**Intersectionality and the nation: *The Clamour of Nationalism*, diaspora space and the English North-South divide**

**Introduction**

Sivamohan Valluvan’s (2019) *The Clamour of Nationalism* is a welcome intervention in debates on Brexit that have so often elided the exclusionary racisms of this nationalist turn (Emejulu 2016; Bhambra 2017; Virdee and McGeever 2018).Valluvan’s (2019) central contention – that ethnicity is fundamental to nationhood, as the basis both of the political formation of the nation and of its racialised exclusions – demonstrates that racism is integral to nationalism in all its ideological repertoires. This includes nationalisms that use a leftist language of class, as can be seen in the reductive, whitewashed class politics that appear in understandings of Brexit as the rebellion of a ‘white working class’ against a ‘metropolitan elite’ (Valluvan 2019, 171). Calling on the left to abandon nationalism, Valluvan (2019, 25) locates a potential generative site of a renewed politics of the left in the unspectacular commitment of working-class people in Britain to ‘everyday multiculture’. Although he challenges the racialisation of the nation’s ‘others’ that underpin nationalist myths, Valluvan pays less attention to the intersectionality of difference along the lines of gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, location, religion. In order to develop an intersectional account of the English North-South divide, a spatial representation that prefigured narratives attributing Brexit to a ‘white working class’, I put Valluvan’s (2019) concept of everyday multiculture in conversation with Avtar Brah’s (1996) theory of England as a ‘diaspora space’. In doing so, I aim to contribute an attentiveness to the multiple modalities and intersections of power to Valluvan’s (2019) call for an anti-nationalist politics of the left.

**Leftism, nationalism and everyday multiculture**

As Valluvan (2019, 55) argues, ‘The story of nation in Western Europe, and certainly Britain, has always been one of race’. According to Valluvan, the nation draws its coherence, not from a shared sense of belonging, but of non-belonging; from the exclusion of racialised ‘others’ within the nation. Nationalism itself ‘denotes those particular moments when political discourse substantially *centres* the spectre of non-belonging when making sense of and reckoning with its various economic, cultural and security concerns, whether real or imagined’ (37). Far from being an aberration in the history of modernity, nationalism’s current dominance constitutes an intensification of the racialised exclusions that underpin the nation as a political formation. Across the ideological registers of nationalism that Valluvan delineates – liberalism, conservatism, neoliberalism and the communitarian left – it is black people, Muslims and those perceived as immigrants more generally who become the bearers of Britain’s contemporary nationalist anxieties. Valluvan skilfully unpicks the many ways in which different nationalist ideologies position these groups as the targets of racialised violence, and whilst he undertakes an impressive survey of the intricacies of nationalism on the political right, it is on his excoriation of left nationalisms that I wish to focus.

Given that nationalism has its basis in racialised exclusion, it follows that it is not possible for the left to salvage nationalism. Valluvan gives short shrift to the idea that nationalism can be deployed as a ‘viable vehicle towards other political ends, not least leftist collectivism’, asserting that ‘Nationalism is, in the final instance, primarily about its own exclusionary racisms – anything else is largely a convenient bedfellow co-opted to make its appeal more likely’ (2019, 17). Nationalism’s exclusionary racisms are evident in what is ‘perhaps the most deafening feature of contemporary left nationalism’ (177): the reading of working-class people in Britain as white, and as under threat from the figure of the racialised immigrant. Following Shilliam (2018) and Bonnett (1998), Valluvan demonstrates the fallacy of this whitened understanding of class by tracing its history through a significant achievement of left nationalism, the founding of the British welfare state in the 1940s. The institution of the welfare state, with its (limited) redistributive measures, relied on the dissolution of the longstanding dichotomy between the deserving and underserving poor, which became displaced onto a distinction between the deserving white working-class citizen and the underserving racialised outsider. Not only was the provision of welfare not extended to Britain’s colonial possessions, but the subsequent removal of British citizenship from many colonial subjects, the withholding of workers’ rights and security from racialised migrants, and the invocation of the spectre of the welfare-hungry immigrant that has been a staple feature of British politics from Thatcherism up to the present day, are all evidence of the racial exclusions that lie at the heart of the welfare state (Valluvan 2019, 177-180). The racialised politics of class that underpins this key victory of left nationalism in Britain indicates that nationalism cannot serve to further progressive collectivist politics; rather, it leaves class hierarchies intact whilst promulgating its own exclusionary racisms. This is a warning that is particularly pertinent at a moment when the supposed victimhood of a working class that is visualised as ‘white, and only white’ (176) has come to dominate leftist explications of the current political crisis.

