Whiteness in the glare of war: soldiers, migrants and citizenship

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Whiteness in the Glare of War: soldiers, migrants and citizenship

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Abstract:

The figure of the soldier-migrant demonstrates why it is important to bring the question of military service into contemporary sociological debates about citizenship, belonging and racism. The essay draws on an understanding of whiteness as a fundamental component of historical and gendered notions of citizenship underpinning the ‘hypnotic ideals’ of national identity. Because of academic specialism and disciplinary boundaries, however, the intersections between civil and military spheres are often neglected as a locus for exploring racialised terms of belonging and exclusion, particularly in times of war. The essay discusses key questions raised by the campaign for Gurkha settlement rights and the employment of thousands of personnel from Commonwealth countries in the British Army, bringing the notion of whiteness as ‘fitness for citizenship’ into dialogue with recent work on the soldier-citizen developed in Canada and the USA. Recent BNP propaganda demonstrates the perils of leaving the link between military service and the indigenous ‘deserving’ Brit undisturbed, and the concept of postcolonial melancholia remains a vital way to approach the mobilisation of war memories as a way of defining the terms of UK citizenship today.
In *Iron Britannia*, his incisive analysis of the Falklands war in 1982, Anthony Barnett wrote:

For all the talk of truth being the first casualty of war, the Gothic excesses of conflict may clarify, especially as they bring domestic forces to a head. The glare of war can illuminate darkness just as the flash of lightning at night can reveal a white image of the surrounding landscape. When the darkness sets in again and the thunder rolls on, those who love the spectacle will talk about the lightning.’ (Barnett, 1982: 6)

The glare of that particular war offered a glimpse of political forces underpinning Thatcher’s Britain, and although his use of the word ‘white’ was perhaps more poetic than political, Barnett’s diagnosis identified Britain’s decline as an imperial power and the logic of national sovereignty that produced the crisis: ‘The long relative economic decline and party political crisis of the UK determined the military diversion and remains its ‘underlying’ cause.’ (92)

Barnett defined the term Churchillism as the force that propelled the country to war in the South Pacific, an idea which he characterised as ‘the warp of British political culture through which all the main tendencies weave their political colour.’ (33) In his scathing account of the debate in the House of Commons on 3 April 1982, he elaborated: ‘All the essential symbols were there: an island people, the cruel seas, a British defeat, Anglo-Saxon democracy challenged by a dictator, and finally the quintessentially Churchillian posture – we were down but we were not out.’ (34)

While Barnett’s gaze was firmly on the landscape of Thatcher’s Britain, and especially those features of imperial decline exemplified by what became known as the ‘Falklands Factor’, I want to borrow his dramatic imagery of the bleached terrain revealed in the split second after the lightning strikes. I am specifically concerned with the way that the glare of this current war in Afghanistan not only highlights the tenuous position of Britain as a junior
partner of the US, but also accentuates configurations of national identity that are both racialised and militarised. Yet the mainstream sociological debates about social cohesion, race and ethnicity – and whiteness in particular - in the UK do not address the role of military labour and defence institutions in shaping postcolonial Britishness. It is unusual, for example, for sociologists who are not specialists to ask where soldiers come from or what society might owe them in return for ‘serving’ their Queen and country. At the same time, studying the armed forces tends to be the preserve of military social scientists more likely to be grounded in psychology and International Relations than sociology. Tarak Barkawi makes a similar point about this disciplinary fog in the introduction to his book *Globalization and War*: ‘Specialists in war and the military pay insufficient attention to society, politics and culture, while sociologists, cultural theorists and to a lesser degree political scientists are not sufficiently attentive to the importance of war to their subject matters. …war and society stand in a dynamic interrelationship with each other. (Barkawi, 2005: 28-9)

Tracing these faultlines that run between war and society, or, in the context of this essay, between civil and military, offers tantalising views of national identity formation in these postcolonial times. In this essay I intend to explore ways in which the concept of citizenship animates the norms and expectations attached to military service. In *Genealogies of Citizenship* Margaret R. Somers defines citizenship ‘at its most basic as a mechanism for inclusion and exclusion, and thus a means for establishing or prohibiting membership in political entities that vary in scale from supranational to local.’ (2008: 21) She identifies this mechanism as a ‘two-sited’ research field, a characteristic which is significant for my own argument. The first, she suggests, ‘straddles and stretches across the geopolitical and conceptual borders of citizenship’s exclusionary lines of demarcation.’ (21) She refers to this as the “inside/outside” of citizenship studies’, populated by scholars working on the ways in which people are distributed among ‘political entities’, as well as ‘how the criteria are established for these rules and practices of distribution and exclusion.’ The second site of
research, which she calls the ‘inside/interior’ one, asks ‘what is citizenship’s meaning and what are the substantive benefits and costs, the rights (if any) and obligations, that accrue to those who already possess its status, that is, those who are its legal citizen-members?’ (21) Although most scholarship inhabits either one site or the other, she adds, the division of labour between them is demonstrably porous as well. I suggest here that an investigation of the meanings of military service is a useful way to test Somers’ genealogical map.

