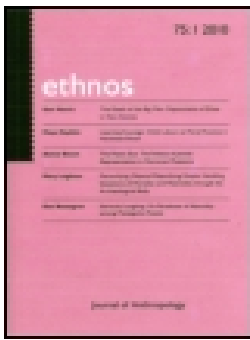


## Leavers and remainers as 'kinds of people' : accusations of racism amidst Brexit

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# Leavers and Remainers as ‘Kinds of People’: Accusations of Racism Amidst Brexit

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## ABSTRACT

After the referendum on Britain’s membership of the EU, leavers and remainers have become identified in media, political, intellectual, social scientific and everyday discourses with a contested set of racialised and classed characteristics. Central to this portrayal of leavers and remainers is the idea widespread within remain-orientated discourse that leavers are more likely to hold racist attitudes on questions of multiculturalism and immigration compared to remainers. This article draws on fieldwork that examines the emotive accusation of racism articulated by leavers and remainers at each other, and expressed in everyday discourses and social interactions. We explore the ways in which racism becomes reduced within social interactions to an individual characteristic of leave or remain ‘kinds of people’. Our argument is that the individualisation of racism in this way inadvertently displaces and curtails critical reflection on the reproduction of white privilege in British society.

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**KEYWORDS** Racism; Brexit; white privilege; leaver; remainder; England

## Introduction

When I say ‘remoaner’ I mean those who refuse to accept the result and what they tend to do is demonise the other side, caricature them not engaging in a sensible conversation but simply to say: ‘No. That person is racist. That person is xenophobic. That person is an idiot. That person’s from a deprived background ...’ It’s a very specific type of person who voted remain and then responded in a ... very uncharacteristic way for a British person to respond to a democratic vote ...

(Extract from a fieldwork interview with a male leaver who describes himself as ‘British’, his mother as ‘white British’ and his father as ‘ethnically Indian and a naturalised citizen of the United Kingdom’).<sup>1</sup>

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In June 2016, the UK Parliament held a referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union. The decision to leave the EU was won with 51.9% of the electorate voting to leave, and 48.1% voting to remain. While Scotland and Northern Ireland voted by a majority to remain, the majority of voters in England and Wales voted to leave. As the opening interview extract illuminates, the referendum has exposed a deep division between the 'types of people' some leavers and remainers imagine each other to be centred on questions of racism, xenophobia, national belonging and class identity. In this article, we shall draw on our ethnographic study of Brexit, identity and belonging in England to examine the way in which the accusation of racism mediates everyday social interactions and discourses to define leavers and remainers as particular 'types of people' who are considered to be 'racist' or 'non-racist', 'good' or 'bad' depending upon how they voted in the referendum.

To think about the ways in which leavers and remainers have become defined as 'types of people' within public and everyday discourses, we have found it useful to draw on Hacking's (2006) philosophical concept of 'kinds of people'. Hacking argues that different 'kinds of people' are thought to have definite classes that are defined by specific properties. Hacking gives many examples of how 'kinds of people' come into being. For example, turning to the field of clinical medicine, Hacking argues the idea of 'kinds of people' known as 'high functioning autism' did not exist before 1950. But by 2000, 'high functioning autism' became a way to experience oneself and to live in society. In this way, Hacking sets out the idea that there are 'kinds of people' in the world. We interact, relate, and think about each other as if we have a set of characteristics that make us the 'kind of people' that we think each other to be. However, Hacking argues that when we get to know other 'kinds of people', they transform. This is not because we get to know them better, but rather because our very interaction with different 'kinds of people' both constructs and transforms their characteristics.

Leavers and remainers did not exist as 'kinds of people' before the outcome of the referendum in 2016. They might have been there, but we did not think of them as particular 'kinds of people' in the way that we do today. With this in mind, we summarise in [Table 1](#) how leavers and remainers are characterised in some of the findings of surveys conducted by social scientists who examined the opinions of the British public on

**Table 1.** The depiction of leavers and remainers pervasive in remain-orientated public discourse.

Leavers	Remainers
Euro-sceptic	Pro-EU
Live in socio-economically declining and 'left behind' districts in England	Live in prosperous and/or cosmopolitan areas in England
Working-class/ poorer	Middle-class/ financially better off
White	An ethnically diverse group
Older generations of people	Younger generations
Do not have higher education/low skill	Have higher education qualifications
Traditional/nostalgic in their outlook	Forward looking
Express backlash against multiculturalism	Embrace multiculturalism
'Somewheres' (Goodhart 2017) – they are rooted in place	'Anywheres' (Goodhart 2017) – not rooted in place

Brexit, and that resonate with some of the wider remain-orientated political, media and intellectual commentary on Brexit (see, e.g. Goodwin & Heath 2016; Jennings & Stoker 2016; Ford & Goodwin 2017; Carreras *et al.* 2019). Reflecting the centrality of racism, xenophobia and nationalism in public debates about Brexit, the list of characteristics that are thought to define leaver and remainer 'kinds of people' are centred on their supposed attitudes to immigration, multiculturalism and national belonging. The latter become entwined in some social scientific, political, intellectual and media commentaries with leavers' and remainers' supposed racial, ethnic, class, generational and place-based identities. While we acknowledge that there are competing stereotypes of leavers and remainers within public discourse, we take the remain-orientated narrative set out in Table 1 as our starting point because it is a widespread public narrative of Brexit. This became evident to us during our fieldwork discussions with both leavers and remainers across England, many of whom contested, critiqued, reproduced and elaborated upon aspects of this discourse in their own accounts. This public discourse is also the starting point for recent anthropological and sociological discussions about Brexit.