Valluvan (2019) is clear that in order to develop an adequate response to the political crisis that in the UK has taken the form of Brexit, the left must reject nationalism in favour of an anti-racist politics of class. Leftist understandings of Brexit as the anti-capitalist rebellion of the ‘left behind’ white working class (169), along with widely disseminated narratives that pit middle-class cosmopolitanism (‘read multiculture and anti-racism’ [170-171]) against white working-class anti-migrant sentiments, ignore the fact that the lowest two social classes made up just 24% of the Leave vote (Virdee and McGeever 2018, 1803; Dorling 2016); justify and contribute to ‘anti-migrant race-baiting’ (Valluvan 2019, 183); add validity to right-wing nationalist arguments regarding immigration, bordering and racialised exclusions (183); and lend nationalism ‘an integral, indeed indispensable sense of struggle, injury and revolutionary affect’ (169). Perhaps most significantly for Valluvan’s argument, such narratives elide the existence of ‘working-class cosmopolitanism’ (Rogaly, forthcoming) and its potential as a generative site of a renewed leftist politics. Not only is it untrue that anti-migration sentiments are the preserve of the working classes whilst the middle classes have a monopoly on cosmopolitanism; crucially, for many working-class people in urban, suburban and provincial Britain, ‘everyday multiculture’ is an unremarkable aspect of life. Drawing on Gilroy (2004), Valluvan (2019, 203) defines everyday multiculture as ‘the highly causal, nigh banal interactive practices that emerge in spaces characterised by ethnic diversities’, in which identification along the lines of ethnic and racial difference, alongside ‘the complementary iterations of unceasing migration’, ‘become normalised as being a pre-given, natural feature of social life’. This is not to say that nationalism does not exist; indeed, ‘it is conviviality *in spite of* racialised nationalism that gives it a unique and conceptual vitality’ (205). It is in the endurance and remaking of multiculture in such spaces that Valluvan locates the potential for a politics of the left that eschews the temptations of nationalism.

It is to Valluvan’s (2019) call for a renewed politics of the left, built on careful attention to the banality of difference found in everyday multiculture, that I want to attend to here. Whilst everyday multiculture might not be a feature of all, or even most working-class lives in Britain, Valluvan argues that it is out of these spaces that a revitalised leftist politics has developed, one that recognises ‘poverty’s multi-ethnic, ‘migrant city’ realities’ (2019, 207; Back and Sinha 2018). This youthful iteration of the anti-nationalist left, which is lending its energy both to Corbynism and to a broader ‘class-based but race-conscious politics’, draws on anti-racism, feminism, environmentalism and queer politics, as well as working-class cosmopolitanisms (Valluvan 2019, 200). This important observation regarding the resonance of anti-capitalism and liberation movements for many young people in Britain is part of the cautiously optimistic note on which Valluvan ends his book. However, although he acknowledges that they are essential to any socialist politics that presents a serious challenge to nationalism, Valluvan’s nod to axes of difference other than along the lines of perceived ethnicity is somewhat cursory. No one book can include everything, and *The Clamour of Nationalism* is an interrogation of the discourses that serve to obscure the violence of nationalism even as it dominates mainstream politics, including the ubiquitous euphemistic use of populism to denote nationalism; the claim that nationalism can ever be progressive; the narratives that attribute Brexit to the supposed opposition between a ‘left behind’ white working-class and the ‘smug arrogance’ of a metropolitan elite (171). In his analysis of the many political repertoires of nationalism, Valluvan deconstructs representations of the nation as ‘a means of investigating the conditions of its formation, its implication in the inscription of hierarchies, and its power to mobilise collectivities’ (Brah 1996, 184). Engaging with Brah’s (1996) theorisation of England as a ‘diaspora space’, I aim to deconstruct the nationalist myth of the English North-South divide in order to contribute to the mobilisation of a renewed leftist politics that foregrounds the intersectionality of difference (Yuval-Davis 2012).

