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Migration

The new undesirables

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Sivamohan Valluvan and Eleanor Penny unpack neoliberal attitudes to migration and 'low-value' humans.

Presiding over an otherwise vacuous British Conservative conference characterized by empty ‘techno-utopian babble’, Sajid Javid and Theresa May did announce one big policy intended to rally its base, the electorate and, in turn, the nation. [1] [2] [3] This was the formal call to end free movement within the EU, decreeing in turn a new threshold in how immigration to the country would be regulated. A threshold that would ‘harmonize’ European migration with the restrictions that non-EU citizens are already subject to.

Whilst not unexpected, this move does represent a drastic restriction on immigration. That such a move has been enacted by a Tory party so committed to emphatically capitalist visions of a post-Brexit future does raise accordingly intriguing questions about what we might describe as being a ‘neoliberal nationalism’? Indulging a shameless bout of ad hominem, it could for instance be pointed out that Javid was formerly an illustrious member of the investment banking classes. [4]

Globalisation and the Nation State

At first glance, this seems like a paradox. After all, it’s frequently suggested that neoliberalism involves a departure from the nation-state: that globalisation renders the borders of nation states increasingly defunct. All that shall prevail is the free movement of capital, goods and labour. All else that was solid shall melt into air, including, therefore, the nation. [5]

But the thesis that globalisation sounds the death knell for the nation-state is at best overstated and at worst entirely misplaced. It is already erroneous in the simple sense that the nation-state’s role is in fact elevated within neoliberalism. It acts as the security regime that polices and mops up the human debris of a capitalism unleashed; and as the state that facilitates businesses’ access to domains they’ve hitherto been denied (public sector provisions) or have found difficult to access (certain ‘hot’ geopolitical zones). [6]

But the ‘globalism’ conceit is also misguided in the obvious sense that we do not have anything resembling the free movement of capital, goods and labour. [7] As has been widely documented, the movement of capital and goods are subject to conditions that routinely privilege the more politically powerful states. [8] And as regards labour, it is resoundingly the case that a principle of free movement does not prevail anywhere. Indeed, contrary to certain commonsensical impressions, even within the EU certain mobility, employment and welfare controls are occasionally implemented: restrictions on how work can be applied for, how welfare can be accessed, and how free movement can be delayed upon a new country’s accession to the Union.

We need to question therefore the idea that neoliberalism is the untethering of capitalism from the nation-state. Already, we sense in the above a more complex and contrary understanding. One where nationalism is always in play, and where the outsider and the border are as relevant as they have ever been.

Nationalism and neoliberal visions

The word ‘nationalism’ covers all manner of sins. However, in terms of the recurring definition that permeates Valluvan’s previous thinking, nationalism is, in the final instance, the recourse to politically understanding a society’s perceived problems through extensive *negative* reference to the presence of those who do not belong – outsiders who are often construed along their many ethnoracial guises. [9] In this context, we need to consider how neoliberalism is endowed with certain moral precepts that designate these outsiders undesirable, ominous, and a problem to be formally addressed and/or thwarted.

There are two principle aspects to this. The first involves already established racialised non-white communities being further ‘pathologised’ – falling short when appraised against the ‘moral-economic’ logic unique to a neoliberal temperament. [10] These are the stereotypes that routinely represent certain minority groups as work-shy, prone to welfare dependency, susceptible to nihilistically destructive lifestyles, and/or as groups who remain excessively attached to ‘traditional’ values that do not accord with the neoliberal call to freedom. It is however the second principle, concerning the wider anxieties regarding immigration as a specific political issue, where this recent policy move by the Tory government is best deciphered.