Let us now expand on some of the ways in which these racialised and classed characteristics are articulated and debated in public discourse. One strand of thought advocated by some social scientists, intellectual and media commentators legitimises the leave vote by identifying it with 'white working-class' people's perceived fear of 'loss of order' and 'identity' in an increasingly globalised and ethnically diverse world that is identified with immigration (for examples of this approach see Goodwin & Heath 2016; Ford & Goodwin 2017; Goodhart 2017). An alternative strand of thought has been proposed within the liberal remain-orientated media, that does not attempt to legitimise white working-class people's concerns, but rather dismisses white working-class leavers as 'racist'. From this standpoint, white working-class leaver 'kinds of people' are thought to be 'uneducated', 'parochial xenophobes who hate immigrants' and are believed to hold 'outdated values' fearing 'uncertainty and change' (Furedi [2016] cited in Mondon & Winter 2019).

In contrast, scholars working in the field of critical race and ethnicity studies have expertly deconstructed and critiqued these narratives of who are leavers and remainers to illuminate the ways in which they contribute to what Mondon and Winter (2019) call the 'mainstreaming' and 'normalisation' of racism in British society (see also Bhambra 2017; Flemmen & Savage 2017; Virdee & McGeever 2018; Valluvan & Kalra 2019). Advancing in this framework, Bhambra (2017) and Mondon and Winter (2019) each contend that the racialisation of 'working-class' leavers as 'white' and 'left behind' 'legitimises' the idea that the white working-classes are 'disenfranchised', 'alienated' and 'victimised'. They each suggest that the consequence of this is to privilege white working-class concerns at the expense of attention to the structural disadvantages experienced by racialised minorities. In this way, Bhambra (2017) and Mondon and Winter (2019), respectively, argue that the 'left behind' narrative ignores the ways in which class inequalities cut across racial identities (for similar arguments, see Virdee & McGeever 2018). These critics also contend that the identification of the white working-classes with the leave vote screens out the white middle-classes and 'political elite' support for Brexit (Bhambra 2017; Mondon & Winter 2019: 7;

see also Savage & Flemmen 2017). The latter is evidenced by statistics that demonstrate that 52% of leave voters were from wealthy Southern parts of England (Dorling 2016). Indeed, Bhambra (2017: S227) has influentially coined the term ‘methodological whiteness’ to convey how the ‘left behind’ narrative ‘fails to acknowledge the ways in which race is integral to the very configuration of socio-economic inequalities in the present’ which she argues is entwined with the histories and legacies of the British empire (for similar arguments, see Virdee & McGreever 2018; Valluvan & Kalra 2019).

Saunders (2020) broadens the scope of this discussion to focus on both leaver and remainer political discourses. In so doing, he explores how ‘imperial patterns of thought’ shape both pro-European remain and leave political discourse. Saunders suggests that this should not be surprising given the influential arguments advocated by postcolonial scholars that the racist and nationalist history of the British empire ‘is a history which implicate us all’ (Hall 1998 cited in Saunders 2020: 1142). Indeed, turning to the parallel but different context of Trump’s election in the USA, Bonilla-Silva (2019a) maintains that there is a requirement to examine sociologically the ways in which both Democrats and Republicans are implicated in racist practices. He suggests that this is because all actors of a ‘racialized social system are raced albeit ... not in exactly the same way’ (2019a: 18). From this point of view, Bonilla-Silva (2019a: 14) asserts that those social commentators who argue Trump’s election was the outcome of ‘the political activities of the “racists” severely limits an understanding of racism as a collective phenomenon’. He concludes that it is ‘the softer’, ‘color-blind’ ways in which white Democrats, and doubtless a good number of Republicans, express their racial views that is the hegemonic articulation of racism in the USA (2019a: 18). We contend that there is a parallel trend in remain-orientated public narratives of Brexit in the UK to reduce racism to a discussion of whether leavers are racist or not. Moreover, this trend similarly ignores the ways in which racism is a ‘collective phenomenon’ integral to the everyday fabric and institutional structure of British society that implicates both leavers and remainers.

Reflecting on this impasse, Mintchev (2021: 126) argues that Brexit has become so emotionally and morally charged that it has led to a situation whereby ‘racism and legitimacy [e.g. non-racist views] are conventionally treated as mutually exclusive terms in a zero-sum game: an idea, demand or action can either be racist or legitimate, but never both’. In this vein, Mintchev (2021: 124) asserts that in public discourse about Brexit, racism has become a ‘concept’ entangled in a cycle of contestations and denials between leavers and remainers over who holds ‘legitimate’ non-racist and ‘illegitimate’ racist views.

In this article, our aim is to advance and develop these ideas by shifting the current scholarly attention away from the deconstruction of media, intellectual, political and social scientific accounts of Brexit to explore how racism becomes expressed within everyday social interactions across leave and remain positions. Our account points towards some of the ways in which public discourses about Brexit have become articulated in the formation of antagonistic relationships between leavers and remainers in everyday social interactions. In so doing, we will examine how racism becomes individualised in social interactions to a characteristic of leave and remain ‘kinds of

people'. In this way, racism becomes reduced to the perceived ignorance, stupidity, immorality or irrationality of the leave or remain Other. Our contention is that this reductive individualisation of racism unwittingly shifts the focus of attention away from the 'mainstreaming' of racism in British society.