In countries that have abolished mass conscription, the question of eligibility for the social and political benefits of citizenship remains linked to the structures of political participation, regardless of whether this includes some kind of national service in return. With the abolition of mass conscription, however, many would argue that the reciprocal link between military service and democratic citizenship is weakened (Pfaffenzeller 2010). Being a soldier in a volunteer force reverts to being a particular kind of job, undoubtedly a form of uniformed public service but one that is more likely to be immersed in powerful nationalist rhetoric when the country is at war, ranging from patriotism, heroism and sacrifice to shame, dishonour and disgrace. Writing about the enduring concept of the ‘citizen-soldier’ in the US, political scientist Ronald R. Krebs suggests that these are important conceptual and political issues:

‘Soldiers are hailed for their sacrifice, and whatever additional pay they receive for service in a combat zone is not some emolument but only partial payment of the nation’s debt to them. Such language is so prevalent and familiar that it seems hardly worth noting. But it is at odds with the occupational model of military service, and it suggests that the citizen-soldier remains part of Americans’ everyday experiences—as a rhetorical practice.’(Krebs, 2009: 25)

The status of the serving and former soldier, in the UK at least, is dependant to a large degree on the job that he or she is or was required to perform. In other
words, the popular image of soldiering is constantly affected by attitudes to, reactions against and propaganda about *particular* wars. In the context of continuing high fatalities in Helmand Province, for example, the ‘rhetorical practice’ surrounding British soldiers casts those who serve as ‘heroes’ who are carrying out an exceptional service on behalf of the nation.

In contrast, the figure of the migrant is often constructed as a threat to social cohesion. Migrants enter the national collective with little sense of entitlement, or at least not until they have been able to demonstrate their right to claim public funds. The society to which they have moved, for whatever reason, owes them no debt and is forever tightening the rules under which they might eventually become ‘naturalised’ as citizens, if they so choose. The combination of these polar identities in the body of the soldier who is also, and at the same time, a migrant exposes the tension between the underlying principles of citizenship: on the one hand a right that is deserved and on the other, a privilege yet to be earned. Exploring the conditions in which the migrant-soldier is employed is likely to provide rich insights into the conflicts and contradictions at the heart of citizenship studies.

This inquiry draws an ethnographic research on the recruitment, training and deployment of thousands of soldiers from Commonwealth countries alongside their British-born counterparts. The project addresses some sociological questions raised by this degree of rapid diversification within the organisation, but it also asks to what extent the employment of a multinational and multicultural workforce within such a symbolically homogenous institution effectively delineates or blurs the political boundaries of the nation, both as a historic construct and in its postcolonial present. Before considering these questions, the next section will discuss how a focus on whiteness might help to illuminate the intersections of war, racism and immigration politics that shape our post-imperial, heavily securitized and increasingly militarised country.

**The one true race**
The binarism of blackness and whiteness underpins what Foucault has called the ‘race war’, the permanent war that goes on ‘beneath order and peace, the war that undermines our society and divides it.’ (Foucault, 2003: 59-60) Paul Gilroy asserts that the ‘race’ idea is powerful ‘precisely because it supplies a foundational understanding of natural hierarchy on which a host of other supplementary social and political conflicts have come to rely. Race,’ he argues, ‘remains the self-evident force of nature in society’. (Gilroy, 2005: 8) One of the benefits of making whiteness the focus of analytical scrutiny has been to take nature out of the racial equation. Work that demonstrates how whiteness had to be ‘made’ in different settings has been able to draw attention away from essentialisms of phenotype and skin colour in order to investigate the symbolic currency of white power along other axes of ‘race war’, whether these are marked by privilege, inequality, marginalisation or exclusion.

In the context of the US, Matthew Frye Jacobson’s analysis of whiteness as a political and cultural category documented how it came to mean different things in terms of citizenship, national identity, and immigration discourse over a long sweep of cultural history. (1998, 2006) Recognising the elemental career of white primacy as it has been articulated through the politics of nation-making - immigration and patriotism in particular - Jacobson demonstrates how the revived attachment to ethnic identities – the celebration of the hyphen – gave rise to new forms of inclusion and exclusion even as the potent mythology of the ‘nation of immigrants’ continued to be celebrated. His book, Roots Too, concludes with a call to pay strict attention to ‘patterns in our collectivised sense of naturalized Americanness…These more than anything else constitute the historical weave of that hypnotic political ideal, America.’(2006: 396)

