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Racial Conjectures: Politics, Populism, and Authoritarianism, Then and Now

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Abstract

Across the world populism has created an era of intensified antagonisms and the rise of political authoritarianism. In this dangerous and divisive time, openly racist, nativist, and exclusionary politics are evident and prominent in ways they have not been for some decades. What does doing sociology - and what does sociology do - in such troubled and troubling times? This is not a question with any plain or singular answers, but it does invite us to think again about the public roles of sociology and sociologists. As sociologists we do not study race and racism merely as ideas and forces in the world, but because we have some commitment to undermining or reducing racism and racial inequalities and dismantling the structures that sustain racial divisions. My approach is centred on Britain, and it looks back to another time of crisis, and the approach of one key theorist, Stuart Hall to see what we can draw from the past. Hall's use of conjunctural analysis to diagnose the coming of what in the late 1970s he called 'iron times' constitutes an intervention as (political) sociology. Hall and others pointed to the emergence of authoritarian populism, in which race was a central or constitutive motif. I draw from and extend this to explore two main questions: What did it mean to see the politics of race and racism as central to the crisis as it was then? What does that suggest for now, in what might be called a 'Brexit conjuncture' in Britain? Looking cross five decades the core argument is that populist authoritarianism is built on race and racism, and thus it may be better characterised as racial authoritarianism.

Keywords

Racism; Britain; Thatcherism; Brexit; Riots

1. Introduction

If there is one word that captures the drift of politics over the past decade that word would be populism. Yet grasping its meaning(s), whether it an ideology or a programme, or its connections to right- and left-wing movements remain under debate. So too is the relationship between populism and democracy. A record number of people voted in elections across the world in 2024. Ranging from the most populous democracy on the planet India, to transnational bodies such as the European Union, nearly half of the world's population could cast a vote in seventy-five national elections. The sheer numbers are astounding but this felt less like a celebration of democracy than a fundamental risk to it. So, we have a puzzling situation where more people than ever before voted in one year, yet democracy feels under threat. Populism is what encapsulates this paradox. It is unwise to assume that democracy is set in stone, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) argue, as the connection between liberalism and democracy, frequently treated as co-dependent (Wolf, 2023) turns out to be tenuous. Significant dissatisfaction with democracy – or with what it delivers

politically – is notable. For example, 7 in 10 South Africans said they would value a leader who brings jobs and reduces crime over democracy itself; and less than 50% of people say they are satisfied with the state of democratic politics in the USA (The Nation, 2024).

The outsize influence of the USA on global politics means that it is often centred in discussions. How democracy itself becomes a battleground was pronounced in the 2024 campaign and tactics of Donald Trump, who barely acknowledged that he did not win the 2020 election, refused to take responsibility for the storming of the Capitol building on 6th January 2021, and whose speeches were full of contentious and dangerous rhetoric, often including downright lies. His speeches are literally, non-sense, defying logic let alone common sense. The inability of journalists to hold him to account means the mainstream/legacy media has effectively ‘sanewashed’ him. Yet, Trump is not exceptional in campaigning in this way; populists across the world adopt a ‘shoot from the hip’ style, as seen by fellow outriders in Europe (including the UK, Austria, Germany, France, Italy, Hungary and the Netherlands), as well as in South Asia, notably in India, in South America, particularly Argentina and formerly Brazil. Whether populists are shaping or just reflecting public opinion is an open question, but either scenario creates concerns about the rise and threat of the demagogue. In some ways this suggests that populism is best seen as a style of communication, rather than an ideology. Yet even if that is so, it does not reduce fears about the spectre of dictatorship and fascism (Applebaum, 2024; DiMaggio, 2021; Snyder, 2017). Long considered a 20th century phenomenon and usually regarded as restricted to an extreme fringe of politics the F-word has gone from a whisper to a tangible fear, not least due to Project 2025.ⁱ

The rise of populist leaders and manifold nationalisms in many nations have gone hand-in-hand with anti-globalisation, which has economic plus cultural elements. Populism thrives on fomenting divisions and creating enemies, enhancing antagonisms through culture wars, for example. This is not confined to the hate speech of social media, especially the twittersphere, but has now been magnified, on multiple similar platforms, including mainstream media. Various well-known channels that supposedly provide news serve mainly as outlets to platform extreme and often hateful opinions. Done under the guise of free speech as in Elon Musk’s takeover of twitter (Conger & Mac, 2024), I suggest this is the actual ‘fake news’. Openly racist, nativist, and exclusionary politics are public in ways they have not been for some decades. The enemies imagined and created in these wars are not mere opponents or antagonists, confined to the realm of democratic deliberation, but actively constituted as threats who could or should be locked up, according to Trump. Or, even more worryingly, violently eliminated from the borders of the nation, thus making this one of the most unsafe and contentious times in several generations. In this light it is timely then to recall Arendt’s view in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*:

Never has our future been more unpredictable, never have we depended so much on political forces that cannot be trusted to follow the rules of common sense....forces that look like sheer insanity, if judged by standards of other centuries.ⁱⁱ

In seeking to understand this and the current conjuncture of politics, populism and authoritarianism I focus on Britain, though as indicated developments in one country cannot be separated from wider international currents. My core argument is that race, or rather racism, underscores the political era we are living in, just as it did in the crisis of the 1970s in Britain.

This amounts to more than a claim that race is important or central, rather it is an assertion that race/racism is what *articulates* the present moment. However, how that operates over time is a matter of context rather than a simple linear thread between the past and present. The connection of racism to anti-democratic beliefs is clear from research. An analysis of the American National Election Studies shows support for voting restrictions, belief in voter fraud and even support for overturning election results is tied to one key factor: exclusionary racial attitudes, based on white grievances (Ferrer & Palmisano, 2025).