To extend our thinking on what we mean by the 'mainstreaming' of racism, we have found Bonilla-Silva's (2018: 8–9) notion of 'racial structure' useful. He states that a society's 'racial structure' is constituted by '*social relations and practices* [we also add here norms, values and attitudes] *that reinforce white privilege*' (2018: 9, original emphasis). Proponents of critical whiteness studies argue that white privilege is often reproduced by white people unintentionally and without malice (see Frankenberg 1993). For example, it does not occur to white people that they get a good response from their children's school, a new job or a nice place to live because they are white. In other words, white people are likely to be unaware of their everyday privilege and institutional advantage by virtue of being white. In this regard, white people are often 'color-blind' of the way in which whiteness is a racial identity that bestows privilege on them (Bonilla-Silva 2018). It is precisely the reproduction of white privilege in this unintentional way that in part constitutes what Bonilla-Silva (2018) calls 'racism without racists'. Moreover, Bonilla-Silva (2018; 2019a) suggests that the latter is experienced by racialised minorities as a 'killing-me-softly racism' that takes meaning in contrast to overt racist attacks committed by people who are intentionally and explicitly racist. Our ethnographic account illustrates how the reductive individualisation of racism to a property of leave or remain 'kinds of people' in everyday interactions displaces critical reflection on the often unintentional reproduction of white privilege in British society.<sup>2</sup>

We have developed these ideas and arguments by reflecting on fifteen months of residential ethnographic fieldwork conducted by Tyler with white people and racialised minorities that live in the predominantly white region of the South West of England. We shall begin our analysis with an account of the diverse ways in which racism structures the daily routines of some racialised minorities that live in this place. This includes verbal racist attacks committed by white individuals, and the more routine experience of the reproduction of 'racism without racists' (Bonilla-Silva 2018). This account offers us a platform from which to examine how the reduction of racism to the prejudice and ignorance of the leave or remain Other in social interactions displaces critical reflection on racialised minorities' experiences of white privilege in this place.

While our analysis takes a place-based approach, we also want to emphasise that the processes discussed here are not specific to the South West of England. Rather, as the studies on Brexit cited here indicate, and our fieldwork in other areas of England on Brexit testifies, these processes are reproduced across England in the media, social scientific accounts and everyday life. Furthermore, our supposition is that our analysis of the reductive articulation of racism in the face of Brexit has wider implications for thinking about the way in which racism and white privilege are articulated in post-Brexit Britain, a point we shall return to in the conclusion. But a first necessary step that we take now is to consider how our account develops an emerging body of

ethnographic work by anthropologists, one that has also set out to explore everyday experiences of Brexit in England.

### **Anthropological Approaches to Brexit**

To do this we shall consider Balthazar's (2017; 2021) study of affluent white working-class people's experiences of Brexit in an English seaside town. We shall also discuss Koch's (2017) account of the experiences of poor working-class people across ethnic and racial identities living on a social housing estate in the South East of England. Both Balthazar and Koch are keen to show that for their interlocutors Brexit is about more than issues of identity politics and animosity towards migrants that are thought to remain-orientated public discourse to divide leavers and remainers into distinct camps. From this standpoint, they each emphasise the ways in which their interlocutors' decision to vote leave was centred on their place-based anger and frustration with poor political representation by an elite that was thought not to relate to their concerns (see also Koch *et al.* 2021 for an analysis of the wider social processes of polarisation across England). In this vein, Balthazar (2017: 223) explains that her interlocutors felt their political representatives did not value their sense of the importance of national histories that became entwined with their working-class identities and attachment to place. Koch (2017) illustrates how for her interlocutors their leave vote signalled to the government their frustration and anger with the way in which the state and the political elite interferes with and controls every aspect of their lives. It is in these differing contexts that Koch and Balthazar respectively assert that their interlocutors vehemently rejected the idea that their vote for Brexit signalled that they are 'racists'. As Koch reports, one white mother of mixed-race African descent children who voted leave posted on social media: 'Am I a racist? No! Am I thick? No! Am I ignorant No!' (2017: 228).

Reflecting on these studies for what they tell us about questions of racism and legitimacy, Mintchev (2021: 135–136) rightly observes that these accounts offer rich insight into the ways in which Brexit is experienced, felt and lived 'on the ground'. He also insightfully claims that a reader of these ethnographic accounts could easily interpret the anthropologist and the people in their ethnographies in different ways depending upon how they conceptualise racism. From one perspective, Mintchev suggests that it could be read that the anthropologists' close attention to their interlocutors' felt lack of political recognition illuminates participants' and the anthropologists' desire to dispel the idea that leavers are 'racists' by presenting the reader with 'social and affective logics that challenge the irrationality attributed to Leavers' (2021: 136). Alternatively, it might be claimed that these accounts are 'deflections from the issue of racism' (2021: 136), especially Balthazar's lack of critical attention to the way in which the national histories that her interlocutors are keen to preserve are entwined with whiteness. In this vein, Mintchev surmises that some readers of these ethnographies might argue that 'they offer little, if any, evidence that racism isn't rife in the communities in question' (2021: 136).



By putting at the centre of our ethnographic analysis how accusations of racism are articulated, emotionally felt and experienced within everyday social interactions and discourses, we set out to avert the possibility for similar interpretations of our ethnographic account. In so doing, we pay detailed critical attention to the ways in which our white leave and remain interlocutors deflect the accusation of racism, a consequence of which is to unwittingly shut down critical reflection on the reproduction of white privilege in this place.