This emphasis on identifying patterns in the formation of national identity and terms of belonging is developed by Roger Hewitt who has written extensively about racial conflict and perceptions of multiculturalism among working class communities in the UK. He argues that whiteness is usefully conceived through the historicised and gendered notion of citizenship, whether
this is achieved through the status of settlers or natives. (Hewitt, 2006) Whiteness does not necessarily arise from a conception of the ethnic majority or the dominant ethnicity, he suggests, but is ‘augmented with the idea of ‘born to rule’ or ‘standard by which all others are judged’ or ‘grid through which all things should be perceived’. This is the realm of the long history through which a cultural hegemony of ‘whiteness’ was achieved. (42)

Hewitt is particularly concerned with the way in which particular groups of ‘migrant whites’ are considered more or less threatening than others in contemporary Britain. Since the influx of economic migrants into the UK from new EU countries in 2004, new hierarchies have been established: attitudes to Poles, Kosovans, Bulgarians and Lithuanians, for example, reflect the degree to which they are considered useful, threatening, needy, or hard-working. Within the new Europe, he argues, ‘Our conscious as well as tacit knowledge of racial discourse construction is immense – we have seen so much of it – and in truth many of its contradictions and putative ironies are very simple matters: populations and their governments like immigrants who contribute something to the social good and don’t threaten.’ (41-2)

At the beginning of the 21st century the latest rules governing immigration into the UK are more stringent than ever: a revision of immigration policy carried out by New Labour, entitled ‘Our Shared Responsibility’ consolidates successive governments’ efforts to block economic migrants entering from outside the EU, whether or not they possess the skills to work. The concept of ‘earned citizenship’ awards points to those who appear to be willing to contribute, and conversely, deducts them from those who act in ways that are thought to be anti-social or against Britain’s interests. (Best, 2009)

The points-based system is derived from Australia where it was developed by John Howard’s government in the 1990s. This is an example of the extent to which, within the last 20 years, the mechanisms to restrict immigration and asylum have not been the sole preserve of national governments but developed largely in response to international crises or wider political
settlements. The end of the Cold War, for instance, and the momentum of economic neo-liberalism influenced the process of European integration, including the negotiations over its internal borders under the Schengen agreement. (Squire, 2008) It bears repeating too that the consequences of September 2001 are just beginning to be seen in historical perspective. The demonisation of multiculturalism and the entrenchment of anti-Islamic discourse in the domestic sphere, combined with the NATO-led ISAF operation in Afghanistan, have had immeasurable impact on the internal surveillance of citizens and stricter controls at the points of entry. In *The Threat of Race*, David Goldberg echoes Foucault’s analysis of racial discourse as ‘a principle of exclusion and segregation and, ultimately, as a way of normalizing society’ (Foucault, 61) ‘Race has continued,’ Goldberg writes, ‘silently as much as explicitly, to empower modes of embrace and enclosure, in renewed and indeed sometimes novel ways, as much shaping the contours and geographies of neoliberal political economy globally as modulated by them’. (Goldberg, 2009: 372)

As long as the concept of whiteness continues to thrive as a politically volatile index of authenticity, privilege, eligibility or injury, it will continue to operate as a ‘mode of embrace and enclosure’. Appeals to this symbolic currency of whiteness – even in decline - as the basis for belonging, connection and exclusion can be justified in many dubious ways, not least by the notion of ‘threatened biological heritage’ or when it is employed as an argument that makes ‘common sense’. At a time when European electoral parties on the far right are making significant gains it is even more urgent that sociologists collaborate across national borders in order to counter the relentless move towards racist explanations for hardship and humiliation. One crucial strategy is to battle against revisionist accounts of the national past as we identify how and where whiteness enters the intricate patterns in ‘our collectivized sense of naturalized’ identities.¹
The many faces of Churchillism
The reality of war poses the question of how we hold together our accounts of the way we feel about a country with more prosaic but pragmatic issues involved in participatory democracy, including foreign policy. The battlefield in Helmand is constantly represented as the site of the ultimate defence of Britain’s integrity, and government ministers have claimed on many occasions that the military operation there is as vital to national security as the war against the Nazis. Speaking to a Daily Mail journalist while on tour in the Middle East in 2008, Foreign Secretary David Miliband declared: ‘Why we are there is straightforward. Sixty or 70 years ago the Armed Forces defended Britain on the White Cliffs of Dover. Now to defend Britain we have got to be in the toughest areas of the world like Afghanistan.’ (Brogan, 2008)

Miliband’s Churchillian reference to Albion’s shores demands interpretation in the context of Gilroy’s analysis of postcolonial melancholia:

I think there is something neurotic about Britain’s continued citation of the anti-Nazi war. Making it a privileged point of entry into national identity and self-understanding reveals a desire to find a way back to the point where the national culture – operating on a more manageable scale of community and social life – was, irrespective of the suffering involved in the conflict, both comprehensible and habitable...That process is driven by the need to get back to the place or moment before the country lost its moral and cultural bearings. (2005: 89-90)

