign, therefore, managed to 'successfully cohere a significant cross-class coalition' of voters (Virdee and McGreever, 2018: 1803).

Other scholars have focused less on the socio-economic motivators of the 'Brexit' vote and instead, examine how concerns around national identity and immigration were harnessed by those campaigning to leave the EU. This research draws attention to how the (broadly-defined) Leave campaign drew markedly on anxieties about immigration, multiculturalism, border control and security, by promising a regaining of sovereignty and a reassertion of a distinct English and/or British identity (Hobolt, 2016; Hobolt and Wratil, 2016; Wilson, 2016). As Virdee and McGeever (2018: 1802) note, an 'insular, Powellite narrative of island retreat' and 'imperial longing to restore Britain's place in the world as *primus inter pares*' featured heavily in the Leave campaign. Thus, central to the Leave vote was an erasure both of the histories of racism underpinning Empire and its racialised legacies. This was evident in the Leave campaign's activation of racialised structures, and associated anxieties about immigration and national belonging, which spoke not only to those who were struggling to cope with the loss of Empire but for whom the rallying calls to 'take back control' served to offer hope of Britain regaining global standing and authoritative rule (Virdee and McGeever, 2018: 1804). In this sense, the Leave campaign positioned itself as the last bastion of '*authentic*' Britishness.

For some Leave voters, British order and stability were therefore found to be more important principles than global freedom and diversity, and accordingly they support policies which favour restrictions on the free movement of people (Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017). Portes (2016: 14), for example, notes that negative attitudes toward immigration were 'by far the strongest predictor of opposition to UK membership' to the EU. For Kauffman (2017:10), the white majority population in the UK ought not to be stigmatised for wishing to express their racial, cultural and economic self-interests, and thus 'do not deserve the "racist" appellation'. Yet Bhambra (2017), in her scathing critique of narrowly-conceived class-based analyses of 'Brexit', foregrounds the racialised narratives underpinning the Leave vote. As she asserts, a narrow focus on class – which although not a neutral category, is ubiquitous in so-called 'left behind' arguments – displaces 'racialized inequalities from the conversation' (Bhambra: 2017: 218). Thus, whilst due attention has been paid to the racialised narratives underpinning the Referendum, less attention has been paid to the subtle and seemingly non-racial – or 'post-racial' – narratives that underpin the Leave vote. It is to an overview of the literature on the 'post-racial' that this article now turns.

### **New racisms in a 'post-racial' society**

'Post-racial' logic holds that race bears little significance in liberal democracies, with the reported decline in explicit racist prejudices (see for example, Ford, 2008) held up as evidence that Western societies have moved beyond their racist pasts. The presence of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) people in positions of power is ubiquitously constructed as symbolic of racial equity: for example, see Jonah Goldberg's (2009) editorial on Barack Obama's Presidential election and Douglas Murray's (2018) piece in *The Spectator*, which used Meghan Markle's marriage into the Royal family to position racism in Britain as a 'myth.' With explicit manifestations of racism now 'rejected, rendered implicit, silenced or denied' (Goldberg, 2015: 78), the 'post-racial' illusion works to repudiate the structural conditions of race (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018a) and limits racism to 'individual acts of bigotry' (Hodges, 2016:1). The ascription of culpability at the level of the ('bad') individual is, as Valluvan (2016: 2241) notes, consistent with the preferred *modus operandi* of contemporary neoliberalism. Racisms have thus not disappeared but rather, have assumed new models of articulation (Goldberg, 2008). They are 'no longer overt, [but] seem almost invisible and are seemingly nonracial' (Bonilla-Silva, 2015: 1363). Racisms remain deeply embedded within – and protected by – the economic, social and political structures of white supremacist societies.