## Methodological Reflections

From October 2018 to 31 January 2020, when Britain officially left the EU, Tyler conducted fieldwork with residents living in seaside towns, rural villages and a city situated in the South West of England. The timing of the fieldwork was significant. This was the year that the UK Parliament was torn apart in its attempts to agree on the terms on which Britain was to leave the EU. While Tyler was conducting fieldwork in the South West, Blamire conducted parallel fieldwork in the East Midlands and Degnen in the North East of England as an ethnographic team of a larger research project.<sup>3</sup> We each interviewed 60 people across ethnic, racial, national, class, gender and generational identities, migration status, and leave and remain positions. The interviews explored individuals' senses of belonging, or lack thereof, to their local place, the nation and Europe, views on immigration, the media and politics, as well as everyday media practices. In the South West, Tyler conducted the interviews in people's homes, in their sitting rooms, at their kitchen and dining room tables, at their places of work and in cafes and pubs. Alongside conducting these conversational-style interviews, Tyler had many informal discussions with residents about Brexit, including with farmers at livestock markets, and attendees at community centres. She also observed Brexit-related rallies and election hustings held across the region and regularly shadowed campaigners on their street stalls.<sup>4</sup>

To explore everyday accusations of racism in the face of Brexit, we shall draw on a combination of interview extracts and ethnographic 'scenes' including at a street rally, a campaign stall, and a farmers' livestock market. Our focus on ethnographic scenes is inspired by Stewart's (2007) anthropological work on *Ordinary Affects*, whereby she draws on 'scenes' based on her observations of everyday life that 'fascinate because they literally hit us or exert a pull on us' (2007: 4). For Stewart, these scenes 'provoke attention to the forces that come into view as habit or shock, resonance or impact. Something throws itself together in a moment as an event and sensation; a something both animated and inhabitable' (2007: 1). The scenes and the interview extracts discussed here set out to convey the heightened emotions of sadness, anger, hurt, frustration, mortification, shock and irritation produced by the moralising accusations and counter accusations of racism in the face of Brexit. In the final scene, we illustrate how Tyler became embroiled in these accusations of racism, and so positioning ourselves not as detached critical observers but rather as part of these polarising interactions and affective processes. Thus, while Tyler's intention was to be critical in her scholarship of the leave/remain/racist/non-racist binary, she at times found

herself reproducing it in her fieldwork relationships. This highlights what felt to us at the time to be the all-encompassing and inescapable constitution of this binary in the face of Brexit.

But before turning to the details of these scenes, we will pay attention to how race and racism structures the daily routines of some racialised minorities' lives in this predominantly white place of the South West of England.

### **Racialised Minorities' Everyday Experiences of Racism**

Like many regions in the UK, the South West of England is predominantly white and British in terms of its ethnic, racial and national composition. Like many other predominantly white places in England, this region has deep multiracial histories including inscriptions of slavery and empire interwoven into the fabric of place such as pub and street names. The city, where Tyler based her fieldwork, has been home to some people from the Windrush generation and is more recently home to refugees from war-torn locales, as well as migrants from most parts of the globe. Today, there is a feeling of growing multicultural conviviality in the city that includes both international, interethnic and interracial sites of conviviality in the city's schools, workplaces, streets and community centres, though this is not mirrored in the rural areas.

Despite these emerging sites of multicultural conviviality in the city, this region's population remains mostly white and British. It is against this background that some racialised minorities routinely experience and anticipate their everyday social interactions in this city and its surrounding countryside to be mediated by whiteness and racism. In this regard, some of our interlocutors' experiences of racism in this place become entangled with negative 'racialized emotions' (Bonilla-Silva 2019b). The latter includes overt racist interactions with prejudiced individuals, and the more routine feeling of an unwelcoming tone and atmosphere of place. Consequently, spaces emerge in this place which can be uncomfortable and intimidating places for racialised minorities, leading to a sense of non-belonging.

Listen first to Sarah (all names are pseudonyms), a black African working-class woman who has lived and worked in this city for some ten years:

When ... you go around in the city sometimes you just get these snide comments from people ... When I was on the bus and they said: 'Oh, see this migrant, I guess there's free tickets!'. And I am like: 'No it is not free! I paid for it!'

In this instance, Sarah identifies an incident in which she encountered racist slurs made by specific individuals on the bus. She further explained how she internalised the feeling of being watched and positioned as a migrant and outsider, which shaped her routine social interactions in this place. For example, consider her experience of visiting the doctors:

And queuing up in the doctor's feels like I am using up NHS [National Health Service] resources ... You just feel like you're not welcome as a result of ... this kind of thinking ... So, you ... end up believing ... you are not this welcome person.

By contrast to the incident of the ‘snide remarks’ made by specific individuals on the bus, it is not a particular individual or group of people who cause Sarah to feel ‘unwelcome’ at the doctors. Rather, her experience at the doctors illustrates how she has internalised common everyday racist tropes about immigrants, that inform her experience of this place even when she is not directly confronted with any external triggering causes. Our supposition is that this experience of whiteness illustrates the reproduction in this place of ‘racism without racists’.

Meera, a middle-class woman from South Asia also described how she experienced racism and whiteness to routinely inform her everyday interactions in this city. For example, she discussed how she felt shop assistants regularly monitored her movements because they were concerned that she might ‘steal’ or ‘break’ the merchandise:

If you were in the supermarket like you feel their [the shop assistants’] sort of eyes on you ... You will walk into a department store, if ... I walk in they would be very quick to come: ‘Are you looking for something? Can I help you?’