One might expect champions of neoliberalism to back freedom of movement, with their supposed focus on the ‘free exchange’ of market goods and labour power in a dynamic, muscular system. But the way in which neoliberal ideologues suggest immigration ought to be handled runs counter to some key intuitive understandings of the neoliberal programme. Neoliberalism is *not*, contrary to popular understandings, pro-immigration. Any permissiveness that it allows for regarding immigration is instead filtered through a moral appraisal respective to neoliberalism’s guiding virtues of competition, entrepreneurialism and the gloriously ‘responsible’ self: an imperative to filter ideal migrants that was gestured at by the late social critic, Bauman, in his inventive ‘vagabond’ versus ‘tourist’ heuristic. [11] The real world example that best reveals this perhaps abstract assertion is the increased embrace of what is often termed an ‘Australian’ styled ‘points-system’: free movement not for people per se, but for the kind of labour force deemed most valuable according to certain moralised economic principles. Javid/May’s recent proposal is simply another iteration of this wider regard for the ‘points-system’ as political panacea.

Even robust anti-immigration nationalists like Nigel Farage have praised this technocratic ideal of ‘metric-power’, demonstrating in turn the powerful appeal that a neoliberal understanding of migration has in our political mainstream. [12] [13] Other attitudes grounded in notions of obligations or even compassion might be sourced from other competing, even conservative, ethical repertoires – for instance, a remade legacy of Church teachings regarding hospitality, refuge and sanctuary. [14] But these are forfeited for the overriding interests of economic utility. Conservatism, nationalism, and neoliberalism become, in this simple move, one and the same thing.

The points system

The sociologist Will Davies has offered a typically generative commentary on why the ‘work-permit’ driven points system appears so attractive to so many merchants of anti-immigration alarmism. Davies notes how a point-system agenda attempts to clarify and simplify the terms by which immigration is to be regimented. [15] “The points system is to calculate different human capabilities according to the economic metaphor of human capital.” Each prospective migrant must be evaluated solely on the terms of how much value they add. This is of course an appeal to economic technocracy, formally deferring to the decision-making powers of a market-responsive state bureaucracy. But, in order to gain popular traction, this system of assigning migrants ‘value’ does invariably rely on more popular notions of who counts as valuable and desirable.

The first obvious casualty of any such point system being further normalized as the guiding logic of immigration policy, is the idea of the refugee or asylum seeker. They are no longer someone inherently deserving of support or

compassion, irrespective of the impact on the ‘host’ nation. They are simply another possible vehicle of labour power.

This in turn summarily buries any even residual vestige of a more radical ‘no borders’ principle. It is here we can begin to grasp how neoliberals can mobilize a particularly candid, matter-of-fact dehumanization when considering immigrants (and, by further implication, refugees). Consider here Ian Duncan Smith’s remark, in the context of a 2017 Newsnight interview about Brexit and immigration, that ‘we [have] had a huge number of very low-value, low-skilled people coming through the EU’. [16] (In an anticipation of this week’s announcements, he went on to explain that exiting the European Union would now allow for a more purpose built filtering of who would in fact be given entry to the United Kingdom.)

The broader doublespeak in these and similar statements is supposed to imply that the Conservative’s new immigration policy represents a progressive pivot *towards* the world in its entirety, dissolving the difference between EU and non-EU citizen. But the logic evoked here does in fact further embed the undesirable status of the world’s darker-skinned peoples. In the course of excluding the European migrant, in their different guises of poverty (the ones being repulsed here are after all the overworked, underpaid and routinely shamed Poles, Sicilians, Romanians, and Roma alike), the precise political logic that it normalizes carries with it a particularly resonant denigration of those also already racialised as non-white. When seen along the terms of optimal economic citizenry – those who are able to convey the ideals of independence, enterprise and offer premium skills – darker-skinned people and the stereotypes fixed to their bodies already constitute a symbolic antithesis. [17]

It is for precisely this reason that migrant rights groups are often reluctant to press an economic argument about the contribution of immigrants – that immigrants leave us with ‘fiscal gains/surpluses’, etc. [18] These interventions leave intact an analysis of human worth in instrumental, mechanistic, and economic terms – which risks playing into a longer history of treating racialised minorities not as humans, but as machines or beasts of burden to be put to work for profit. Economic talk of utility and contribution simply reinvents that cruel history in the dryly mechanical terms of the neoliberal age.