Although Bonilla-Silva (2015) contends that contemporary racism persists concomitant to a hegemonic refusal to acknowledge being a racist – 'racism without racists' – Goldberg (2008) argues that there are in fact 'racisms without racism'. In making this distinction, Goldberg (2008: 1714) suggests that traditional racism has not disappeared but rather racisms have proliferated, in kind and quantity. Yet, 'torn as they are from the classic conditions of racist articulation', they become no longer recognisable (or 'unseen') in a contemporary epoch. Whilst contemporary racisms may be as difficult to recognise as they are to redress, Valluvan (2016: 2244) draws attention to the 'remade terms by which race does indeed get named'. In this sense, literatures on 'new racism(s)' (Fekete, 2001; Kundnani, 2001; Sivanandan 2006) can be usefully brought into conversation with 'post-racial' theorising to examine how culture has become central to the continued practice of racist ideology (Patel, 2017). New racisms refer to emergent forms of discrimination that have replaced older, biologically-based racism. Still racist in origin and impact, new racisms essentialise culture by 'othering' racially minoritised people without using overtly racist language and whilst seemingly fulfilling equality measures (Pon, 2009: 60-61). Contemporary examples of such new racisms include Islamophobia and anti-'migrant' hostility, which draw upon older anxieties about identity, 'race', place and citizenship. These forms of hostility are often passed off in public and political discourse as legitimate, emerging from a '(natural) fear of strangers' – a xenophobia – which operates to reify whiteness and nativism. More recently, xenophobia has been re-framed as 'xeno-racism' because, as Sivanandan (2006: 2) notes, xenophobia 'bears all the marks of old

racism', except that the term fails to acknowledge its colour-coded aspect. It is 'racism in substance, though xeno in form' (Sivanandan, 2006: 2), meaning that newer forms of racism are permitted to present themselves as rooted in seemingly non-racial discourses of cultural preservation and nationalism (Pon, 2009).

Within this 'post-racial' epoch, rhetoric, policy and practice that advocates for the foreclosing of borders to certain populations has prospered at a national, European and international level (Kundanani, 2001: 43). This control of movement is not exerted equally but rather, is highly-stratified in nature, creating a situation in which some migrants ('expats') are celebrated, whilst others are feared (Andersson, 2014). In this sense, contemporary neoliberalism has drawn upon a politics of disgust to exclude – and to justify the exclusion of – certain social groups (Tyler, 2013) and to reinforce boundaries between 'the self' (the citizen) and the 'contaminated other' (the alien) (Ngai, 2005). In recent decades, the construction of 'asylum seekers' as a suspect group – imagined in the public consciousness as bogus, deviant and/or criminal – functions to popularise resentment and fuels prejudice (Fekete, 2001; Kundanani, 2001). Yet in a 'post-racial' context, concerns around immigration are reframed as legitimate and seemingly non-racial (Patel, 2013; 2017). The anti-immigration attitudes of the public thus both feeds, and are fed by, a barrage of punitive legislation which seeks to control Western state borders. In the UK, the racist underpinnings of how borders close (in) on racially minoritised bodies have a long history but recently, the 'Windrush' scandal in 2018 cast light on the injustices of the Government's 'hostile environment' agenda. Xenophobic logic was also a dominant feature of some of the campaign materials in the lead up to the EU Referendum. The UK Independence Party's campaign material for 'Brexit', for example, included a poster headlined 'Breaking Point', which depicted a line of refugees purportedly trying to reach Europe: imagery that is strikingly reminiscent of Nazi propaganda. Before moving on to explore how 'post-racial' racisms manifested in our interviews, we now briefly introduce you to the research aims and methods.

### **The Salford 'Brexit' research project**

The qualitative data upon which this article draws derives from a broader mixed-method project exploring the Leave vote in Salford, which was undertaken between May 2017 and May 2018. The aims of this project were: (1) to explore the meanings and motivations residents in Salford ascribed to their vote to leave the EU; and (2) to examine whether Salford Leave voters perceived their pre-vote expectations to correspond with their immediate post-vote views and experiences. Participants were included if they were a Salford resident the day of the EU Referendum and voted Leave. In part, the Greater Manchester city of Salford was selected on the basis that it saw a higher percentage of the electorate (56.8%) vote to leave

the EU than the national average (51.9%). Furthermore, the demographic makeup of Salford – for example, higher rates of low-skilled occupations, higher unemployment, and poorer health than the national average – enabled us to interrogate the utility of the dominant ('left behind') discourse found in previous scholarly work on 'Brexit' (Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Hobolt, 2016; McKenzie, 2017; Swales, 2016).