The process to which he refers was illustrated during the 2009 elections for the European Parliament when the memory of Britain’s victory against fascism was re-centered as a battleground for fighting over the terms of political community. The electoral campaign was held amidst economic meltdown, a crisis of political representation precipitated by the expenses scandal and a war fought by an army that was evidently chronically overstretched and under-
resourced. It was a climate that favoured the complementary agendas of the BNP and UKIP to halt all immigration, stigmatise foreigners as invaders and return the country to its rightful indigenous inhabitants. Both parties were successful in gaining seats in the European parliament. In this section I examine how the racist discourse of the BNP appeared to abandon its strident message of ‘rights for whites’ in favour of using more coded claims of belonging and entitlement on the basis of military service defending Britain against fascism in World War 2. The BNP party political broadcast, aired on national TV in May 2009, revealed how this aspect of the national past is being used to qualify their racialised terms of inclusion and exclusion. It does this by posing the question: who exactly is British and how do we know?

The film begins with an introduction cementing the link between patriotism, the defeat of the Nazis in 1945, Churchill, and heroes who, ‘fought like lions to stop Britain being swamped by foreign invaders…’ ii Fleeting, layered images evoking the 1939-45 war establish the notion that the BNP consider the Nazis to have been enemies of freedom. A voice intones, ‘Heroes must be turning in their graves…immigration has become an invasion…’ The BNP leader Nick Griffin is then shown seated at his desk, a case of medals strategically positioned behind him.

‘It’s not about racism,’ he insists. ‘It’s a question of who has helped to build our country.’ As the film cuts away to lists of names engraved on war memorials he continues,

In the end the answer to the question by what rights should Britons be put first, can be seen on every war memorial in the country. Think of all the names: English names, Scottish names, Welsh names, Irish names, our British names, nobody else’s. Because overwhelmingly it was our people who did the fighting and dying for our country.
Having established that the right to citizenship is derived from military service on Britain’s behalf, he reiterated, ‘It’s our rights, your rights, your family’s rights, to enjoy the benefits that come from being part of this great nation which was won by the blood, sweat and toil of our past generations.’

The visual deployment of Churchill’s memory in the broadcast echoes Barnett’s analysis of ‘Churchillism’. Raising the spectre of Britain as an island under siege, the BNP had no compunction about weaving their own political colour into this sturdy warp of mainstream British politics. Significantly, the conventional ‘racist’ language of black and white is replaced by rhetoric of belonging, rights and benefits, while tropes of invasion, blood and soil remain the same. The token acceptance that settled migrants will be permitted to stay is later contradicted by the emphasis on British names on stone memorials, all in rural settings so as to emphasise the notion of ‘indigenous stock’.

**Doing the right thing**

The Euro elections were not the only recent occasion for the emotive recollection of Britain’s military past, however. Two months later, the 60th anniversary of the declaration of war with Germany in September 1939 produced a surge of commemorations that both revised and replayed the history of that period. But another series of events took place during 2009 that effectively linked the commemoration of the Second World War to the question of military service and the rights of veterans who are not UK nationals to enjoy the full benefits of British citizenship. Shortly before the Euro elections took place, the Campaign for Gurkha Justice, fronted by actor Joanna Lumley, brought all these issues to the attention of the public, defeating and embarrassing the national government in the process.

The extensive media coverage of Lumley waving a large *kukri*, the traditional Gurkha knife, signalled more than a victory for the retired Nepalese soldiers’ claim for residency and welfare rights. Her intervention appeared to usher in a brief period – shortly before the expenses scandal blew up – of making
the political decision-making process vulnerable to disruption by an ordinary, avowedly non-political, person with an unassailable cause. Lumley’s celebrity status, based largely on her portrayal of Patsy, a dissolute, amoral character in the sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous*, served to highlight her supremely ethical representation of the elderly Gurkhas in the eyes of the British public. Far from being another category of unwanted immigrants seeking to cash in on their tenuous connections to the UK, the retired Gurkhas and their dependants were cast as deserving entrants to the national collective. Numerous online forums, phone-ins and other sources of public reaction testified to the popularity of the Gurkhas in contrast to the wrong kind of claimants: those economic migrants and spongers who had nothing to contribute in return. The Nepalese ex-servicemen had earned their claims to citizenship rights, if not their entitlement to retire in dignity in the country for which they had risked their lives. The prolonged campaign to reveal their shoddy treatment was also an opportunity to educate the British public about the Gurkhas’ role in Britain’s late 20th century wars. Little attention had been paid at the time to their active involvement in the Falklands, for example, as well as in Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor, Sierra Leone and Iraq. The death of Corporal Kumar Pun in Helmand Province on 7 May, just three days after Lumley’s triumph, was a reminder that Gurkha units are integral to NATO operations in Afghanistan.