Two main themes inform this article. First, it explores whether populist authoritarianism usefully captures and explains the present, and how that relates to authoritarian populism as discussed in the 1970s and 1980s. This draws from an approach known as conjunctural analysis, often associated with Stuart Hall. What did it mean to see the politics of race and racism as central to the crisis as it was then, and what does it mean to do so now? Naturally, I am not claiming a direct read through across five decades, but I use race as a connecting thread. Second, my use of Hall is not incidental but matters because his work frames the second theme. – the role of social scientists in troubled and troubling times. What we can achieve is not a question with any plain or singular answers, though the context may make us reflect again on the practice of sociologists. As sociologists we do not, I believe, study race and racism

merely as ideas and forces in the world, but because we have some commitment to undermining or reducing racism and racial inequalities and dismantling the structures that sustain racial divisions. What is an engaged politics of race scholarship in these circumstances? I start with this question.

2. Engaged scholarship

What is an engaged politics of race scholarship in our present time? What kinds of activity usefully enable social scientists to contribute to a politics of anti-racism, if we are indeed faced with fundamental threats to democracy and the spectre of fascism? In this climate I set aside any boundary policing around whether more and less explicit forms of political activity are appropriate in and for social science as somewhat of an academic debating point. In a decade marked by students challenging the university through Rhodes Must Fall (Garton, 2019), Decolonising the University, BDS and the pro-Palestine encampments of 2024, plus the Black Lives Matter protests (Ahmed, 2026) the causes for scholars to at least think about race and racism are numerous and evident. More than just thinking about it we can stress that it is the responsibility of scholars and institutions to actively engage racism and seek social change (Romero, 2020). The argument that diversity and decolonisation are little more than performative rhetoric is well known but that does not absolve those who study racism from trying to do more. If scholars seek to have some effect in the world, beyond the classroom and conference, what outcome or impact can academic labour have? What are the challenges of addressing intensely political questions about race and racism in and beyond the academy for contemporary scholars?

These kinds of questions are not new of course, but the current conjuncture raises them as a particular challenge for the academy. Yet there seems to be a disconnection in ethnic and racial studies between engaged ‘activist’ scholarship and highly abstract theorising about ethnic and racial formations. As Knowles (2010, p. 27) observed, ‘Race is over theorised and disconnected from social and political engagement. Elaborating difference provides complexity and depth, but it is over focused on identities and lacks political engagement. Yet, race politics is urgently needed.... There is growing unease in academies at the disconnection between theoretical debate and political struggles addressing racism.’

One prominent mode of conceiving the relationship between academics and ‘publics’ is to refer to public intellectuals, or those who proclaim themselves as such. Communicating ideas, framing problems and issues, bringing analytical clarity, and, sometimes, offering policy and other kinds of political solutions are typical roles. The figure of the public intellectual is often based on the privileging of the exceptional individual – who through talent can straddle and speak to different worlds. Readers can no doubt think of individuals they regard as exemplars of this role. For me, there are problems with the conception and the supposed practitioners of this role. One is that it is usually an individualised and, arguably, masculinised conception of intellectual life, mirroring ideas of the ‘great men’ of history. It imagines interventions into the public realm as individual displays of courage, free from any context of collective endeavour. An un-situated and decontextualised model of the public intellectual is unconvincing. It jars with the often collaborative, as well as explicitly politicised, practices of racial and ethnic studies. Whether such figures are speaking to (or for) ‘publics’ beyond self-selecting constituencies, or whether their address is only to elites are highly debateable. A second substantial problem is the (self) conception of the public intellectual as a fearless speaker of ‘truth to power’. There is little sign that those in power want to hear truth, while a better role might be to speak ‘truth to the powerless’. A reflexive stance would acknowledge the academy as a site of power and privilege also. Instead of universalising claims of or for public intellectuals, Foucault (1977) saw a new mode of connection between theory and practice in specific sites. Based on locations in institutions – whether the hospital, asylum, or university he stressed a more concrete or grounded awareness. In this way the ‘specific intellectual’ is *of* the struggle not a commentator *on* it. This means intellectual work is not a specialised activity that brings knowledge and enlightenment to the masses or to the public.

A second mode is engaged and activist scholarship. This also blurs the distinctions between intellectual and political work, seeking to bring the movement to the classroom and the insights of the classroom to the movement. The project of the scholar-activist - or social justice scholars (Briscoe & Khalifa, 2015) - is an orientation aiming to dismantle ‘the ivory tower’ syndrome, seeing it as setting up a false dichotomy between the academy and society beyond the campus. It calls into question the assumption that the academy holds a monopoly over the production of knowledge, indeed getting beyond that is a necessary step to achieve more inclusive processes of shared learning and practise. However, scholar-activists may experience conflict and even derision in increasingly managerial and

corporate universities - the so-called 'neo-liberal university' - that demand that all activity be measured and given value in the market (Bailey & Freedman, 2011). Or they may find a lack of access and resources to pursue social justice from within the academy. The institutionalised racist exclusions of the academy shape the possibility of politically engaged work, amidst ongoing debates about what should be included in conceptions of officially sanctioned knowledge. This stages the academy itself as an interested and partial actor in a political arena that spans internal power struggles and the world beyond (Bhattacharyya & Murji, 2015).

