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Factual – Measured – Critical

**Viewpoint: The Dangerous Politics of Belonging**  
**Gurminder K Bhambra, University of Warwick**

In January 2011, the UK Minister for Education, Michael Gove, launched a review of the National Curriculum for primary and secondary education in England. This included, especially, the History curriculum. The first draft<sup>i</sup> was published in early February 2013 to general disquiet from schoolteachers,<sup>ii</sup> academic historians,<sup>iii</sup> the Historical Association,<sup>iv</sup> as well as the Black and Asian Studies Association.<sup>v</sup> The only prominent voice in favour of the proposals was celebrity historian, Niall Ferguson who, writing in *The Guardian*, called the draft ‘a major improvement’<sup>vi</sup> on the current curriculum.

The key issue for most commentators was the reversion to an ‘Our Island Story’ narrative. This was a history book for children written by Henrietta Marshall in 1905 where British history was understood only in terms of the events that took place within the territorial bounds of the nation.<sup>vii</sup> What ‘Our Island Story’ misses, however, is that at the height of the British Empire in the early twentieth century, the UK governed over at least one quarter of the Earth’s land territory and over one fifth of its total population.

The idea that this broader context is irrelevant is to present a parochial, distorted vision of our collective past. How we represent the past is central to the politics of the present. It should be no surprise that with the promotion of such a narrow and exclusive history come narrow-minded policies in its wake.

In summer 2013, the government launched its ‘returns’<sup>viii</sup> pilot. This was ostensibly aimed at making it easier for those who were in the country ‘illegally’ to ‘go home’, but seemed to be more about reclaiming votes that they believed had been lost to the UK Independence Party in recent elections as a consequence of their stance on immigration. The pilot involved two vans with the slogans ‘In the UK illegally?’ ‘Go home or face arrest’ and a phone number for people to call for advice about repatriation. These vans were driven around areas of London with settled immigrant populations (although not around the areas largely inhabited by Australian, New Zealand and US immigrants) and the language options when calling the telephone ‘helpline’ were Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu, hardly a comprehensive selection of the languages of immigrants in London.

This was accompanied by a number of raids by the UK Border Agency at underground stations seeking to ascertain the citizenship status of commuters. From eyewitness reports, the majority of people stopped were Black and ethnic minority commuters raising concerns of racial profiling by the border police.<sup>ix</sup> The slogan ‘Go home’ – the language of racist abuse in the 1960s and 70s – has also been used on posters in asylum reporting centres in Glasgow.<sup>x</sup>

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The scapegoating of migrants in the run up to an election is not new. The following statement was made by a Liberal Democrat candidate during the general election period in Britain in 2010: 'We're in danger of a lost generation – parents and grandparents worry about a future where their children can't repay student loans, can't find a decent job and don't have a sniff of a chance at getting on the housing ladder. Their concern about the knock-on effects of immigration is genuine and it isn't racist.'<sup>xi</sup> What is significant here is the association of immigration with specific concerns such as their children's education, finding a job, and getting on the housing ladder. The suggestion, albeit implicitly, is that immigration is the *cause* of these problems and that the effects of these problems upon migrants themselves is of no concern.

What is not addressed in this narrative is that it was a British government that brought in tuition fees and undercut access to higher education; it was a British government that undermined the unions and deregulated the labour market; and it was a British government that sold off council houses, didn't build any more, and thus allowed the pool of social housing to contract. All of this in response to an electoral politics of the majority population – who voted for these measures – now mobilised to undermine the claims to equality and inclusion made by minorities and migrants.

This mobilisation is not only by politicians, however, key British intellectuals are also peddling this line. In recent comment pieces for *The Guardian*<sup>xii</sup> and BBC Radio 4's *A Point of View*<sup>xiii</sup>, for example, Roger Scruton has addressed issues of democracy, political freedom, and national identity. He has questioned whether democracy isn't, after all, over-rated and criticized the abstractions of human rights foisted upon us against the common law freedoms of England. For him, these abstractions represent a loss of national sovereignty which, apparently, we can now begin to see when 'wave after wave of immigrants seek the benefit of our hard-won assets and freedoms'.<sup>xiv</sup>

It is clear from his wider discussion that these immigrants are not included in the 'we' of the national community under discussion. Despite their apparent appreciation of *common* freedoms, their traditions are represented as different and as a threat. Equally significantly, he fails to address the origins of 'our collective assets'. In representing the political community as an 'island home', he neglects the broader histories of British capitalism and its colonial and imperial past when 'our assets' were once the (potential) assets of others. Scruton cites Edmund Burke's appreciation of the small platoons that make up society, but neglects entirely the latter's critique of the gunboats of international commerce and empire.

For Burke, the problem of abstractions was not restricted to 'human rights', but also included the 'market' and 'empire'. It was pursuit of market and empire that would, for him, corrupt the nation. In failing to address the constitution of national assets by the coerced imposition of markets and the plunder of empire, Scruton seeks an

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idealized England (he elides Britain and England, precisely because the United Kingdom is bound to that imperial history). It is a travesty of Burke's legacy to present British history as newly corrupted by external factors, rather than historically corrupted by internal will.

The attacks on our multicultural present are the thin end of the wedge that will also ultimately undermine the cosmopolitan liberal order that is otherwise celebrated. As is increasingly apparent in the UK context, one of the pillars of cosmopolitanism – a commitment to human rights demonstrated through participation in the European Court of Human Rights and signing the Human Rights Act – is being undermined by key members of the Coalition government. The Justice Secretary, Chris Grayling, and the Home Secretary, Theresa May, are lobbying for the UK to pull out of the court and the convention.<sup>xv</sup> A move that even others within their party, such as the former Justice Secretary Ken Clarke, think will lead to the unravelling of fundamental liberties that are at the heart of the very idea of European civilisation.<sup>xvi</sup> Scruton, however, concurs with May and Grayling, criticising European courts for their lack of care for our 'unique social fabric'. He forgets, or refuses to address, how that social fabric has already been rent by inequality and poverty. One in four children currently live in relative poverty, and this is predicted to rise with the impact of austerity policies<sup>xvii</sup>; over half a million people are reliant on emergency food parcels from charitable associations<sup>xviii</sup>; and a recent OECD report predicts levels of inequality to continue to rise as a consequence of austerity cuts<sup>xix</sup> with the UK already one of the most unequal countries in the world.

The Coalition government, in line with the Labour opposition<sup>xx</sup>, use arguments against providing benefits to migrants in order to cut spending on non-immigrant UK citizens. Here, the attacks on multiculturalism are used to sow division among, usually poorer, citizens, which then leads to a worsening of conditions for all citizens. So, whereas a multicultural society had initially been blamed for the deteriorating conditions of 'native' citizens; the wish to deny benefits to 'migrant' citizens is now being used to worsen the conditions of all citizens – 'native' and 'migrant'.

There is a need for any political community to express itself collectively as a 'we'. However, there are many among us who, in recognition of historical connections and new connections forged in the present, can imagine that 'we' to be inclusive of the 'waves of immigrants' that Scruton and members of the government dismiss. A more expansive and inclusive 'we' would also be conscious of the widening social and economic inequalities brought about by the abstractions of neoliberal policy. Our problem is not the disruption of the social fabric by immigrants and by the exercise of human rights, but the separation from common problems of a distant political class and their active denial of an inclusive public interest.

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Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination (*Palgrave, 2007*), winner of the 2008 Philip Abrams Memorial Prize, and has a monograph, *Connected Sociologies* forthcoming with Bloomsbury Academic.

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