Although an online survey of 114 Salford Leave voters was first used to generate data, it is data from the semi-structured interviews later carried out with 13 Leave voters that are centred in this article. The in-depth nature of these interviews yielded rich and detailed insights; although, the relatively small sample size does inevitably limit our ability to generalise our findings to all Leave voters. However, drawing upon Critical Race theoretical traditions, our intention is not to generalise findings beyond the sample but rather, to offer a counter-narrative to the hegemonic class-centric ('left behind') discourse, by exploring how 'post-racial' theorising can aid understandings of 'Brexit'. Interviewees were recruited via social media, the Mobile Research Laboratory<sup>i</sup>, and/or predominantly through the online survey, where respondents were asked to provide contact details if they were willing to be interviewed. The one-to-one interviews were conducted either face-to-face or over the phone, depending upon the interviewee's preference, and lasted on average 45 minutes. Given the political sensitivities of 'Brexit' and the involvement of members of the population who were at the time demonised, in some quarters, for contributing to a rise in explicit racial hate crime, the study underwent an extensive and thorough ethical review.

Given that interviewees volunteered to participate after first completing the online survey, the interview sample was essentially self-selecting. All 13 interviewees self-identified as 'white': either 'white English/Scottish/Welsh/Northern Irish/British' (n = 12) or 'white Irish' (n = 1). This is perhaps unsurprising given that the clear majority of survey respondents self-identified as white (n = 102; 89.5%), with only two respondents identifying as Mixed Asian and White (1.8%), one as Black Caribbean (0.9%), one as Asian Pakistani (0.9%) and eight choosing not to answer the question about ethnicity (7.0%). Yet it should be noted that although the national Leave vote appeared to be influenced by ethnic identity, it was not entirely ethnically marked. Indeed, the British Election Study indicates that 29% of Black adults and 32% of Asian adults voted Leave, compared to 51% of white adults (Swales, 2016: 27). It is important to recognise that anti-immigration sentiments are not unique to white people but rather, nativist attitudes influenced BAME Leave voters, who expressed resentment at the apparent ease with which European migrants can enter and work in the UK (Begum, 2018). Although interviewees were not asked directly about their social class, survey responses to questions

around educational qualifications, employment status and household income indicate that approximately half of our interviews were working-class and the other half lower-middle class.

It is worth noting that from the outset, our names, institution and contact details were provided on all material relating to the project, with our photographs included on some recruitment materials. This information, along with the possibility that participants may have carried out internet searches to look at our academic profiles, would not only indicate that one of us (Patel) is British South Asian (Indian) and the other (Connelly) white British but that our work centres on anti-discrimination ('race'/ethnicity and gender). Although it is impossible to measure the precise impact of our 'racial'/ethnic markers – or our gender and/or academic work, it would also be reasonable to suspect that some interviewees modified or underplayed negative sentiments about 'race'/ethnicity and immigration in the presence of Patel, in order to present themselves in more 'favourable' ways. That said, two interviewees (one interviewed by Patel and the other by Connelly) expressed, in some depth, views that appeared consistent with far-Right ideology. Given that these views were also expressed in pre-interview communication, telephone interviews were carried out as a security precaution.

In general, the semi-structured interviews explored: experiences of living in Salford; general voting attitudes and practices; motivations for voting Leave; the sources that informed their vote; post-Referendum experiences; hopes and fears for the 'Brexit' process; and their opinions on the Government's handling of 'Brexit'. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically, with the assistance of NVivo 10 Software. This involved an iterative process of manual coding by both researchers, first to pick out general themes and then with a focus on 'post-racial' racisms. We now explore some key findings: first by considering the key motivations behind the Leave vote, and then how Leave voters sought to distance themselves from accusations of racism, framed their whiteness as victimised, and attempted to minimise their white privilege.