A third mode of commitment beyond the walls of the academy to speak to 'publics' takes its cue from the extensive debates about public sociology. While that was initiated in a context of the academy under attack by the forces of marketisation, its impact on the professional autonomy of scholars appears to have been more muted than the populist calls to connect with the public. Academic freedom has been raised often, though it sometimes seems skewed towards the freedom of those pressing dubious claims about race science, while clamping down on those advocating BDS. Or, in the case of student protests in support of Gaza across US university campuses in 2024, it has been against rather than in favour of faculty associating with students against excessive policing. Some approaches to the idea of reclaiming a public scholarship appear to imagine the academy as a neutral space, only recently corroded by the impure intrusion of the market, but race and ethnic studies – or more precisely anti-racist scholarship - is heavily informed through battle about the nature of the university. Thus, the implication that some scholars should *become* public sits awkwardly with an endeavour aiming to disrupt the boundaries of the academy. This radical stance extends the process of scholarly knowledge to locate the university as itself complicit.

Scholars who take seriously engaging with race and racism in the present face an array of pressing issues, as well as avenues to venture beyond the campus. There is no single or correct way to participate in a politics of opposing racism, whether that is close to home or internationally, even though there are 'keyboard warriors' whose activity on social media sometimes looks like point scoring against other scholars. Public sociology, social justice activism, and/or public intellectual activity offer cues to action though they do not have to be seen as silos or distinct camps. The example of Stuart Hall's work shows it is possible to straddle all three roles. This stance is less concerned with definitional arguments about what the form of the activity is than to partake in public issues, campaigns and struggles against racism. The range of his public policy engagements was vast, criss-crossing from a type of public pedagogy at the Open University to many engagements and shorter forms of writing and commentary.ⁱⁱⁱ Hall did not deny the label of public intellectual, however his commitment to collaborative work made him anything but individualistic. Through multiple contributions to social movements, he was effectively doing social justice work, and the analytical perspective. he brought to all these activities are a form of public sociology/social science (Murji, 2020; 2022).

A critical review of the sociology of public intellectuals (Eyal & Buchholz, 2010) argued that this realm of scholarly activity is better thought of as a sociology of interventions. Interestingly, this fits the nature of Hall's endeavours well. While all public intellectuals and scholar-activists can be regarded as intervening in public debates, this makes it just a truism. In Hall's case it is not incidental or trite, but a critical modality, as his own commentary on his practice shows. He presented his work as 'interventions in a field, rather than autonomous scholarly works', reflecting in an interview (Hall & Back, 2009) that:

I realized that almost everything I write is a kind of political intervention. It may not be about politics explicitly, but it is trying to shift the terms of the debate, intervene on one side or another, clarify something, wipe some other distorting views out of place so that something else can come through. I suppose that's critique or criticism or whatever it is, but I'm aware that it is a kind of political intervention.

And, among his many interventions, a key one was developing the idea of authoritarian populism in the 1970s.

3. Race, politics and authoritarian populism

In the late 1970s Hall and others foresaw the coming of 'iron times', meaning the emergence of an authoritarian populist state. Significantly, Hall et al (1978) presented their work as an intervention, as *Policing the Crisis* analysed the moment of mugging in the generation of public consent through the media to the emergence of a law-and-order society and authoritarian populism. Race was central in this process. Mugging, depicted as a crime of black on white, created a moral panic around lawlessness, black men, and street violence in the inner cities. For Hall et al (1978; second edition, 2013) the discourse around this crime condensed or symbolised the moment of crisis that Britain was undergoing. Race articulated – it joined together – a context of social anxiety about race and migration,

combined with British economic and imperial decline and the changing role of the state. The analytical task that conjunctural analysis achieved was to show the context – political, economic, social - in which race matters. As Hall said:

If you'd just taken race as a black issue, you'd have seen the impact of law-and-order policies on the local communities, but you'd have never seen the degree to which the race and crime issue was a prism for a much larger social crisis. You wouldn't have looked at the larger picture. You'd have written a black text, but you wouldn't have written a cultural studies text because you wouldn't have seen this articulation up to the politicians, into the institutional judiciary, down to the popular mood of the people, into the politics, as well as into the community, into black poverty and into discrimination (in Hall & Back, 2009).

The 'larger picture' is the way Hall connects race to other things – law, history, society, class, nation, empire. These things are not 'bigger' or 'wider' than race, rather they are all essentially bound up together, with race as the articulating hinge between them. Hall's strategy is a form of radical contextualising, understood as a practice that maps 'the very identity that brings the context into focus' (Slack, 1996). Hall et al (2013, p. xiv) use it to describe an 'analytical proves of widening the frame.... it is not the invocation of an inert 'background' but involves treating...articulated processes through time'. Thus, context is not just something out there, it must be assembled for the purposes of analysis. A contextualising method seeks to analyse an event as the product of histories that precede the event:

The context is the beginning and the end of our researches. The trajectory from the beginning to the end provides the measure of our success at mapping, at arriving at a better description/understanding of the context.... [it requires a] rigorous application of . . . the premise of historical specificity (Hall, 1980).

Conjunctural analysis has enjoyed a revival in recent times, across several disciplines (Jefferson, 2021; Hart, 2024; Cooper, 2025; Karayiannides, 2023; Lorne et al., 2024). It identifies a break, or a 'structural discontinuity' (McCracken 2020) in the political order; it also a moment or a period where knowledge can be articulated in relation to political struggles. Hall et al (1978, p. xv) see it as deploying: 'a type of periodisation based on a distinction between moments of relative stability and those of intensifying struggles and unrest, which may result in a more general crisis.' The main distinction they make is between the time of the post-war welfare state, and the coming of what came to be called Thatcherism in Britain, and Reaganism in the USA. While this makes a conjuncture something like an era, Hall uses it in a more refined manner to identify the 'specific and distinctive shape' when different social, political, economic, and ideological contradictions...come together.'

