



LONG READ FEBRUARY 2024

Anglo-American hegemony or else...!

BY RALUCA BEJAN



*Hans Kundnani's book *Eurowhiteness* (Hurst, 2023) propositions that white ethnic nationalism is at the basis of European identity. In her Long*

Read, however, Raluca Bejan unwraps several issues that she argues make Kundnani's argumentation flawed.



Hans Kundnani's book *Eurowhiteness* argues that the idea of *race* is central to European identity. Kundnani's argument is twofold: first, that the European Union, through its multi-country regionalism fosters a European nationalism that is something like the nationalism theorized in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*; and second, that the EU's supposed regionalism is merely a cover for ethnicity and culture, and for the propagation of a civilizational idea of identitarian whiteness which positions Europeans as superior to all others. In other words, the EU manifests a symbolic investment in Eurowhiteness and reflects a Eurocentric position on diversity by equating Europe with the world. Kundnani then discusses the UK's decoupling from Eurocentrism via Brexit, and argues for a nuanced interpretation of the relationship between race and Brexit. Brexit was also an anti-racist vote, Kundnani writes, against the racism perpetuated by the EU.

Identifying EU regionalism as a form of nationalism is an insightful contribution by the book. There has been little attention given to how various ways of imagining belonging that allegedly aim to subvert archetypal nationalist attachments end up reinforcing nationalism. Canada's multiculturalism, for example, is defined in terms of the co-existence of religious, ethnic and immigrant communities, and has become the shared universal to support nation-building; multicultural particularisms are recognized as long as they do not disrupt the Canadian hegemonic universalism. This new type of nationalism

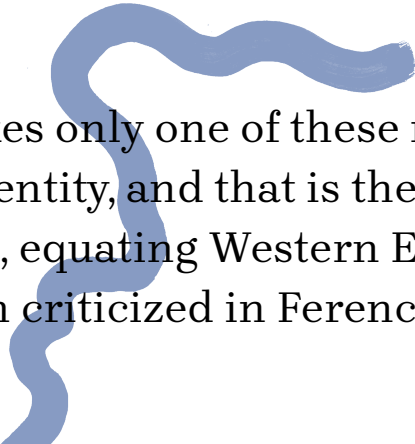
paradoxically defines itself through the negation of nationalism in the traditional sense, to position Canada as somehow a “better” nation because of its multicultural diversity.

Similarly, the EU creates a regional identity which negates country-specific nationalisms. Yet it is this negation that positions Europeanness as the better identity. Since EU membership is not available to all at a global level, writes Kundnani, European identity might well be inclusive for Europeans, but it excludes everyone else. It is this dynamic of inclusion and exclusion that embodies Eurowhiteness.

However, Kundnani’s proposition of a white ethnic nationalism as the basis for European identity has several conceptual flaws.

Epistemological Whiteness

Kundnani argues that modern Europe imagines its identity in racial terms, as white, by defining it in secular, rational, and civilizational terms as resulting from colonial contact with Africa, Asia, and the Americas. This whiteness, Kundnani continues, cemented itself through European colonialism in the Americas and the emergence of the Atlantic slave trade, which led to the identification of people of European origin in the New World as white.



Kundnani, however, takes only one of these modernities to symbolize European identity, and that is the modernity of Western Europe. This conflation, equating Western Europe with Europe as whole, has already been criticized in Ferenc Laczó’s review of Kundnani’s book.



But Kundnani ignores the fact that the idea of Europeanness – and whiteness for that matter – has been constructed through an Anglo-American lens. Interpretations of the whiteness-race dialectic disregard the fact that, while Anglo-American history constructs colonialism as a universal project defined by European settlement, the regions that experienced European colonialism were not all outside the European continent. While the New World was being settled by the first-tier empires of the British and the French, second-tier empires within Europe were colonizing Europe's own peripheral lands, which were neither fully Western nor fully Eastern. Thus, colonial differences were also produced within the Ottoman, Russian, and Habsburg empires. This is why some have argued that Europe produced multiple modernities and multiple Europes with different hierarchies. Kundnani, however, takes only one of these modernities to symbolize European identity, and that is the modernity of Western Europe. This conflation, equating Western Europe with Europe as whole, has already been criticized in Ferenc Laczó's review of Kundnani's book.