It is tempting to speculate about the significance of the whiteness of Lumley’s charismatic femininity in defending these dignified foreigners, her tremulous female voice in great contrast to their own muted ability to speak up for themselves in public. Her embodiment of white femininity certainly animated the historical memory of gender, race and colonial power. Her claim to be a ‘daughter of the regiment’, in dutiful memory of her soldier father and as confirmation of her familial relationship to the Gurkhas as a community, was welcomed by a waning generation of peers who recognised her formation as a child of empire. The passion with which she spoke also evoked deep-rooted national memories both of the global campaigns by Britain and her allies in 1939-
45, and of Britain’s imperial connections to the Indian sub-continent. But the tears of shame and then joy that flowed down Lumley’s cheeks not only stemmed from the emotive struggle to recognise the ‘moral debt of honour’ owed to a group of people tied to Britain through residual and anachronistic colonial settlements (Allen, 2009). They also signalled the triumph of a powerful idea about what it means to be a soldier in the service of the nation, regardless of nationality or ethnic origin. But the postcolonial blood shed for Queen and country in this heroic discourse does not mingle easily with the purified blood which pulses to the beat of racial kinship favoured by the BNP.

The military hinge

Being prepared to die and to kill on behalf of the nation continues to be an ideological cornerstone of national belonging and a sound qualification for the material benefits of democratic citizenship. Gordon Brown underlined this reciprocal relationship in the inquiry into the ‘National Recognition of Our Armed Forces’ in 2008:

The Government is acutely aware of the debt we owe to our Armed Forces, and our gratitude for the work they do in the service of our country is reflected in our recent initiatives on pay, on tax-free bonuses, on housing and health-care…but beyond these individual initiatives, important though they are, it is vital for our serving men and women, especially those engaged in difficult and dangerous overseas campaigns, to know that the whole of Britain understands and appreciates the work that they do in their name. (Davis, 2008)

Brown’s reassurance that the ‘whole of Britain’ was behind the men and women of the Armed Forces was designed to echo the Military Covenant, an unwritten code defined in army doctrine as ‘the mutual obligation between the Nation, the Army and each individual soldier; an unbreakable common bond of identity,
loyalty and responsibility which has sustained the Army throughout its history. This was a defensive move, coming after months of criticism of the government for failing to provide either the resources or the moral support for the troops in Iraq and their families at home. In 2007, for example, the *Independent on Sunday* launched a campaign to press the government to honour the Covenant, backed by a host of organisations and powerful individuals including senior military figures and politicians from all parties. (Johnson, 2007)

This is just one development emanating from civil society that has brought military service into sharp relief as an exceptional form of employment. The coalition of forces behind the campaign showed how the figure of the soldier becomes highly symbolic of how the nation is constituted, particularly when a country is involved in active military operations. Again, a comparative approach is helpful. From a US perspective, Krebs argues that ‘the military is the key hinge institution sitting astride and mediating between domestic and international politics.’ (Krebs, 2004: 123) Bearing in mind that this theoretical generalization obscures the huge differences between different national states, it is still a valuable comment on the Janus-faced nature of military institutions. In an exploration of how that hinge operates as a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, Krebs asserts that military manpower policies are instrumental in shaping the politics of citizenship, the definition of the political community, and thus the boundaries of nationality.

Militaries are undeniably social as well as functional institutions, shaped by but also shaping social structures and values. Debates over who serves continue to arouse passion in part because the military’s manpower policies are widely viewed as having important implications for citizenship and national identity—arguably a polity’s most central questions. (Krebs 2004, 89)

For those researching the politics of citizenship and national identity,
paying attention to an army’s manpower policies and strategies when the
country is at war becomes an important way of investigating the limits of the
nation – both an idea (if not a hypnotic political ideal) and in policy terms as
well. If the war in question is unpopular, or the terms and conditions of working
in the armed forces are deemed unattractive for a variety of reasons, then the
volunteer army is forced to recruit from where it can. The employment of
significant numbers of non-nationals exposes contradictory norms in the making
of national identity. Taking a historical perspective on the hiring of soldiers in
European armies over a longer period, Sarah Percy investigates the use of
mercenaries as an acceptable solution to recruiting problems (Percy 2007). Her
analysis is relevant here because it reveals the shifting attitudes towards the
concepts of military service, duty and the obligations of citizenship within
different national contexts.

New ideas about the relationship between states and citizens reinforced
the existing notion that the use of mercenaries was immoral, and the use
of mercenaries became impossible. To use foreign fighters in Europe after
the nineteenth century would have undermined the entire system of
military service used in all states, and challenged the underlying beliefs
about how war and killing could be justified. To use mercenaries would
also undermine national identity, as the willingness of citizens to fight and
die for the state was one indicator of that state’s success and status as a
great player on the world stage (165).