Both Hall and Laclau developed the idea of articulation from Gramsci. One of the key differences is that Hall based his work on the example of Thatcherism in Britain, while Laclau began with populism in Latin America. This produced a significant divide where for Hall, Thatcherism is a concrete instance of articulation and political domination, while for Laclau it is more abstract, building a general theory of how hegemony works (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Hall's engagement with a particular case makes his approach specifically conjunctural, retaining a stress on the forms of articulation of the ideological, the economic and social and political spheres (Colpani, 2021). Thus, Hall said:

By the term 'articulation', I mean a connection or link which is not necessarily given in all cases, as a law or a fact of life, but which requires particular conditions of existence to appear at all, which has to be positively sustained by specific processes, which is not 'eternal' but has to be constantly renewed, which can under some circumstances disappear or be overthrown, leading to the old linkages being dissolved and new connections – re-articulations – being forged' (Hall, 1980).

Articulations are contingent ideological and cultural creations, they have to be constructed and maintained; they are not given for all time, they are not 'guaranteed' to have effects, and they can be analysed and, possibly, dis- and re-articulated. Articulation carries the dual sense of 'joining together' as well as 'giving expression to'. How things are or can be 'joined together' in a different frame raises questions about the operation of state power and legitimacy, and of imperial and colonial histories, as well as how race 'gives expression' to those things.

Populism is though never defined in *Policing the Crisis*. As Arato and Cohen (2022) note, it is a contested notion, often deployed polemically. As a political project they say it could be a strategy, a style, an organised idea, or a discourse. They identify the key dimensions of populism as covering appeals to sovereignty and 'the people', the reliance on a charismatic leader, constructing dichotomies of friends-enemies and a distinct notion of the political. Nonetheless, its meaning can still be broad and vague as signalled by Bartle et al (2020):

‘Populism’ is often used imprecisely to describe anti-establishment political movements which propose simple solutions to complicated problems, and which advocate popular policies that liberals find uncomfortable. We have tried to avoid any such usage here. Rather, we have described what we characterise as authoritarian populist sentiment among European mass publics as a mindset that combines a preference for strong national foreign policies with opposition to immigration, anti-Europeanism, an antipathy to the liberal human rights agenda and a right-wing political orientation.

This shares some commonality with Williams’ (1976, p. 181) discussion of the word in his original version of *Keywords*. He noted that

Populism, in political discussion, embodies all these variations. In the USA the Populists (People’s Party), from 1892, were in a *radical* alliance with *labour* organizations, though the relations between **populism** and *socialism* were complex. The sense of representing **popular** interests and values has survived, but is often overridden by either (a) right-wing criticism of this, as in *demagogy*, which has moved from ‘leading the people’ to ‘crude and simplifying agitation’, or (b) leftwing criticism of rightist and fascist movements which exploit ‘**popular** prejudices’, or of leftist movements which subordinate socialist ideas to **popular (populist)** assumptions and habits. (bold in the original text).

The argument made in Hall et al (1978) has been controversial and much debated. In joining populism to authoritarianism others (Jessop et al., 1984) argued that an over-emphasis on the ideological dimensions underplayed the extent to which it was based on political and economic factors. Norrie and Adelman (1980) share the view that Hall et al over-stated the ideological basis of Thatcherism, which they argue links authoritarianism too much with the right, thereby missing the extent to which there was a ‘consensual authoritarianism’ in Britain across the right and the left of politics. This is now a historical debate, but two points are worth making. One, the starting point of *Policing the Crisis* in the media’s depiction of mugging shapes an account of moral panics based on the production and demonisation of folk devils, in the form of black youth. The book does go on to locate race in social anxiety about British economic and imperial decline, so race is historicised and linked to political and economic changes. Two, the precise form of the relation between authoritarianism, populism and politics is contingent rather than given and will vary according to national and historical context. Hall (1985) restated the importance of ideology and argued that *Policing the Crisis* presented authoritarian populism as made up of different elements, not reducible to ideology or political economy, but rather showed their articulation. In this light, conjunctural analysis aims not for general explanation but rather for analytical insight into changes and fractures in the social formation.

While a combination of economic liberalism and social/moral authoritarianism characterised the new right in Britain in the late 1970s and the 1980s, this too is contested. For Crewe (2020), social conservatism and moral authoritarianism have come and gone and only rarely been politically significant. Crewe questions whether populism is what typified the times and so again shows there is a degree of vagueness about its meaning, whether it is actually popular and its role in political strategy. As a strategy it may aim to mobilise social and political consent for an authority figure and an authoritarian state. The linking of authoritarianism and populism invokes something distinct from the Frankfurt School conception of authoritarianism and the authoritarian personality. The F scale used by them measured a receptiveness to fascist ideologies, where authoritarianism is understood as an inclination towards an imagined or strived for homogeneity through force, while populism is usually seen as more about pitting ‘the people’ against elites (Morelock, 2018). So, the linking of the two words – as authoritarian populism – creates a politics of the people against elites, who must be removed or displaced due to the popular will. While the drivers of this can involve charismatic leaders, notably the image of the demagogue, the political consequence is often the reverse: the leader or a group centralise force meaning power is in the hands of fewer people than a proper democracy. This paradox does not however seem to undermine the level of support for populism, and some polling evidence indicates people are not troubled by a hollowing out of democracy (Ferrer & Palmisano, 2025).