## **Findings and discussion**

### A mixed-bag: Motivations for the Salford Leave vote

Most interviewees were keen to emphasise that rather than there being one dominant motivator, there were several interconnecting reasons for their Leave vote. There were, as John<sup>ii</sup> noted, 'lots of little reasons' behind the vote. Yet interviewees largely suggested that concerns around immigration were the primary motivator. Susan, for example, said that she

...voted leave, on the simple basic grounds of, and I shouldn't actually say, I'm trying not to sound racist because that's the wrong thing to say. I voted leave primarily because of uncontrolled immigration. I don't believe in uncontrolled



immigration, certainly not at this moment in time. I don't believe in it in terms of from within the EU. I certainly don't believe in it from outside the EU.

Cognizant of the way in which her reflections might be interpreted as racist, Susan acknowledges that her views might be 'the wrong thing to say.' In so doing, she demonstrates an awareness that explicitly prejudicial views are no longer palatable in a 'post-racial' society (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). That she is 'trying not to sound racist' is indicative of the broader shift in racism's modes of articulation in recent years, from explicit 'old' forms to subtler and seemingly non-racial racisms (Goldberg, 2015). It is interesting that Susan is more concerned with not *sounding* racist than of not *being* racist.

Evident in Susan's account of her motivations for voting Leave was a concern with what she terms 'uncontrolled immigration', a notion common both in our interviews and in the analyses of other researchers (Ford and Goodwin, 2017; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017; Portes, 2016). It is clear that for many interviewees, 'uncontrolled immigration' was understood as synonymous with EU membership. Indeed, although 'the share of Britain's population comprising non-Britons is not out of line with other EU countries' (Tilford, 2016), Leave voters remain concerned about the proportion of 'migrants' residing in the UK. As Susan also articulates, her concerns around immigration were not only confined to people migrating from EU countries but also, around those migrating from outside of the EU. Although most interviewees demonstrated awareness that their Leave vote had little direct bearing on migration from outside of the EU, reflections on non-EU migration were nonetheless common. In this sense, Leave voters appeared to see the 'Brexit' vote as an opportunity to signal a general dissatisfaction with UK immigration policy. For many then, the vote had the potential to directly influence migration from the EU but also to indirectly – or symbolically – send a message of intolerance to non-EU 'migrants', whom Susan 'certainly' does not want to migrate to the UK. The additional emphasis Susan employs here is thus demonstrative of a hierarchy of migration, in which non-EU 'migrants' are even less welcome than their EU counterparts.

This message of intolerance was often coupled with a feeling of resentment that the EU and its bureaucrats were able to hold some sort of power and authority over the British people. As Katherine stated

I voted Brexit on the sole reason of immigration, to keep control of our borders... secondary to that, Britain is a proud nation and it always has been, and I couldn't, not for the life of me, understand how some bureaucrats in Brussels could tell the British people what they could and what they couldn't do.

In keeping with Virdee and McGreever's (2018) findings that the Leave vote signalled a desire to reinstate the sovereign will of British people, narratives like Katherine's not only illustrate

patriotic sentiments about Britain as a 'proud nation' but also, demonstrate an attempt to re-position Britain as a great power. Perhaps implicit within her reflections, therefore, is a harking back to a state similar to (albeit an already always sanitised version of) that seen during British colonialism and Empire building. The nostalgia for such a period not only shapes future goals but fails to recognise that Britain's colonial and Empire building practices were profoundly exploitative and violent. Indeed 'post-racial' hegemony is dependent upon white historical amnesia (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018b) or what Stuart Hall (1978: 26) describes as a 'profound historical forgetfulness... about race and Empire since the 1950s.' This denial of Britain's long history of racism and white supremacy is coupled with a longing for Empire: a 'postcolonial melancholia' that not only nostalgically wishes for a return to imperialist times but also, endorses the neo-colonialism of the present (Gilroy, 2004). The narratives of Leave voters thus revealed a feeling that departure from the EU would help Britain to regain its power, or at least to 'take back control' of its own future.