Neither Gurkhas nor Commonwealth soldiers qualify as mercenaries within the
British Army since they come under the legitimate control of the state. But more
significantly, the Campaign for Gurkha Justice has proved that the ‘foreignness’
of Nepalese troops is no disqualification for citizenship rights since they have
proved their loyalty to the country by fighting in Britain’s wars. Here the
question of who deserves is inextricable from the equation of who serves.
Writing about the historical development of social citizenship in Canada, geographer Deborah Cowen argues that the involvement of citizens in ‘war work’ effectively changed the notion of mass welfare as a service that was granted to a right that was deserved. ‘Mass warfare, she writes, ‘ingrained a sense of social right in the national population.’ (Cowen, 2008: 53) This was intrinsically linked to the institution of national service. Cowen also notes that Britain’s Beveridge plan which inaugurated the modern welfare state was built around parallel assumptions. From the 1930s the term ‘social security’ referred to the government’s responsibility for the social welfare of its people who were, in turn, thought to owe some form of national (usually military) service in return. “‘Social security,’ Beveridge would explain, ‘must be achieved by cooperation between the state and the individual. The State should offer security for service and contribution.’” (emphasis in Cowen, 53)

Any consensus about a political framework that justifies ever-tightening immigration controls that define the boundaries of nationhood today will emerge out of bitter negotiations to determine who is eligible for social welfare and what forms of allegiance or duty this might demand in return. As we have seen, with a strong national identity the traditional rules are clear: one must be ready to kill and to die for one’s country, or give up one’s children, in exchange for protection by the state. But what issues are raised by the manner and scope of military recruitment when the country is involved in a prolonged, costly and dangerous war and its own reluctant citizens are deemed increasingly overweight, unfit and unsure of their place in the world? Soldiers take time to produce and although the intense training regime determines the calibre of the end product, the fluctuating quality of raw recruits entering the pipeline (as it is referred to in military terms) has implications for costs, wastage and retention.

It is unwise for citizenship scholars to overlook the processes and politics of ‘manning’ (and maintaining) an effective military workforce at the best of times. When the functioning of a country’s armed forces depends on the use of migrant labour and the deliberate inclusion of ethnic minorities, there are rich
opportunities for testing the value and limits of whiteness as a conceptual and ideological grid determining the architecture of national identity. In addition, the phenomenon of migrant-soldiers demands a rigorous re-thinking of the theoretical ground between studying ‘citizenship’s exclusionary lines of demarcation’ and focusing on the ‘benefits and costs, the rights (if any) and obligations’ awarded to those who are considered to belong’ (Somers).

Joining the force

The recruitment of Commonwealth citizens to the British Army began in 1998 when residency requirements were dropped to bring the armed forces into line with the civil service. The provision of new sources of manpower had the immediate effect of easing an acute shortage of new soldiers as well as an alarming poor retention rate. The drive was so immediately successful that in 2005 a report in The Times claimed (erroneously as it turned out) that ‘The Army has stopped actively recruiting Commonwealth and foreign soldiers because the numbers joining up have risen by nearly 3,000 per cent in seven years.’ (Evans, 2005) Figures published in 2008 show that by then there were 7,240 officers and soldiers from Commonwealth countries, trained and untrained. Of these, 2205 were Fijian, 690 Ghanaian and 630 Jamaican, while South Africans and Zimbabweans combined totalled 1365. (Taylor, 2009)

Carol, a 23 year old Jamaican, is a technical supplies specialist in the British Army who was at that time seconded to the Diversity recruiting unit. I arranged to meet her in a shopping mall in Slough, just outside London, where she was part of a team running an army recruitment stand. As we sat talking in the open plan café within sight of her colleagues, she explained to me how her family in Jamaica felt about her being a soldier in the British Army: ‘They were pleased. It’s a job at the end of the day, but you feel proud of it, going back there.’
I asked her what kind of reactions she encountered among her colleagues who were born in the UK: “Lots of people think it’s new for Commonwealth to be in the army. Young soldiers don’t know their history; they ask, ‘why do you want to join the British army?’ – I say why not?

“The Queen is head of our government, we have British values and standards, technically we are British, Commonwealth British.”

Carol’s sense of historical continuity was partly based on her perspective as a Jamaican citizen. She also mentioned that she had given interviews in Black history month on the army’s ‘We Were There’ exhibition that documented the historic roles of colonial soldiers fighting Britain’s wars. However, as a recruiter she was well aware that young British people born in the UK were not attracted to army life, particularly those of Caribbean or South Asian descent: “There’s not a lot of ethnic Brits joining the army,’ she said. It was evident to her that her fellow Commonwealth soldiers had a different approach. One reason was that ‘we don’t have a long history (here) so it is easier for us to join. Parents have a big role to play in terms of recruiting ethnic minorities in Britain. My family didn’t have experience of living in the UK. I didn’t have a barrier in my head.”