This underscores the loose nature of populism, such as whether it is seen as a top-down strategy articulated by demagogic leaders who claim to be representing the will of ordinary people, or whether it is a bottom-up process where political discontent is widespread and there is a suspicion of elites and politics as usual (Toomey & Shepherd, 2023). If this is a conundrum now it was also an unresolved issue in the past. What sounds like populist rhetoric about ‘the people’ and what leaders really do are not always aligned. For instance, Mrs Thatcher’s own class background was not from the elite; while most of those she berated for the sense of Britain as ‘the sick man of Europe’ were trade unionists, people who did or could not work, benefit or welfare claimants, etc. In other words, this is

‘punching down’, while protecting the traditional elites (Knott, 2020). Conversely, populists of the Brexit era did come from elite backgrounds but seemed happy to attack some other elites, notably as former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson berated UK supreme court judges for subverting the popular wishes of the populace. Johnson, as well as the populist campaigner for Brexit Nigel Farage, both with a clear elite upbringing such as private schooling, claiming to stand for the people is one of the many odd moments in British politics in the past decade (Clarke & Newman, 2017). Hence, populism persists and arguably even thrives on its lack of coherence. Moreover, as I argue in the next section, it actively creates ‘crises’ and enemies to sustain itself.

Another challenge to Hall et al is from Robinson et al (2017) who question the periodisation of the times. Instead of a conjunctural analysis suggesting three parts – an era of social democratic Keynesianism, a period of crisis in the 1970s, followed by the ascendancy of neo-liberalism, they argue the wish for more autonomy and individualism predated Thatcherism. In this account the shift in popular opinion against the constraints of class, gender and race/ethnic identities came from groups and individuals more left/liberal than the right. Thatcherism did not produce this shift, but it paved the way for Thatcherism. This is not totally at odds with Hall et al who document the social and cultural changes of the 1960s, including the anti-war protests, nor does it undermine Hall’s analysis of Thatcherism that stresses the ways the ‘new right’ better captured the sentiments of the time, as bound up within the crisis of social democratic politics. The use of symbols such as the flag and tropes of the national economy as akin to household budgeting were powerful popular and cultural elements of Thatcherism, as underpinnings of national sentiment. Sectional interests – such as class and race in the form of trade unionists and black people – then became inimical to the national interest, when they were deemed as law breakers, either through strikes or crime. The emergence of an authoritarian statist response was the expression of popular will against ‘the enemy within’. Indeed Wilder (2026), drawing on Hall, also sees this as a key reason for treating authoritarian populism as a distinctly right-wing phenomenon, in contrast to left-wing popular democracy. Conjunctural analysis aims to bring out the specific context for such developments, and the task of critical social science is to show how it works through a process of articulation.

4. Populist authoritarianism: The Brexit conjuncture

While the meaning of populism is much debated, as is its connection to authoritarianism, it is evident that recent years have seen the rise of populist and even quasi-fascist, ‘strong men’ leaders, often fomenting divisions, naming enemies and calling for authoritarian measures. A populist sentiment, sometimes linked to anti-elitism is evident in the USA and other countries including India, the Philippines, Hungary and Poland, and Austria (Angeles & Wajiha, 2024; Özer et al., 2023; Rogers, 2019) as well as in European nations such as Italy, France, Greece. In the Global South Nilsen (2024) regards similar developments as expressions of ‘southern authoritarian populism’. Some, such as Crewe and Sanders (2020) disagree, seeing it as a shift in focus on populism from Latin American or Southern Europe towards the ‘western’ world. Nevertheless, the impact of populism is noted on journalism and social media and education (McNair, 2020); while Morris (2024) suggests that digital tools such as social media are not bystanders to but active creators of the social and cultural chaos.

So, across nations populist leaders make appeals to ‘the people’, warning of threats to the nation, internally and externally from left wing movements, protestors for race equality, Muslims, and generic others. This has been called populist authoritarianism though the meaning of that term and its relation to authoritarian populism is not spelt out. They overlap in mobilising support against ‘enemies; including severe limits on rights, even military rule, without which it is claimed the nation would be at peril. At the forefront of all of this is migration, which in Europe has framed the reactionary populist politics of nationalism, securitization, and Islamophobia’, as De Genova (2018) argues. In this light, the so-called migrant crisis of Europe is not ancillary but constitutive of the crisis of European borders, rooted, as De Genova sets out, in an unresolved racial crisis founded in the postcolonial condition of Europe. For Rosenberg (2024), migration, along with climate change, and national/international wars are key issues making race intricately connected in the crises of international politics in the 21st century. These arguments can be wide ranging, and their all-encompassing frame tends to make the meaning of race broad rather than specific.

In moving the focus on to Britain, and what may be called the Brexit conjuncture, I want to bring out some key elements of context. My account centres race, and its connections to nation, and migration, which overlaps with issues of culture and economy. The wider political and economic context of Brexit is set out by others (e.g. Sobolewska & Ford, 2020). Race can refer to all ‘non-European/non-white’ others, such as Latin Americans; and often

it includes migrants from Africa, but it can also include white people, sometimes. Race intersects with religion in the form of Islamophobia, making the task of analytical specificity challenging. Brexit was the main expression of a populist surge, articulated by race and migration, but in complex ways. Although the referendum in the United Kingdom took place in 2016, the vote and aftermath are just a point in a history we need to read backwards and bring into the present day. So, it needs to be contextualised in a conjunctural manner, as something that started well before 2016 and persists into the current day. Riots in England in the summer of 2024 are an instance of that long reach, as I will suggest later.