#### A distance from racism

In the same way as Susan above sought to 'not sound racist', many interviewees distanced themselves from accusations of racism when reflecting on their motivations for voting Leave. They expressed disappointment, and at times anger, about how they perceived they have been constructed in populist discourse and by Remain voters as un(der)educated racists. This was particularly notable in Katherine's account

I mean I've got a degree and two postgraduate degrees. There's this sweeping generalisation that we're thick, ignorant, racist, stupid, like I said, we hate foreigners, and it's all completely wrong...I'm in the public sector... there's these massive tenders worth millions of pounds and because it's so fair, they are often awarded to companies that reside outside of the UK and I'm thinking we should be protecting our British-based workers and their jobs.

Katherine felt the need to highlight her educational qualifications and her employment in the public sector, in an attempt to expose the inaccuracies of the essentialising narratives that have emerged around 'Brexit' voters. She is not the 'left behind' Leave voter that is hegemonically constructed in early analyses of 'Brexit'. Instead, Katherine uses the 'unfairness' she sees through her employment to legitimise, or mitigate, her racialised views. She is not 'thick, ignorant, racist' or 'stupid' but rather, wants to protect 'British-based workers.' In so doing, Katherine presents racism in a 'post-race' era, as something only associated with un(der)-educated and un(der)-employed individuals, rather than being a pervasive and pernicious feature of our social, economic and political structures. Like the white working-class participants in McKenzie's (2017: 205-207) research, who 'were confused and hurt' by the portrayal of them in the media as 'backwards and 'racists', it is clear too that Katherine felt the

need pre-empt and challenge accusations of racism and xenophobia, by highlighting her educational and employment status. As McKinney (2003: 44) contends, whiteness is often constructed by white people as susceptible to 'cultural victimisation', in that they perceive themselves to encounter unfair charges of racism. For many white people, being labelled a racist is 'the ultimate insult' (Tatum, 1997), as Katherine articulates. Indeed, in a 'post-racial' context, racisms persist whilst attempts to 'identify, comprehend or condemn' them are invalidated (Goldberg, 2015: 82) and are themselves often reframed as a form of racism (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018b).

Other interviewees sought to distance themselves from accusations of racism by pointing to their relationships with racially minoritised people. As Patrick noted

I know there are people on the hard left who like to say that Brexiteers are all knuckle-dragging racists and that's far from being the case. Certainly, there are some people who fall into that category who are in the Leave camp, but I was married to a Black African lady. My children are mixed-race.

Like, Katherine above, Patrick attempts to connect racism with un(der)educated and poorly socialised individuals: the 'knuckle-dragging' members of the population. In doing so, he too employs a narrow definition of racism and a narrow construction of racists, which fails to understand racism's structural and institutional nature. In addition though, by demonstrating his close proximity to racially minoritised people, Patrick sought to dispel the notion that he, and other Leave voters, are racist. This can be understood as an attempt to avoid the stigma associated with the label of 'racist' in a 'post-racial' society that has – or so the argument goes – embraced diversity and achieved racial equity. Patrick's assertion that he 'was married to a Black African lady' may be viewed as a form of tokenism-by-association and a variant on the popular refrain 'some of my friends are Black', which is commonly employed by white people when confronted with charges of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Yet research suggests that some white people engage in 'enlightened exceptionalism' (Wise, 2009): that is, a form of racism in which some racially minoritised people are held as exceptional to the 'norm'. In this sense, it is possible for white people to exhibit racist attitudes, whilst simultaneously having close relationships to those racialised as 'Other'.

Although Patrick above emphasised his close proximity to a Black woman through marriage, the relationships of other interviewees to racially minoritised and/or migrating people were more tenuous. Christopher, for example, claimed

I've never been a racist, I've lived and worked in South Africa. I've lived and worked with all kinds of different ethnic groups, got on with all of them famously, but I'm

turning racist more and more now, because we seem to be getting the fatter end of the deal, which is a shame really.