Like Sarah, Meera feels that her racially visible appearance in this mostly white place means that she is constantly monitored and surveyed in public spaces, and this feeling of being watched stays with her even if she is not being monitored. Meera also explained how when travelling around the predominantly white rural villages, towns and cities of the region she is often asked: “Are you lost? Are you supposed to be here?” Or people say: ... “Are you sure you’re in the right place?” The accumulative effect of these experiences, in the supermarket, department stores and travelling around the region, is to produce an experience of racism that cannot be straightforwardly identified with the acts of specific individuals, or particular ‘kinds of people’. Rather, Meera’s, like Sarah’s, daily interactions with white people in this place are mediated by the feeling that she is not welcome here by virtue of being racially marked as not white. In this regard, both women are acutely aware of the way in which white privilege structures the fabric, tone and atmosphere of this place.

Significantly, Sarah and Meera each described how their experiences of racism became ‘amplified’ in the face of Brexit (Benson & Lewis 2019). For example, Sarah said:

Brexit – it just makes you feel ... anxious about situations. You don’t want to mix with people because you know with Brexit it’s kind of made it really acceptable for people to ... offend people from minorities and say whatever they couldn’t say probably a few years back ...

Sarah’s concern that ‘people’ are more likely to say explicitly racist things to her after Brexit has made her ‘feel’ even more ‘anxious’ about social interactions with white people in this place, regardless of whether they say explicitly ‘racist’ things or not. In parallel with Benson and Lewis’ (2019) account of British People’s of Colour experiences of Brexit in EU-27 countries, Sarah and Meera found that the referendum result ushered in both a ‘continuation’ and ‘amplification’ of ‘longer standing’ experiences of ‘institutional discrimination and everyday racism’ (2019: 2213). It is from this standpoint that it is important for us to recognise the accusations of racism that we report in this article are in part motivated by a desire to call out the ‘amplification’ of racism in

the face of Brexit. Notwithstanding this insight, we contend that our ethnographic ‘scenes’ exemplify some of the ways in which the reduction of racism to a discrete property of prejudice leaver and remainder ‘kinds of people’ screens out and displaces, albeit unknowingly, critical reflection on the ways in which white privilege structures the fabric of this place.

To begin to exemplify these processes, we start by setting out some of the ways in which white leavers feel themselves to be positioned as racist ‘kinds of people’ by the remain-orientated media and in their interactions with remain colleagues at work. In this regard, we demonstrate how the leave/remain/racist/non-racist dichotomy reproduced in public discourse is not only a ‘central organizing principle of political experience’ (Mintchev 2021: 125), but also shapes everyday interactions.

### Leavers’ Reflections on Being Characterised as Racist

Listen to how Mary, a white English interviewee in her late fifties, and James, a white English interviewee in his twenties, articulate their experiences of being labelled ‘racists’ at work for voting leave. Mary and James both identify as ‘middle-class’, although Mary described how she was from a ‘working-class’ background. Thinking of Brexit, Mary said:

People will ... generally think of people that voted to leave the EU as racist, which is the most ridiculous thing ... But most of the people that I work with you can guarantee that they will have voted remain ... It just becomes ... a set amount of things, that they think ... They [the media] have ... convinced people that if you wanted to remain then you are inclusive. You ... care about everyone. Whereas if you voted for leave you are a racist. And it is just polar, it is just such a lot of nonsense ... To me the EU is racist because it is exclusive ... of everywhere else.

James echoes many of Mary’s experiences and sentiments as follows:

My boss at work ... loves to take the moral high ground and say: ... ‘We embrace everyone, we want to be part of Europe because we embrace European culture’. And then I would say ... : ‘Well, how about the fact that European economic policy is very protectionist? ... It is quite discriminatory’. Our immigration system is very pro EU citizens, they have freedom of movement ... Is that fair? Is that equal ... ? But I think because the media pumps it out, if you are a Brexiteer you are racist, or you are xenophobic or you are against multiculturalism. If you don’t like immigration how they are now, you must think immigration is horrendous and you must be racist ... I think they [remainers] like to ... see themselves as so moral and ... multicultural ... you lot are all racist or stupid ... But ... that is why they tended towards the remain, because remain was portrayed as this liberal kind of embracing, Brexit was seen as insular, being racist ...

Evident here is an overlap between the characteristics thought to define leaver and remainder ‘kinds of people’ articulated in remain-orientated public narratives about Brexit (see Table 1), and the ways in which Mary and James believe the media and their remain colleagues relate to leavers. Leavers are thought by these others to be ‘racist’, ‘xenophobic’ and ‘insular’, while remainers are said to be ‘inclusive’, ‘embracing’ of ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘immigration’. However, in deflecting the charge of

racism away from themselves Mary and James reinforce the good/bad/racist/non-racist binary dividing leavers and remainers by asserting that remainers are the 'real' racists for supporting the EU that is considered to be a 'racist' institution. This highlights some of the ways in which this binary logic reduces racism within everyday social interactions to the holding of one set of views that are considered to be legitimate over another (Mintchev 2021: 129).

In what follows, we will extend these insights by exploring how the accusation of racism is articulated in everyday interactions on the streets between white leavers and remainers. We shall illustrate that the unintended consequence of this allegation is to truncate reflection of the ways in which white privilege structures the fabric of this place. By way of explanation, Tyler will refer to herself in the first person in the next sections when describing the specific details of her fieldwork experiences.