Various social scientists have analysed Brexit as a conjunctural moment centring race and nation, and there is common ground between them. For Virdee and McGeever (2017), racism ‘overdetermines’ Brexit, which they view along two dimensions: an imperial nostalgia for Britain’s empire along with a wish to retreat or escape from a threatening and globalizing world (Bhambra, 2017; Tinsley, 2020). In a related vein, Valluvan and Kalra (2019) see Brexit as a symptom of ‘postcolonial melancholia’, along with an expression of a ‘little Englander’ outlook; this is a narrow nationalism founded in the politics of Thatcherism in the 1980s. As this suggests, the Brexit conjuncture overflows the 2010s, and it is connected to the era of Thatcherism. There is a strong case that the roots of the movement for Brexit can be found in Thatcher’s famous 1988 Bruges speech that ‘put Britain on the road to Brexit’, as Willets (2018), a former Conservative politician and minister put it. This ‘long periodisation’ of Brexit links ‘then’ (the 1980s) to the present day, when the expression of ‘white working class’ resentment to the European Union (EU) expressed regional, generational, and cultural divides (McCracken, 2020). Conjunctures, as Hall et al (2013, p. xv) say, ‘have no fixed duration, but so long as the crisis (and its underlying contradictions) remain unresolved, further crises are likely to proliferate and echo’.

In recent times, migration or immigration is still central to populism. But it is not quite the same as the politics of race in the 1970s. Then ‘the enemy within’ connoted post-World War two migrants of Africa-Caribbean and South Asian heritage, i.e. people with British colonial roots. At the time their loyalty to the nation was questioned by the new right but their citizenship status, such as calls for repatriation, were voiced only by the explicitly racist and fascist far right. Although even that settled status turned out to be precarious as the ‘Windrush scandal’ in the UK revealed in 2017 (Gentleman, 2019). In a Brexit conjuncture of around two decades the targets have changed and widened. It is now much more about precarious irregular migrants from Africa, the Middle East and sometimes Asia, people who are racialised as brown or black, but not in the same category as subjects of Britain five decades ago. This race-migration nexus (Erel et al., 2016) frames the so-called migrant crisis of Europe, but hostility also included Poles and Romanians, people who are ‘white’ but treated as raced others (Tudor, 2023). While the composition differs, across time similar underlying nationalist and exclusionary politics are at work. This is often based on populist appeals to the will of the people, and a politics of cruelty towards and harsh treatment of foreigners. Sometimes this is articulated by populist radical right leaders such as Farage during Brexit, but it has also been mainstream government policy, as the hostile environment (Griffiths & Yeo, 2021). The political apogee of this was a notorious ‘Breaking point’ poster used by UKIP in the 2016 Brexit referendum showing a long line of Syrian refugees waiting to enter Britain (Bradshaw & Haynes, 2023). Not far behind was poster from the Vote Leave side claiming that seventy million Turkish people could enter Britain if it remained in the EU, which is factually incorrect as Turkey is not in the EU.

For Crewe (2020), popular resentment about immigration is the singular issue consistently disrupting electoral politics. Indeed, he claims that if this could be resolved then the basis for populist disgruntlement would be eroded or vanish. Like some others coming from a political science perspective there is a strand in scholarly work that stresses that liberal democracy is best defended by understanding the causes of such populist sentiment and managing migration. This tends to make it seem as if it is irresponsible leaders who are exploiting the legitimate grievances of ordinary people. Yet it misses the extent to which leaders act disingenuously. The UK Conservative government promised to keep immigration to what they called ‘the tens of thousands’, although every year actual immigration was in the hundreds of thousands. In limiting EU immigration politicians entirely failed to recognise or even acknowledge the extent to which the British economy relies on low-skilled labour (Hansen, 2024). This is common knowledge in Britain, so the political proclamations are actively deceitful. The disconnect between politicians and people breeds cynicism with democratic politics, forming the base for populist leaders who claim they are being straight with people. That however does not extend to being honest about the structure of the British economy and its need for low-skills, low-pay workers.

The other problem for Crewe is that while he can see that there is a racial element to the politics of immigration, linking it as he and Sanders (Crewe & Sanders, 2020) do to the disruptive force of Powellism since the 1960s (Shilliam, 2021), they do not see racism as a core feature. The centrality of immigration as a political issue is not in doubt, as polls showed that it was in the top four most important issue to voters in the 2024 UK General Election. How it connects to populism and anti-immigrant and authoritarian sentiment is a matter of political rhetoric and ideology. Peresman et al (2023) found that a strong predictor of anti-immigration attitudes was a right-wing authoritarian outlook. Once again, not all immigrants are equal, and the most hostile views are to immigrant groups perceived as culturally distant. In other words, cultural difference rather than mobility per se is what matters. For them, this view is an aggressive outlook that forms part of right-wing authoritarianism. Making a wider argument, Redclift and Rajina (2021) see Brexit and the hostile environment as connecting anti-migrant racism with anti-Asian racism and Islamophobia, forming a bridge to problematise all non-white peoples.

So, there are elements of continuity and change between then and now, the crisis of the 1970s and the Brexit conjuncture. In the latter, anti-Europeanism fused 'little England' and 'global Britain' themes, signalling that it was a distinct moment in UK politics (Melhuish, 2024; Foley, 2025). While viewing Brexit and right-wing populism as rooted in a longer history underscores that it has more in common with the traditions of English conservatism, rather than the clearly fascistic movements in Britain through the 20th Century (Le Cras, 2020), there are signs that the gap is closing. The blurring of boundaries between Conservatism and the extreme right indicates this is not a hard red line. This is clear in the USA where the 'MAGA' takeover of the Republican Party leaves mainstream conservatives struggling. Common ground across the USA and the UK is not hard to find though, for instance in the National Conservatism Conference, where leading UK Conservative Party politicians are headline speakers.^{iv} They proclaim that governments have imposed multiculturalism and immigration over decades against 'the will of the people'. So rather than seeing populist politicians as just 'just' giving voice to the resentments of whites against migrants and multiculturalism it is important to stress that they actively mobilise, even create, the very antipathies they claim to be speaking for. These are the crises that populist leaders identify and thrive on, stigmatising some groups as enemies.