Here, Christopher seeks to evidence his claim that he's 'never been a racist' by underlining that he gets on 'famously' with people of different ethnic groups. This, according to Bonilla-Silva (2018), is a common practice amongst white people, who may exaggerate the strength of their relationships with racially minoritised people in an attempt to present themselves as racially tolerant. Yet what are often missing in their accounts are tangible displays of trust and friendship. In this sense, Bonilla-Silva (2018) suggests that these relationships are somewhat superficial, instrumental and short-lived. What is also noteworthy in Christopher's reflection is the claim that although he had 'never been a racist', he is 'turning racist more and more'. This may be understood as an attempt by Christopher to position his 'racism' as justifiable: racism is not inherent within him but rather, it has come about for 'legitimate' reasons and because of external factors. His racism was not present, he claims, until his 'deal' in life was threatened. This may be viewed in the context of widespread attempts of late to change and/or inflate the definition of racism in order to legitimise it, which is perhaps only possible because racism is said to no longer exist in a 'post-racial' society (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018a). Whilst Kauffman (2017) argues that we ought to accept that all groups look after their own racial self-interests and thus should not conflate the racial self-interests of the white majority with racism, what he fails to recognise is that 'minority partiality' occurs in the context of a white supremacist power structure (Bhambra, 2017). Thus, when racially minoritised groups seek to exert racial self-interest, it is to redress racial inequality, whereas white majority racial self-interest operates to maintain the status quo. Put another way, Christopher's racism can thus be understood to emerge once his 'white privilege' (McIntosh, 1988) is threatened. In the next section, we unpack this notion of 'white privilege' some more.

### Reverse discrimination versus white privilege

It was clear that interviewees did not perceive there to be benefit deriving from their whiteness but conversely, many suggested that they felt victimised or marginalised as a white Salfordian. Nowhere was this more evident than in the account of Greg, who claimed

I do honestly feel as a white person, a white Salfordian for want of a better word, marginalised. I do feel that as a white male. I do feel marginalised as a white male because I feel that all the world's ills are turned around on me. Certainly, in this political climate...I'm a potential racist.

Here, Greg reflects on his positionality to suggest that rather than accruing privilege by virtue of being racialised and gendered as a white man, he in fact feels blamed for 'all the world's ills'. Whilst Greg clearly feels stigmatised as a 'potential racist', his reflections should be understood within a context in which the white working-class are often reluctant to accept their

white privilege, particularly in a society assumed to be 'post-racial': beyond 'race'. Yet it is perhaps because of the intersectional nature of oppression (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016) that Greg fails to recognise his privilege. Indeed, when struggling against class-based oppression, it is difficult to see racialised and gendered hierarchies of privilege. Austerity, as Virdee and McGreever (2018) contend, has exacerbated existing class-based inequalities, causing very real suffering amongst the working-classes. Across the political spectrum, it is the 'white working-class' who have been constructed as the foremost losers of globalisation, a notion that reflects, and reaffirms, the long-term absence of a multi-ethnic working-class frame. The real injuries of class have thus become recast through the politics of racist resentment, with racially minoritised and 'migrant' bodies positioned as a threat to the socio-economic survival of the 'white working-class.'

Not only does Greg appear to reject his racialised and gendered privilege but he implies that he in fact experiences a form of 'reverse discrimination', in that he feels the ill-effects of being a white man (Pincus, 2003). The argument goes that racially minoritised people have benefitted so greatly through equality policies in 'post-racial' times, that it is the 'indigenous' white population that is now being discriminated against (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Such racially-defined identity politics featured heavily not only in Leave voters' defence of racism but also, in the processes through which they set themselves apart from the racialised 'Other.' For these interviewees, the perceived fixed (raced) and quasi-fixed (Salfordian/British) aspects of their identity, were considered, above all else, to be fundamentally important. Perceiving his 'white Salfordian' identity to be threatened, Greg (re)positions whiteness not as a form of privilege but as a victimised identity. This discourse is not unique to Greg but rather, growing numbers of white people are claiming to be racially oppressed in Western society (Hughey, 2014), with discourses around 'reverse racism' as well as 'reverse sexism' gaining traction. This is despite the scholarly work of anti-racist and/or feminist theorists drawing attention to how racialised and gendered domination is forged in historical processes (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016; Leonardo, 2004).