This brief extract from a longer conversation raises a number of issues that are relevant here. During the course of my interview with Carol, I watched the recruiting group out of the corner of my eye. Three white men in green uniform did their best to solicit interest from passers by, intermittently chatting to each other and looking bored, and not doing very much business. When Carol rejoined them I was immediately struck by the way that the addition of a young black woman wearing the same uniform transformed their display. It was undeniably more dynamic and modern, underlining Carol’s priceless value as recruiting tool. She had talked at some length about her conversations with young people, black and white, out of earshot of her colleagues, and it became clearer why her role was not just about meeting minority recruitment targets. It was an expression of many complex calculations about who was fit to serve in Britain’s national army and on what grounds they should be admitted.
The professionalisation and modernisation of Britain’s post-imperial armed forces began when conscription was finally scrapped in 1960 after prolonged and anguished debates about the effects of its abolition for the moral and physical heath of the nation. In his exhaustive historical account of British national identity from 1945 to 2000, Richard Weight notes that race was a key factor in ending conscription, citing the concern that ‘large numbers of blacks and Asians would be liable for the call-up as a result of immigration…The enlistment of black Britons into the professional army could be controlled by prejudicial selection, but statutory national service was another matter.’ (Weight, 2002: 308) In these postcolonial times, the arguments leading to the diversification of the armed forces and its component organisations – the army, air force and navy - reflect the fact that they are part of the public sector much like the NHS or the BBC and therefore subject to employment law. In 2001 the Race Relations Amendment Act placed a duty on all public bodies to take positive steps not only to eliminate discrimination but also to promote racial equality. However, because the army is a closed military institution grappling with its own reputation for racism, bullying and harassment it requires a larger intake of minority ethnic recruits in order to remake its image as a convincing, equal opportunity employer.

Christopher Dandeker has written extensively about the policy shifts behind the recruitment of minority ethnic personnel in the armed forces. (Dandeker & Mason, 2003) Beyond the requirement to reflect the ethnic composition of contemporary British society, there are other factors involved which suggest that there are sound business reasons to aim for a more representative workforce. He gives three broad motives for the army to increase its intake of ethnic minorities as it competes for new employees. First, it provides a wider recruitment pool, and second, the army is likely to benefit from a broader range of skills and experience. Third, it enables the army to live up to, or aspire to, the ideal of being an Equal Opportunity employer which in turn improves its image and aids recruitment.
But there are also important political implications emerging from the link between military service, minority status and citizenship. These arguments are more complex since they reach into the heart of the soldier-citizen ideal. The representation of British ethnic minority communities cements their right to belong. But if they don't join, and they voluntarily exclude themselves, he asks, does this have implications for their claim to citizenship rights? Why does this not also apply to those categorised as white who also reject military service? (489) These questions highlight the predicament of those serving members who are not UK nationals. The British Army has consistently failed to attract British-born minority ethnic applicants, but now employs personnel from over 35 countries. Many of them, like Carol, hold dual nationality; others seek to obtain ‘the red passport’ at some point in the future, and a significant proportion have no intention of applying for naturalisation either during or after their service.

The race to recruit
There is not space here to investigate the complex immigration issues involved in employing non-UK nationals in the army, but there are several questions that can be summarised in the context of this discussion about Britain’s postcolonial future. First, it is important to appreciate the historical significance of this tightly restricted pool of labour from the Commonwealth and to connect it to earlier patterns of immigration designed to support the reconstruction of Britain in the post-war period. In 1948 the Labour government led by Clement Attlee passed the British Nationality Act which granted rights of citizenship to all members of the Commonwealth countries, whether still under colonial rule or newly independent. (Paul, 1997:17) The law was undoubtedly an extraordinary compromise, designed to satisfy the competing claims to nationalism within the Commonwealth while preserving the status of British subjecthood throughout its territories. Inevitably it was a controversial measure that divided politicians across all parties. Weight recounts how the Home Secretary claimed that the bill would place ‘the coloured races of the empire’ on a legal par with people of the
motherland, while his interpretation was that the bill ‘was...based on the idea of
a racial hierarchy which reserved Britain’s right to define “civilization” and to
declare when it had been attained by people under its tutelage.’ (2002: 137).

Although the extension of British citizenship to all members of
Commonwealth countries is often forgotten in revisionist accounts of
immigration control, it provided the legal and constitutional context for the
subsequent negotiation of restrictive policies by different governments. The
irony today is that the Ministry of Defence turned to the Commonwealth as a
source of military manpower at a time when other routes of migration from this
source are being barred in favour of boosting internal labour markets within the
EU. The supportive role played by Britain’s colonial armies during the 1939-45
war underlines the historical continuities that make their recruitment feasible. At
the same time, citizens of EU countries against whom they were required to fight
are permitted to come and go as they please.