There are then several ways in which race is crucial in the articulation of Brexit. While these could be connected to themes from the 1970s their articulation in the present is distinct. The first is the way that whiteness has been mobilised as a specific racialised trope – the 'white working class', who have been 'left behind'. This racial grammar informs what Pitcher (2019) calls a racial common sense in Britain as whiteness and the left behind became explicit and implicit racialised images. They carry the implication that while the white working class may display base ethno-nationalism their concerns are nonetheless well founded and need to be addressed, that is, they have legitimate grievances. British politics for more than a decade has been overrun with this theme, as both main political parties have made it a core concern. Whether legitimate or not, this focus on the lowest ranks of society commonly overlooks elite and state racisms, as is so often the case in Britain,

Second, mediating this discourse is the role of supposed public intellectuals. This reveals quite a different conception of engaged scholarship than the concern with social justice developed in an earlier section. Writers such as David Goodhart and Eric Kaufmann have articulated whiteness, presenting racialism as a benign, positive, and simple preference for 'co-ethnics' sharing common values. They attack 'identity politics', referring to movements such as Black Lives Matter, while paradoxically maintaining calls for 'white self-interest', which are presented as not racism but merely a legitimate preference (St Louis, 2021). Operating across the boundaries of the academy, think tanks such as Policy Exchange and mainstream/legacy media they achieve a significant if minor celebrity status, akin to Jordan Petersen. They are part of events titled 'Is rising ethnic diversity a threat to the west', in which 'diversity' is an unobvious code for race, or often Muslims, nationally and internationally (Selod et al., 2023). They have been at the forefront of giving voice to white disadvantage, in which the Brexit vote is an understandable expression of white resentment to immigration and multiculturalism. The Conservative party won a record victory in the 2019 UK General Election on the promise to 'get Brexit done', as well as to 'level up' the northern regions of England. This spatialisation of politics drew on a long history of unfairness to the northern regions of England, and sets it against the more prosperous, and more multicultural, south of the country (Featherstone, 2022).

Tying together all elements of right-wing populist common sense is the third strand - culture wars. This has various targets and is composed of multiple elements, underpinned by race and racism. At one level, Black and Asian communities are seen as gaining preferences in social and economic goods, so white resentment is not simple racism but founded on well-founded complaints. At another level, the (small) gains from the identity politics of

racial minorities are presented as having been at the expense of (poor) white communities. Additionally, calls to decolonise and movements to displace statues or change the names of streets associated with slave owners, or even for reparations for slavery, are seen as excessive interventions in and against the histories of a tolerant nation. EDI (Equality, diversity and inclusion, used as DEI in the USA) is another battleground. And sitting on top of this cake is ‘cancel culture’ – through the rejection of racist speakers on university campuses, the repudiation of some people on social media by a supposed ‘wokerati’. While being woke has become an insult across mainstream and social media, as supposed ‘woke warriors’ police language and limit ‘free speech’, by seeking to limit hate speech rather than treat it as a legitimate point of view, it is important to note just how organised the backlash to it is (Davies & MacRae, 2023).

4.1 Anti-migrant riots

To bring my argument about the long reach of the Brexit conjuncture up to date I turn to recent events in Britain. In August 2024 widespread rioting took place in towns and cities, mostly in England. Some of the locations were Aldershot, Birmingham, Blackburn, Blackpool, Bolton, Bristol, Darlington, Hartlepool, High Wycombe, Hull, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester, Middlesbrough, Nottingham, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Preston, Rotherham, Southport, Stoke-on-Trent, Sunderland, Tamworth and Weymouth – most, though not all, in northern England. It is not incidental that I stress England, rather than Britain, with some limited rioting in Northern Ireland and in Wales, and none in Scotland. The ostensible trigger for these events was the fatal stabbing of three young girls in Southport, Merseyside. On social media this was speedily and falsely attributed to a migrant, with a fabricated Muslim name appearing frequently (later analysis tracked the origins of this disinformation to right-wing and neo-Nazi activists in Finland and France). Groups of mainly white men took violent action targeting hotels where migrants are temporarily housed (due to a lack of spaces for detention), as well as Muslim places of worship. They sang ‘Rule Britannia’ and chanted ‘we want our country back’; when interviewed, they said they wanted to ‘stop the boats’.^v

These vocabularies are not accidental or incidental. They echo the political rhetoric of the UK Conservative government (that was deposed in the election of July 2024) that made ‘stop the boats’ one of its headline policy aims, alongside developed plans to detain and transport migrants to Rwanda for processing. Just as significantly, the refrain that ‘we want our country back’ resonates precisely with the Brexit campaign, embodying the sense that it was going to be a moment of national renewal after years of humiliation (Toomey & Shepherd, 2023). While Brexit was mainly opposed to the European Union, the anti-migrant sentiment was often directed against ‘eastern European’ migrants who had the freedom to move and settle in the UK, in ways that made them racial others. While the ostensible case for Brexit was the economic benefit from not being part of the EU (Watson, 2018) all evidence shows that what drove the vote for Brexit was not economic but an (imaginary) sovereignty that the nation would reclaim when separated from the EU (Gordon, 2016). This is the fantasy of ‘little England’ and the ‘island nation’ that is underpinned by a nostalgia for Empire; it assumes an ethnic homogeneity and stable past is what defines England/Britain. So, even when right wing commentators criticised violent protests, they saw them as a failure of politics to take seriously public concerns about migration in recent years, and the multiculturalism they say has been enforced on the British nation over more than 50 years.^{vi} This is a re-tread of the tropes of the Brexit movement, and the instrumentalisation of ‘the left behind’ working class, coded and imagined as white.