### The Accusation of Racism in Everyday Interactions

During her fieldwork, Tyler was struck by the way the city centre transformed from being, what appeared to her as a white woman, a peaceful shopping centre into a temporary site for the enactment of heartfelt anger between leavers and remainers. To illustrate how the accusation of racism mediates these interactions, we reflect on Tyler's attendance at a public rally held in the city centre. Our interest here is in the interactions amongst people who formed the anonymous crowd that gathered in a public space and not the organisers of the event nor the views of the speakers.

This rally was against Prime Minister Johnson's decision to prorogue (close) Parliament during the government's attempt to negotiate a withdrawal agreement with the EU. This process required the passing of legislation through Parliament – a process that had become slow and fraught due to the division between Members of Parliament on the question of Brexit. Many people felt that parliamentary scrutiny of legislation had been prevented by Parliament's proroguing. Tyler observed how:

At the rally there were placards 'Defend our Democracy' and 'Stop the Brexit Coup', as well as some EU flags blowing in the wind. From what I could see most people at the rally were white and supported remain.

At the side of the rally was a young white man in his early 20s – he was noticeably younger than most of the crowd. The young white man was wearing a black shirt. He stood with a young Asian woman also in her early 20s. This couple had a makeshift pro-Leave banner. They were shouting out as they gradually moved their way through the crowd. Everyone else attending the rally was listening to the speakers. I felt from the people standing closest to me a feeling of irritation and annoyance at this disruption. As the leave protestors moved towards the front of the rally, I heard an older white man shout: 'You have your black shirt on', and the young white man replied: 'I work as a waiter'. I looked closely at the white man's shirt. It was a restaurant uniform. There was a request from some members of the crowd to have these leave protestors removed.

In this scene, the white leaver's 'black shirt' was instantly associated by the white remainder with the 'blackshirts', the name given to members of the racist British Union of Fascists led by Mosley in the 1930s. The latter took their inspiration from 1930s

German Nazis. The evocation of 1930s fascism in this scene ‘hits’ and ‘pulls’ us (Stewart 2007: 6) because it resonates with how some of our white remain interviewees across our fieldsites drew parallels between Brexit and the rise to power of the Third Reich in Nazi Germany.

What also ‘pulls’ and ‘hits’ us (Stewart 2007: 6) about this scene is the ways in which the Asian identity of the leave protestor and the class identity of her white male companion are rendered irrelevant in this accusation of racism. The Asian leaver was one of few racialised minorities in this mostly white space. Moreover, the young white man accused of fascist-style racism rebuffed the charge that he was a ‘black shirt’ with the retort ‘I work as a waiter’. In this moment, the possible socio-economic classed distinctions separating the white remain accuser and the white leave protestor are rendered both visible and irrelevant. Just as the white remainder takes a ‘color-blind’ (Bonilla-Silva 2018) approach to the Asian leaver’s racialised identity, he also did not recognise a worker’s uniform when he saw it. In this way, seeing these leave protestors as particular ‘kinds of people’ erases the racialised and possible classed inequalities and differences separating the white remainder from those he accuses of racism. In other words, this is a form of ‘methodological whiteness’ (Bhambra 2017) that associates all leavers with racism, screening out and displacing both class and racial inequalities. But yet, it is also important to recognise that this type of rally offered support and solace to many, mostly white, EU citizens across our fieldsites who felt marginalised and discriminated against in the face of Brexit. Moreover, it is also noteworthy that if we discussed with the white remainder his views on racism and Brexit, he might have given a more nuanced account than was evident in this encounter. Nonetheless, the unintended consequence of the request made by some members of the crowd to have the white leaver and his Asian companion removed is to whiten further this already predominantly white space, a situation that we surmise that the white remainder would not intentionally endorse.

To add deeper insight into how the individualisation of racism in the face of Brexit curtails critical reflection on the reproduction of white privilege in this place, listen to how Polly described her experiences on a pro-Brexit street stall. Polly is a white middle-class, middle-aged English woman, who is from a working-class background. Polly said:

A remain voter brought these ... small children over to the stand ... and said: ‘these are the racists’ ... We were ... hurt because we thought ... that is ... children that you have shown racists. And I probably know far more black people than you have ever met. You have probably never even met one, you live here, it is so rare compared to being in a multiracial city [she names the city where she comes from].

**Tyler:** ... What did you say to the guy?

**Polly:** ... I think I probably just said: ‘No we are not. No, we are not’ to the children. But we were really shocked. But we shouldn’t be shocked because we get it all the time ... To have children actually presented to us ‘these are the racists!’ We were absolutely mortified. And there was another interesting thing later that day with one of the Asian [campaigners] ... a Brexiteer and he is very dark skinned, Asian but very dark skinned ... And the middle-class ones were coming up, it is generally them calling us racist. And he actually made a really interesting

point, he jumped in and he said: ‘No you are the racist, I don’t need your help. I am an equal ... I don’t need you fighting my corner. Stay out of it! ...’ Because we thought, ... there is that kind of patronising ... ‘Oh I hope you are not mistreated in any way?’ Or ‘what is he doing there? ... Does he know what you are about?’ ... There is this level of condescension ... and he picked up on it.