A more precise attentiveness to the arguments put forth by figurehead neoliberals is revealing here. These are the action-oriented thinkers who call for the nation to be streamlined, noting how immigration, whilst itself permissible, must be subject to vital neoliberal checks. [19] Who is in fact being given entry, what do they do once here, and what should the upper limit be. For instance, even though the more frenzied Right railed *against* Carswell for somehow being ‘pro-immigration’, what Carswell was routinely advocating was precisely this surgically neoliberal resolution to the ills of immigration:

‘Britain needs a point-based immigration system, similar to that in Australia. An eVisitor visa scheme would make it easy for legitimate visitors and tourists to enter the UK. Parliament would annually agree on a quota of those that would be allowed to permanently settle – and in time acquire citizenship. Places would be allocated on the basis of the skills that those first generation Britons would bring with them.’ [20]

This is scarcely a pro-immigration position. It is instead a call to direct migrant flows by the sole criteria of the alleged human capital gains that the nation-as-enterprise would most require.

Similarly, it is to be noted that the global trade utopians in the Empire 2.0 mould who champion Brexit – Liam Fox, Ian Duncan Smith, Michael Gove, Nigel Farage, and Boris Johnson – all speak about the need to make Britain a slick engine of capital accumulation. [21] Central to that aspiration is the management and restructuring of its core stock (i.e. the national population). Needless to say, the destitute Eritreans, Pakistanis, and Arabs who’ve braved the unforgiving seas hardly elicit confidence when seen against these broader criteria of shiny capitalist success.

Of course, this new neoliberal politics of the nation does make certain symbolic exceptions to reflect contemporary shifts in concentrations of global capital – not least a recoding that recognizes the rise of China and East Asia more broadly alongside a carefully calibrated reading of say India’s economic possibility. These are no longer homogenously painted as a hive of menacing foreign perils, but in more complicated terms as also a wellspring of future growth and trade. Their people might still be racialised and subject to border policing and ‘compliant’ environment policies in the UK, but their pockets are invitingly deep. It is for instance interesting that Carswell, in the course of his anti-EU, pro points-system vision for immigration, made explicit rhetorical mention of India and Singapore.

‘Since 400 million EU citizens have a right to come, lowering immigration numbers means making it harder for non-EU people to enter the UK. [22] Thus do we prioritise a EU citizen with a criminal record over someone with a doctorate from India or Singapore. It makes no sense.’

Such ostensible openness to a world, one that refuses to privilege Europe, has a notionally inviting ring to it. It is also a resounding and pernicious misnomer (see for instance May’s refusal to relax visa regulations during a ‘charm’ offensive visit in India). [23] Whilst a select Indian doctor, Ghanaian IT engineer and Chinese investor might be picked off selectively (via a points system), they represent anomalies in the popular neoliberal gaze – wherein the bulk of those who threaten to allegedly burst through the port patrols at Calais or ask for student visas that might allow them to work do not satisfy even the most basic neoliberal approximation of an attractive skills portfolio or character matrix.

Decades of popular racism and its constitutive stereotypes render these various migrant figures, and their corresponding racialised communities who are already resident here, unwanted and disposable. Under this global points-system regime, a start-up investor from Qatar might indeed be courted to shower a London property development with money and lifestyle. But, by the same reckoning, the impoverished migrant worker and their predecessors who might be already living in the same area become all the more expendable. These are racialised figures that can only be found fundamentally wanting when subject to a neoliberal moral appraisal. Some weasel words by its Tory proponents, and their apologists, about the new immigration policy now being fairly squared across the world will accordingly not do. The policy summarily excludes the European poor. And it emphatically rejects the wretched of the earth.

[Red Pepper](#)

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[1] <https://www.patreon.com/posts/there-is-death-21793282>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/oct/02/immigrant-language-criteria-to-harden-after-brexit-says-sajid-javid>

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