The 2024 riots were a form of populist uprising, underpinned by a sense that politicians are out of touch and have failed to represent the wishes of the people, over decades. This has continued into 2025 and 2026 with similar protests and riots in England and Northern Ireland, accompanied by the prominence of the St George flag, now also on display across lampposts in some towns and cities (Bonnett & Hopkins, 2036; The Guardian, 2026). For the Washington Post (Sands, 2025) this is an anti-immigrant wave energised by Donald Trump; while that is debateable it brings this paper back to the populist theme it began with. Politicians, particular the government, reacted with condemnation of the violence but called it just ‘thuggery’, or sometimes ‘far right thuggery’, rather than racial or racist attacks. The reluctance to name it as racism is more notable in the stance of the BBC. For much of the time in August 2024 the BBC referred to the riots as ‘protests’, or ‘anti-migrant’ protests. It is a sign of how deep the Brexit conjuncture runs. Both the government and the leading UK news outlet are reluctant to call these attacks racism or refer to the actors as racists. For the former this is because of the fragile political coalition after Brexit, when ‘white working class’ voters deserted Labour in large numbers in the 2019 election (creating a huge win for the Conservatives); and who then abandoned the Conservatives, either for Labour or mainly for Reform (the

successor to UKIP) in the 2024 General and 2026 local elections. For the BBC, it suggests a simple fear of being drawn into the culture wars, and a sign of how much the political centre ground has shifted right. Nearly five decades ago Hall (1979) called this ideological and political shift the ‘great moving right show’. Despite occasional gaps, this has been the way in which the tectonic plates of politics have been moving since then.

5. Conclusion

In tracing the connections between populism and authoritarianism then (the 1970s/80s) and now I have maintained that race and racism are critical in the articulation between these things. This is authoritarian populism as racial authoritarianism (Leveson & Paret, 2026). While continuities across time are significant, highlighting changes and differences is important to avoid flattening times and spaces. So, in the case of Britain it is not quite the same racism then and now, with a shift from post-colonial subjects of the British Empire to migrants from diverse countries. A revived English nationalism has underpinned and been boosted by the long context in which anti-Europeanism has overlapped with anti-migrant themes. The spaces of post-industrial Britain have become more significant for their political expression. Yet, across time an underlying thread remains evident - hostility, sometimes violent, towards migrants and immigration, and a continuing fantasy of Britain as a homogenous nation. In the 1970s/80s, these factors underlay the rise of an authoritarian statism explicitly using the power of the state and law enforcement against the enemy within. It did so by presenting these internal enemies as opposed to the interests of the nation. It is arguable if that was strictly speaking populist as the main targets were people below rather than elites. The conjunctural analysis of Hall et al identified the place of race in articulating the sense of crisis from which authoritarianism became dominant, as well as the ideological construction of enemies it relied upon.

In the last decade populism has appeared in many places, usually through the ideal of a strong leader who will enact the will of the people. Racism, mainly in the form of anti-immigrant speechifying, is the critical articulating hinge, joining race to an imagined white nation, as seen numerous times in the Trump 2024 campaign. This is what the Brexit conjuncture expresses in Britain, with its distinct imperial historical echoes. Across nations there are the overlaps as well as specific factors that shape the form of populist discourse. Authoritarianism appears frequently as an easy reach in such politics, as calls to eliminate political opponents and institutions are voiced in a way that would have seemed implausible in a democracy not that long ago; or be regarded as something only the extreme right-wing would dare to say. This is the mainstreaming of far-right discourse (Mondon & Winter, 2020). The discursive articulation of populism (and authoritarianism) combines ‘big’ and ‘small’, local and global, and past and present, narratives about the nation. It mixes attacks on elites as well as people on the bottom rungs of society. It is rooted in a politics of race where small and particular events in say the UK are easily connected to wider narratives such as the Great Replacement Theory (Demir & Murji, 2026^{vii}). It is constituted through incoherence, or non-sense, defying evidence and logic. This unstable but durable mix makes populism and authoritarianism articulate around race in various ways. But these links are not given, they must be expressed and maintained, often ideologically and discursively. What Hall’s conjunctural analysis offers us is a tool to understand the present. From whatever marginal position and limited power scholars have, the task of engaged scholarship remains to contextualise our time, offering evidence-based arguments that enhance reason and deliberation in the political sphere.

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ⁱ See The Lincoln Project: Project 2025 - <https://lincolnproject.us/>

ⁱⁱ From the preface to the 1951 first edition of Arendt (2017)

ⁱⁱⁱ This can be seen in the extent of his work. See the bibliography here: <https://www.stuarthallfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Stuart-Hall-Bibliography-25-05-2021.pdf>

^{iv} See: <https://nationalconservatism.org/natcon-4-2024/>

^v This refers to migrant crossings across the English Channel in small boats.

^{vi} Nor is this limited to the right wing. 136 refugee and human rights groups signed a letter to the Labour Prime Minister urging him to tone down anti-migrant rhetoric. Referring to the 2024 riots the letter says: 'You told us this week that immigration 'is a basic question of fairness'. We agree. But the searing experiences of last summer, when hate-filled mobs tried to burn down hotels hosting asylum seekers, make it clear that the path to fairness is not to be found in those pitting local communities against refugees seeking safety from persecution and war.' *The Guardian*, 7 April 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/apr/07/rights-groups-starmer-anti-migrant-rhetoric>

^{vii} See also, Murji K and Demir I (2026) Connecting White supremacy from the local to the global - <https://www.identitiesjournal.com/blog-collection/connecting-white-supremacy-from-the-local-to-the-global>