Although interviewees did not explicitly acknowledge their 'white privilege', its existence was nonetheless implicit in their accounts. When asked to consider the impact 'Brexit' may have upon their local area and British society as a whole, few interviewees recognised the potential for any negative implications. Stuart, for example, claimed

I don't think it will affect the normal people like us whether they leave or whether they stay. It will just carry on, you do exactly the same thing, don't you?

Like most other interviewees, Stuart perceived that the Referendum outcome had not, and that Britain's exit from the EU would not, have any effect on 'normal people' like him. His

deployment of the term 'normal people' is an interesting one and may be understood as an attempt to set apart those racialised as white or constructed as native 'British/English' from those who have thus far experienced the greatest repercussions from the Referendum outcome: those racialised as 'Other' and/or people who migrate. Only one interviewee noted the growth in reported hate crime since the Referendum (Devine, 2018) and the apparent emboldening of far-Right groups such as the Football Lad's Alliance and Britain First. That the Referendum was constructed by interviewees as having little or no effect on their everyday lives, freedoms and rights, can be understood as demonstrative of their racialised (and intersectional) privileges. Indeed, levels of concerns are likely to be far higher amongst people constructed as 'migrant', as well as the majority of the Black and Asian electorate in the UK – approximately three-quarters and three-thirds of which voted Remain, respectively (Khan, 2017). It is perhaps by virtue of an imagined 'post-racial' society, that white Leave voters are able to remain ignorant of the racialised consequences of 'Brexit'.

Salford Leave voters' seeming ignorance to the xeno-racism both underpinning and legitimised by the Referendum was also present in their reflections on the positive impacts 'Brexit' might bring for people who migrate. Jonathan, for example, noted that although he harboured some guilt about voting in a way that may restrict the free movement of people, he believed it will assist (would-be) 'migrants' in the longer-term

Part of me does feel quite bad about that but I think in the long run it'll be better for those people themselves because I think that the EU doesn't do their countries any favours...It might give them the right to work somewhere else but, actually, why have their countries been so impoverished that they have to travel thousands of miles to come and work somewhere else?

Since Jonathan understands EU countries not to do themselves 'any favours', he suggests that Britain should, in effect, act on their behalf. Although he acknowledges that restrictive immigration policy will negatively impact people seeking to migrate for work in the short-term, he suggests it is in their best interests to remain in their countries of origin. Thus, his argument goes that taking away the option of migration can operate as a means of 'helping' other EU countries to prosper. This may be read as a form of paternalism, one that is reminiscent of colonial 'civilising missions' and the 'white saviour' mentality that underpinned them. By recasting other EU member states as 'impoverished', Jonathan positions himself as a hero for the social cause, disguising (white) self-interest behind the façade of protectionism. Virdee and McGreever (2018: 1805) are therefore quite right to point to how 'Brexit' drew on 'deep reservoirs of imperial longing' that yearned for Britain's regaining of social, economic and political superiority, whilst simultaneously erasing the racist underpinnings of Empire. 'Brexit' can therefore be understood to legitimise the UK to act as a 'powerful vector' for the

imposition of its 'ideas and mode of behaviour' upon countries deemed to be less advanced (Donini, 2010: 226). In this way, the UK can pretend to moral superiority, whilst engaging in a soft form of imperialism: one that does not attract the same visceral condemnation as colonialism – which of course, is unpalatable in a 'post-racial' epoch – but remains nonetheless intrusive in the affairs of other countries.

The role that the UK occupies in regulating the behaviours of other countries was also observed by Jane, who noted that it plays an important function in overseeing the 'policing' of world affairs

Like in the days of the British Empire, you remember those old maps where the map of the world and which, the country and the Queen and the Head and it's like nobody wants that, we're never going to be that powerful role again on the world scale. On the other hand, I feel quite proud that we're almost, we're one of the world's policemen. If something bad is going on somewhere in the world, we'll always stick our heads up and say something about it.