Once more this scene exemplifies the way in which the accusation of racism easily degenerates into a deeply emotive ‘spiralling impasse’ of counter accusations ‘between incommensurate, yet mutually reinforcing claims to express and defend one’s position’ (Mintchev 2021: 126). While Polly is particularly ‘shocked’, ‘hurt’ and ‘mortified’ by this accusation of racism made in front of young children, she also constructs her remain accuser as a typical ‘middle-class’ remainer ‘kind of person’ that regularly accuse leave campaigners of racism. Polly thinks this ‘kind of person’ does not know Asian and black people – ‘not even met one’ – coming from this predominantly white city, and so we can assume that her male remain accuser is white. Significantly, Polly attempts to give her views credibility by appropriating the voice and experience of an Asian leave campaigner. This strategy on the surface appears to be diametrically opposed to the ‘color-blind’ (Bonilla-Silva 2018) approach of the white remainer in the previous scene who ignored the Asian identity of the leave protestor at the rally. But yet, Polly’s response to this accusation of racism also supports a ‘color-blind’ approach in the sense that she does not reflect on the way in which what she defines as the Asian campaigner’s ‘very dark skin’ only has meaning in this context because the city is a predominantly white space. While Polly acknowledges and renders visible the whiteness of this city, she does not see that it is her white racial identity that enables her to move freely in this city without comment on her racialised body and disposition in a way that the Asian campaigner cannot. It is important to recognise that during Polly’s ethnographic interview, she reflected in detail upon the diverse ways in which race has shaped her relationships. This insight highlights that in everyday social interactions between leavers and remainers, racism often spontaneously becomes individualised to a property of leaver and remainer ‘kinds of people’, a process that unwittingly curtails thoughtful reflection on the reproduction of white privilege.

### **Being a White Vegetarian Remainer ‘Kind of Person’**

In this final example, we will show how the accusation of racism played out in Tyler’s informal conversations with farmers at rural livestock markets. Here, we will exemplify how Tyler – a white middle-class, middle-aged English woman – participated in these accusations of racism in her fieldwork interactions. Tyler’s vegetarian identity was of importance for farmers, and it is this aspect of her identity that became interpreted through the lens of the characteristics thought to constitute leaver and remainer ‘kinds of people’. We turn now to a passage drawn from fieldnotes:

Livestock markets are overwhelmingly white male agricultural spaces that smell and sound of animals. One morning, I walked into the cafeteria and joined the queue. One white male farmer, who I did not know, standing in front of me in the queue offered to buy me breakfast.

I agreed to have an egg on toast. He said: 'you're not a vegetarian are you?' I had already explained I was an academic studying Brexit. 'Yes', I said. To my complete surprise, the farmer told the white woman serving food behind the counter to put a piece of bacon on my plate. Then he paid for my food. I thanked him and we went to sit with his colleague, who was a white female farmer.

We talked first about the meat on my plate. 'Will you eat it?' both farmers asked. The white female farmer explained that being a vegetarian it would be hard for me to gain acceptance and trust from farmers, which was what I needed if I wanted to discuss with them their views on Brexit. People will want to know 'what your slant is?' She continued: 'the trouble with vegetarians and vegans is that they wear their identity on their sleeve. They always want to tell you they are a vegetarian'. She explained that with Brexit, farmers will not want me making out that they are 'thick, stupid and racist'. From the farmer's point of view, my vegetarianism made this something that I was very likely to do. I ate a little bacon. We all discussed what it tasted like and whether I liked it or not. After eating a little meat, the conversation then focussed solely on Brexit.

The white woman farmer said that she voted to remain in the EU because she did not like the anti-immigrant stance of the leave campaign. She also did not agree with the view that immigration is a problem but said that it is why a lot of farmers in this region voted to leave the EU. To exemplify her point, she said that there was a split in her family between her husband, herself, and her son on the issue of Brexit that centred on their different attitudes to immigration and racism. They could not talk about Brexit anymore as it had created such tension and trouble. She described her son as a 'liberal' person who 'sees people and individuals for who they are'. She feels that she is like her son. However, she described her husband as 'racist' in his attitudes because he thinks that 'all immigrants are the same'. He conflated 'immigrant workers', 'asylum seekers' and 'terrorists', she said. He thinks asylum seekers 'come over in boats with suicide vests on'. She also said he has 'small horizons', and that while he will go to the nearby city, he has only been to London twice.

Once Tyler had eaten some meat and thus shown she had some empathy for the farmer's 'way of life', she and this white female farmer stopped being the 'kinds of people' they both might think each other to be. In other words, the distance separating Tyler and the farmer due to Tyler's vegetarianism was eclipsed in their identification with each other as remainers who thought that the racist attitudes of white leavers are immoral and wrong. To show her agreement with the farmer's views, Tyler expressed shock at the farmer's husband's racism and offered sympathy for her difficult family situation. In showing her support for the farmer's views, Tyler endorses the widespread remain-orientated account of leavers as 'somewheres' (Goodhart 2017, see also Table 1); people who are thought to have 'small horizons', are anti-multiculturalism and against immigration, unlike 'tolerant liberal' remainder kinds of people like themselves. Not long after this discussion, it 'hit' Tyler that her and the white farmer's claim to an anti-racist position rendered them 'color-blind' to the ways in which their white English identities mean that they are not racially visible in the wholly white rural milieu of the livestock market. That is to say, their white English identities mean they can move with ease and confidence in this white rural space in a way that Meera and Sarah explained they could not. In this way, this scene once more illustrates how the accusation of leavers as 'racist' unintentionally truncates critical reflection on the ways in which white privilege structures the fabric of this place.