**‘Diaspora space’, intersectionality and empire**

Whilst Brah’s (1996) appeal as a theorist lies in her capacity to think *with* difference (Hall 2012, 29), her work on Englishness shares commonalities with Valluvan’s (2019) explorations of nationalism. Valluvan depicts everyday multicultural formations as enmeshed in the tensions between multitudinous ethnicised identifications, unceasing migrations and racialised nationalisms (203); for Brah (1996, 209), a ‘diaspora space’ is formed, reformed and contested through the ‘intertwining of genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put’’. Here, the term ‘diaspora’ indicates the economic, political and cultural specificities linking the components of a particular cluster of migrations. Central to this notion of diaspora is the image of a journey, a ‘homing desire’ – though not necessarily the wish to return to a metaphorical and/or physical homeland – and the putting down of roots ‘elsewhere’ (181-183). Profoundly anti-nationalist, Brah’s understanding of England as a ‘diaspora space’ decentres normative understandings of the nation as bounded by ‘purity and tradition’ (208): she writes that such a space is ‘‘inhabited’ not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous’ (209). Where the concept of diaspora space differs from Valluvan’s (2019) understanding of everyday multiculture is in Brah’s (1996, 183) attentiveness to intersectionality, to the ‘configurations of power which differentiate diasporas internally as well as situate them in relation to one another’ [emphasis in original]. As Brah writes, the subject positions of ‘migrant’ and ‘native’ are entangled within the diaspora space according to its particular political, cultural and historical circumstances; subject to regimes of power in differing ways; and experienced through the ‘multiple modalities’ of gender, ‘race’, class, religion, language and generation (184). These axes of differentiation are not incidental, or significant only insofar as they inform anti-nationalist socialisms (Valluvan 2019, 200): they are part of the texture of daily life for the subjects who inhabit diaspora spaces such as England (Brah 1999).

Having explored the potential of ‘diaspora space’ as a concept that could augment Valluvan’s (2019) account of everyday multiculture, it is important to note that both Valluvan (2019) and Brah’s (1996) analyses of Englishness and Britishness are inclusive of histories of empire and their ongoing repercussions. For instance, in his exploration of the ways in which nationalism suffuses conservative ideologies, Valluvan (2019, 111-112) critiques the imperial melancholia and white supremacism that is particularly prominent in this strand of British culture. Brah (1996) too is concerned with the endurance of white supremacism within English nationalism, but her focus is on how racialised exclusions continue to mutate with shifting political, economic, culture and social contexts. She writes that, throughout the British imperial project, it was the British who constituted a diaspora within the colonies. Whilst this diaspora was internally differentiated along the lines of class, gender, and ethnicity, the differences between the English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh were subsumed by their Britishness and whiteness, which indicated their superiority over the ‘native’, the colonial ‘other’. In contemporary Britain, this situation has been inverted. To protect the superiority of the ‘native’ British, migrants to Britain and their descendants, who would have been racialised as ‘natives’ in the colonies, continue to be referred to as ‘migrants’, regardless of citizenship and migration history, in order to exclude them from national belonging. However, as the changing perception of indigeneity shows, the binaries between ‘migrant’ and ‘native’, English and ‘other’, and indeed North and South are unstable and context specific (190-191). Despite the racialisation of diasporic groups within England, Englishness is constantly mingling with, appropriating and being appropriated by diasporic cultures, with the result that English politics, economies, cultures and psychologies are ‘ever-changing’ (209). As Valluvan’s (2019) theorisation of the constructed nature of the nation makes clear, Englishness is not a static national identity: the history of the British Empire and England’s interactions with postcolonial diasporic formations are instrumental in the continual reconstitution of Englishness. By recognising the constructed nature of England as a diaspora space, is it possible to develop an intersectional account of the English North-South divide that situates this imagined boundary within the complex web of power relations in which the nation is continually produced, contested and reformed.