Clearly cognizant of the unpalatability of a melancholic longing for Empire in 'post-racial' times, Jane emphasises that 'nobody wants' the return of the British Empire. Yet she remains 'quite proud' of Britain's operation as 'the 'world's policemen', a construction popularised under Empire. In this sense, she draws upon a nostalgic view of Empire and its continued influence on the mind-set of those white supremacy has benefitted the most. As Gilroy (2005: 434-437) notes, the construction of Britishness in these ways is problematic given that it is shaped by Britain's biased understanding of its own colonial history, where Britishness is viewed through an 'airbrushed' and 'nostalgic filter'. It 'feeds the illusion that Britain has been or can be disconnected from its imperial past' (Gilroy, 2004: 2) and in this sense, 'postcolonial melancholia' is central to a 'post-racial' society in which 'race' is assumed not to be a key defining principle. For Jane, like other interviewees, 'Brexit' thus offers an opportunity, not for the return of Empire in the concrete sense, but for the re-imagination of Britain as a contemporary authority figure in a symbolic sense. Indeed, whilst maintaining that 'race' no longer matters and that racism is a thing of the past, Leave voters are able to re-formulate the explicitly white supremacist practices of Empire as something acceptable in 'post-racial' times.

## **Conclusion**

Foregrounding data generated through 13 semi-structured interviews as part of a broader mixed-methods project, this article has examined the presence and power of 'post-racial' racisms in Salford Leave voters' reflections on the motivations behind their vote. Whilst previous research has focused on the individual and area-level drivers behind the 'Brexit' vote – and much of this has found that concerns over immigration were a central motivator – little

social scientific research has to date examined the subtle and seemingly non-racial ways in which xeno-racialised narratives underpin the accounts of Leave voters. Instead, early analyses have offered a one-dimensional and class-centric focus on the 'left behind', a narrative that has gained much political purchase. In this article, we therefore offer a counter-narrative to the 'left behind' motif by demonstrating the ways in which our white working-class and middle-class interviews expressed views that were, in various ways and to different degrees, 'xeno-racist' in the 'post-racial' sense. That is to say, interviewees took great care to put forward seemingly non-racial accounts of their vote by employing economic arguments and emphasising their proximity to racially minoritised and/or migrating people, in an attempt to disguise or mitigate their racist views. In this sense, their concerns about the negative impact of 'uncontrolled' immigration on the white 'indigenous' population were framed a 'legitimate' response to a victimised whiteness.

Rather than living in the 'post-racial' epoch many imagine, this article demonstrates that racism continues to thrive through new modes of articulation (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). These 'everyday' and 'new racisms' (Fekete, 2001; Kundhani, 2001; Sivanadan 2006) emerge from the shadows at key times, such as the EU Referendum, and re-fashion themselves in ways that are considered more palatable than the older (explicit) racisms of past. Although the data presented here is specific to the Salford context, it casts light on the way in which new racisms are engrained with the social, political and economic structures of the UK, and Western societies more broadly. It was not our intention to demonise Leave voters in this article but rather, to reflect upon these structures and how they give rise to 'post-racial' racist narratives. Thus, to properly understand the Leave vote, it is imperative that we recognise how post-colonial anxieties and a yearning for Empire-like conditions operate behind the façade of the 'post-racial'. In the context of 'Brexit', we must recognise that concerns around identity, place and citizenship are highly-racialised through structures that enable white normativity to go unchallenged and which obfuscate the centrality of racism in contemporary Britain.

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<sup>i</sup> The Mobile Research Laboratory is a vehicle available to researchers at the University of Salford to conduct fieldwork in situ. It was employed by the researchers in this study to take the 'research out' into the local area, by distributing information about the research with the aim of encouraging Salford Leave voters to enter the Laboratory to complete the online survey and/or participate in a semi-structured interview. This approach was adopted on one occasion for a total of 5 hours.

<sup>ii</sup> Pseudonyms have been used to adhere to data protection requirements.