## Conclusion: Post-Brexit Britain and the Reproduction of White Privilege Without Racists

In this article, we have shown how the emotive everyday experiences of Brexit opens up a space to analyse how racism becomes individualised in social interactions to a characteristic of leaver and remainder ‘kinds of people’. We argue that this process unintentionally contributes to the displacing of critical reflection on how white privilege is reproduced in British society. In developing this argument, we have built upon the sociological and anthropological critique of social scientific, intellectual, media and political discourses about Brexit. To do this, we have analysed some of the ways in which the characteristics that are thought to constitute leaver and remainder ‘kinds of people’ widespread in remain-orientated public discourses are articulated, debated, contested and elaborated upon in everyday interactions between leavers and remainers. By putting accusations of racism at the centre of our ethnographic analysis of Brexit, we seek to avoid the pitfall of deflecting questions of racism, a critique that Mintchev (2021) argues can be directed at recent anthropological accounts of Brexit.

To illustrate these processes ethnographically, we have drawn on fieldwork conducted in the South West of England to develop a place-based analysis that takes as its starting point racialised minorities’ experiences of racism and white privilege in this place. From the point of view of racialised minorities, racism is not only reproduced by explicitly ‘racist’ individuals, but rather racism and white privilege becomes constitutive of the structure of feeling, fabric and atmosphere of this place. Consequently, some racialised minorities feel uncomfortable and intimidated in white spaces, including when there are no explicit racist triggers. It is in the face of this analysis that we draw on a series of affectively and emotionally charged ethnographic ‘scenes’ (Stewart 2007) to illustrate how in everyday interactions the reduction of racism to the discrete property of leaver or remainder ‘kinds of people’ unintentionally curtails critical reflection on the way in which white privilege structures the feeling and tone of this place. To elaborate on this, we shall explain how not making such allegations would lead to a different situation.

Let us recall the scene in which a white remainder assumed that a white leaver’s ‘black shirt’ signified his identification with 1930s Nazi-style racism. If the white remainder had not accused the white leaver of racism, then the conditions might have emerged for the white remainder to be responsive to the racialised and classed inequalities separating him from the white leave protestor and his Asian companion. Similarly, if Polly had not become embroiled in accusations of racism, she might have extended her thinking on the whiteness of this place to include reflection on how her fellow Asian campaigner is unable to move in this city without comment on his racialised identity. In the final scene, if Tyler had not been so keen to endorse the white farmer’s critique of leave voting farmers’ anti-immigrant racism, she might have opened a discursive space for her and the white female farmer to discuss the ways in which their whiteness enables them to move through the farmers’ livestock market with ease in a way that is not possible for racialised minorities.

We argue that our ethnographic attention to the spiralling impasse of everyday accusations and counter-accusations of racism in the face of Brexit illuminates the general drift towards the individualisation of racism in wider British social and political life (see Bhattacharyya *et al.* 2021 for an analysis of British state racism). This is evidenced, for example, by the recent government-commissioned report on ‘Racial and Ethnic Disparities in the UK’ (March 2021), which concludes institutional racism no longer exists in British society, suggesting that racism is only reproduced in specific instances by individuals (see Runnymede Trust 2021 for a critique of this report). This report, like our analysis of the individualisation of racism in the face of Brexit, reflects the relevance of Bonilla-Silva’s (2019a) work on the contemporary articulation of racism in America for understanding the British context. Bonilla-Silva (2019a) illustrates how the widespread public attention in the USA to ‘the racists’ in the face of Trump’s election displaced the hegemonic ‘killing-me-softly’ and ‘color-blind’ racism routinely articulated by ‘tolerant’ whites. It is against this background that we conclude that anthropologists of Britain are well-placed to deconstruct the diverse ways in which the individualisation of racism to a property of particular ‘kinds of people’ in post-Brexit Britain displaces critical reflection on the reproduction of white privilege that is reproduced unintentionally and ‘without racists’.

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## Notes

1. Tyler wrote this article and led in the development of its ideas in extended and on-going conversation with Degnen and Blamire who each made significant suggestions on every draft; collaborative working during the fieldwork and analysis periods also meant all authors contributed via the insights of their own fieldwork experiences.
2. Importantly, Brexit exposed the xenophobia directed at white Eastern Europeans (see, e.g. Rzepnikowska 2019), as well as ‘amplifying’ the racism routinely experienced by racialised

minorities including migrants and ethnic minorities (Benson & Lewis 2019). This illustrates how racial structures are experienced differently depending on group access to white racial privilege and power. While the focus of this article is on the reproduction of white privilege vis-à-vis racialised minorities, we consider xenophobia directed at white Eastern Europeans in a forthcoming article.

3. This research forms part of a larger Economic and Social Research Council funded project entitled: 'Identity, Belonging and the Role of the Media in Brexit Britain', <https://brexitstudies.org/belonging/> (ES/R005133/1). The project's Principal Investigator was Katharine Tyler, Co-Investigators were Susan Banducci (University of Exeter), Cathrine Degnen (Newcastle University) and Daniel Stevens (University of Exeter), and the Postdoctoral Researchers at the University of Exeter were Joshua Blamire, Laszlo Horvath, Janice Hoang, Andrew Jones and DeDe Patterson.
4. This research received ethical approval from the College of Social Sciences and International Studies at the University of Exeter (201718-154). All direct interpersonal contact included consent, but in some cases, a signed consent form was not collected as part of the consent process. This research included observation of public events in which it would not be possible to gather consent of all involved, and collection of this sort of data is considered acceptable by Ethics Committees/IRBs.

## Data Access Statement

The project data has been submitted to the UK Data Archive at the University of Essex and will be released in October 2023.

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