**Deconstructing the English North-South divide**

The significance of the English North-South divide as a nationalist myth can be seen in its re-emergence as the white working-class versus the metropolitan elite narrative that, as Valluvan (2019) shows, has been so pervasive an interpretation of the contemporary political crisis. As well as classed and racialised, this narrative is spatialised along England’s imagined North-South boundary: Bhambra (2017, S215) writes that ‘the vote to leave the European Union was disproportionately delivered by the propertied, pensioned, well-off, white middle class based in southern England, not the northern working class who have been more commonly held responsible for the outcome’. The widespread attribution of the result of the 2016 referendum to white working-class Northerners, although empirically incorrect, has cultural resonance due to enduring depictions of the North that homogenise the region as provincial, peripheral, ‘the Land of the Working Class’ (Shields 1991, 208; Taylor et al. 1996); the ‘metropolitan elite’ stereotype affixed to Remain voters chimes with perceptions of London as a ‘global city’ – cosmopolitan, dynamic and wealthy (Massey 2007; Lewis and Townsend 1989, 5). This understanding of the Brexit referendum draws on narratives that imagine the North-South divide as an endogenous English phenomenon, a spatialisation of the conflict between industry and capital that arose during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Industrial Revolution having spontaneously occurred in the North at the same time as global financial systems happened to develop in London and the South. The long-term decline of industry over the twentieth century, and its dismantling under Thatcherism in the 1980s, is portrayed as the industrial, impoverished and unstable North losing out to the growing financial services, and thus increasing wealth and power, of the South (Martin 1987, 1988; Balchin 1990; Smith 1994; Hobsbawm 1999). It is not difficult to see the connections between this narrative of the North-South divide and nativist discourses of Brexit as the rebellion of a ‘white working class’ who are being ‘left behind’ by a globally connected metropolitan elite. Building on Valluvan’s (2019, 24-25) deconstruction of the nationalism underpinning such discourses, and on Brah’s (1996) concept of diaspora space, I examine the way in which England’s colonial legacies and the intersectionality of power continue to shape the North-South divide.

The understanding of England as a diaspora space allows for a reimagination of the North-South divide that exposes the nationalist myth at the heart of this spatial representation. As well as justifying the dominance of London and the South-East in all areas of national life (Massey 2007), narratives of the North-South divide form part of a worldview that positions modernity as an endogenous European phenomenon, erasing the role of colonialism, enslavement, dispossession, appropriation, and exploitation in English industrialism and finance (Bhambra 2014). The success of England industry and finance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the decline of industry in the twentieth, cannot be disentangled from Britain’s possession and subsequent loss of a closed global export market in the form of an empire. To give a few examples from the work of Walter Rodney (2018, 98-99), the ‘first center [sic] of the Industrial Revolution, and the economic advance in Lancashire depended first of all on the growth of the port of Liverpool through slave trading’; West Indian slave owners financed James Watt’s steam engine; many of London’s most powerful financial institutions, such as Barclays Bank and Lloyds of London, were founded and sustained with profits generated by the trans-Atlantic slave trade. London’s status as a ‘global city’ derives from its former status as the capital of empire, and in Britain’s continuing role in ‘global economic exploitation, geopolitical power and military intervention’ (Back and Sinha 2018, 40; Massey 2007). The reduction of the English North and South to an opposition between working-class poverty and middle-class arrogance elides the ways in which the North and South of England are intimately entangled both with each other and with the exploitation and expropriation of labour, land, and resources on a global scale. Given the denial of colonial legacies and the postcolonial melancholia (Gilroy 2004) inherent in the English North-South divide, it is unsurprising that the ‘white working class-metropolitan elite’ incarnation of this narrative is being deployed as a justification for nationalism and its attendant racialised exclusions (Valluvan 2019).

As well as reintegrating histories of empire into spatial representations of England, I aim to deconstruct the binary inherent in understandings of North and South in my doctoral research on the life stories of people from the North of England who have migrated to London. Northerners in London are not commonly constructed as migrants or as a diasporic formation – and I am mindful of reproducing the universalising claim that ‘we are all immigrants’ which, as Back and Sinha (2018, 4) write, occludes the violence directed at racialised groups and individuals – but these representations vary according to the perceived ‘race’, religion, accent, class, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability of individual Northerners (Narayan 2019, 1227). Inscribed in Northerners’ life stories, their reasons for and experiences of migration, their perceptions of London and of the North, the way in which they understand ‘home’ and belonging, are the intersections of multiple subject positions and configurations of power; the political, cultural and economic specificities of Englishness and its histories of empire (Brah 1996; Rogaly 2015). By placing the concept of diaspora space at the centre of my analysis, I aim to think with difference, to think with the complexities of individual experiences of structural inequalities, in order to develop a more inclusive, convivial and intersectional understanding of the North-South divide.

**Conclusion**

In *The Clamour of Nationalism*, Valluvan (2019) is clear that the future of the left lies in a rejection of nationalism and its racialised exclusions. This requires an interrogation of the ways in which representations of the nation, such as the English North-South divide, exclude colonial legacies and perpetuate a racialised politics of class. Drawing Valluvan’s conceptualisation of ‘everyday multiculture’ and on Brah’s (1996) understanding of ‘diaspora space’ in my analysis of the North-South divide, I have argued for an attentiveness to the multiple axes of power that differentiate diasporic formations within England. By foregrounding intersectionality, I hope to contribute to Valluvan’s (2019) call for the mobilisation of an anti-nationalist politics of the left.

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