Secondly, the Military Covenant referred to earlier not only highlights the
complex link between welfare and warfare, but underlines the reciprocal nature
of the relationship between soldier and society. Asking what changes when the
soldier is also a migrant forces us to interrogate the idea that military service is
an incontrovertible qualification to belong to the national collective. It is here that
the ‘glare of war’ can illuminate a host of contradictions. The patriotic support
for the former Gurkhas demonstrates how constructs of ‘race’ and ethnicity are
modified in the inter-relationship between war and society. Despite being
Nepalese citizens, they are still considered as ‘our boys’ and deserve ‘our’ full
backing, which includes the benefit of pensions, free healthcare and the right to
remain in the country. The BNP, caught between the logic of loyalty to soldiers
and an agenda that favours only those who are white - of ‘ancestral stock’ -
dodged the contradiction by announcing: ‘We would actually be happy to have
the Gurkhas if we can swap them, for instance, for the very significant number
from the Muslim population in this country who identify with al Qaida and who
are not loyal to this country.’

vi
But unlike in the United States where military recruitment offers citizenship as an inducement to sign up, Britain’s Commonwealth soldiers, already exceptional citizens by virtue of their labour, remain exceptional migrants too. Where the Gurkha contingents are organised in separate units, Commonwealth personnel train and serve alongside their UK counterparts in an unevenly diverse but integrated workforce. Although the majority of these soldiers, some of whom are also designated as white, might otherwise be cast as ineligible skilled and unskilled migrants from outside the EU, they are not automatically rewarded with citizenship as a condition of employment in the armed forces. Nor is their path to citizenship, should they wish to apply, significantly expedited by their readiness to ‘serve’. It is no exaggeration to say that the figure of the migrant-soldier stands at the intersection of two powerful discursive traditions – the hero and the scrounger - both of which emerge from distinctly British historical formations. However, the employment of migrant-soldiers with strong postcolonial ties to Britain challenges the ‘common sense’ racism that delineates the boundaries of our political community by colour and concepts of indigeneity.

Third, Barnett’s analysis of Churchillism from the Falkland War, updated by Gilroy’s more recent diagnosis of postcolonial melancholia, remains valid since the memory of WW2 is the bedrock of nationalist discourses of exclusion and entitlement in Britain today. Racist agencies such as the BNP rely on a fantasy of the national past in which ‘ethnic’ Brits fought heroically to defend the island nation, but the presence of men and women from Commonwealth countries in the British Army in the present undermines the age-old racist charge that ‘immigrants’ are not prepared to risk their lives for this country. At the same time, the Army’s lack of success in recruiting significant numbers of UK citizens from ethnic minority communities focuses attention on the potent meanings of soldiering as particularly symbolic work in the service of the nation, while also underlining the need to take the armed forces into account in sociological research on racism, exclusion, identity and belonging.
In this essay I have argued that the glare of the current war in Afghanistan reveals the contested terrain of British national identity as it evolves in the 21st century. The concept of whiteness, constantly open to both theoretical and methodological critique, continues to be an essential analytical tool for researching the paradigms of citizenship from different disciplinary perspectives, especially where scholarship on the ‘inside/outside’ and the ‘inside/interior’ overlap, to use Somers’ terms. While the dynamic relationship between war and society is often overlooked as a result of artificial and self-imposed disciplinary boundaries, the practices and policies governing the recruitment of soldiers indicate important zones where social and military spheres overlap. Paying close attention to the non-identical twin figures of the soldier-citizen and the soldier-migrant in different national contexts offers a means to track the changing dimensions of national citizenship. The history of military service needs to be understood as a long-running, contested and contestable pact between citizens and rulers in order to grasp the volatility of these questions today. As Krebs argues, ‘The mass army is today on the run, he suggests, and privatized security forces are making a comeback….’ but who serves remains a question of importance.’ (2004, 124) Bearing in mind the massive proliferation of private contractors and privatised security personnel in the NATO-led ISAF occupation of Afghanistan, this inquiry also offers a valuable opportunity for transnational, comparative conversation, if not collaboration, in the search for more effective solidarities in the face of permanent war, militarization and racism.

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i In the UK this means challenging the mainstream view that immigration has ‘always’ been a taboo topic of debate, particularly in relation to class. See, for example, Kathleen Paul ‘From Subjects to Immigrants’ in Weight and Beach *The Right to Belong: Citizenship and National Identity, 1930-1969*. London, LB Taurus, 1998.


v Army Personnel Statistics Report Published on 18th December 2008 by DASA (Army)

vi The quote continues: ‘An Army Council report concluded that the loyalty of black and Asian soldiers could not be relied upon in wartime: to sum up, the enlistment of coloured men into the Army, and *a fortiori*, the grant of commission in the British Army to them, constitutes, in the view of the Army Council, a threat to the discipline and well-being of the Army which might be a very serious matter in time of war.’ (Weight, 2002: 308)