Moreover, there are close to 50 nations within the European continent, yet the countries that were actively involved in colonizing represent about 14 percent of the continent. Some European nations colonized the New World but not all did. The imperialist expansion in Africa and the Americas was conducted by seven states: Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. Colonialization of the Americas was conducted by five European nations: it was mainly Spain and Portugal that colonized South America and Mexico, and it was mainly England, France, and the Netherlands that were active in the Northern part of the American continent. The strengthening of the British Empire led to a preoccupation with populating the new American lands in order to establish them as strong commercial centers.

What differentiates the British settlements from the French and the Dutch is that the British Empire did not primarily use immigrants to settle the New World. Those populating the British colonies as a whole were for the most part enslaved Africans brought for work. More than 1.5 million slaves had been forced into the British American new colonies by the eighteenth century, a figure estimated to be three times higher than the number of free immigrants. It is this commodification of labour through slavery that created the whiteness-race dialectic, as argued by Bridget Anderson, where “whiteness ‘at home’ was inevitably related to blackness abroad”.

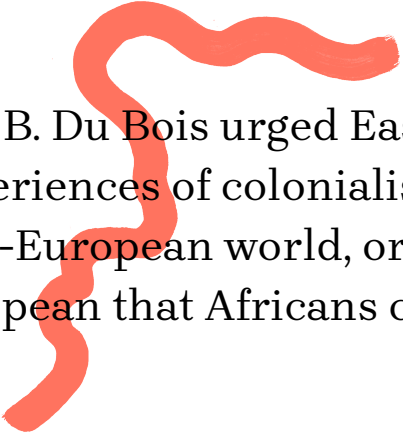
The synonymy of Europeanness and whiteness is an American invention. It is an invention which has assumed that whiteness is analogous with colonialism and race with subalternity, since the British were white and European and the slaves racialized, and has disregarded the fact that there were forms of colonialism elsewhere that unfolded *within* racial lines. Thus, the biggest difficulty in applying the idea of whiteness to the European context is its rootedness in Anglo-American history.

How European are Eastern Europeans?

The idea of a whiteness that is de-historicized and removed from its epistemological context presumes an inexistent European homogeneity. One is the view of Europe from the West, and one is the view of Europe from the East. Kundnani, however, has managed to write a book on European identity without engaging with the other half of the continent that complicates this identity. While he argues that the EU's enlargement towards the East has strengthened Eurowhiteness, it is unclear how that could be, in light of the fact that Eastern Europe is the major source of cheap labour in Western Europe, supplying fruit pickers in the UK, asparagus farm workers in

Germany, and live-in caregivers and domestic workers in Italy. These workers have a socio-economic position in Western Europe analogous to that of Mexican and Guatemalan workers in Canada and the US.

Moreover, Kundnani leaves out completely any discussion of the treatment of Eastern European workers in the UK. The UK imposed transitional restrictions on the free movement of citizens of Bulgaria and Romania for up to seven years after these states EU's accession in 2007, relegating Romanian and Bulgarian migrants to a liminal and conditional status and restricting them to self-employment and seasonal contracts in the food processing and agricultural fields – clearly an experience not shared by Western Europeans workers in the UK.



Consider too that W. E. B. Du Bois urged Eastern Europeans to connect their own experiences of colonialism with the historical experiences of the non-European world, or that Tito was described as the “only white European that Africans could trust.”

And while Kundnani states that Eastern Europe does not share the colonial history of Western Europe, that the Eastern European states underwent decolonization after the First World War but were recolonized by the Soviets, he does not discuss how this complication plays out into his argument. What makes the post-communist Europe part of Western modernity? Thirty years of market capitalism?

Lastly, Kundnani's claim that Eastern Europe has never shown interest in creating solidarities with the anti-imperialist Global South falls short as well. Just consider Tito's Non-Aligned Movement, or the

diplomatic connections forged by the communist governments with African states for a more equitable and less racist world as part of an anti-imperial internationalism. Consider too that W. E. B. Du Bois urged Eastern Europeans to connect their own experiences of colonialism with the historical experiences of the non-European world, or that Tito was described as the “only white European that Africans could trust.” While these relationships between the communist leaders and the heads of the African states might not have been equal in all respects, by no means were they of the same kind as the colonial relations that Western Europeans or the British forged through the African slave trade.

Brexit: It Was Europe's Fault

Perhaps the most extended part of Kundnani's argument is his proposition that Brexit was not a racist vote but a vote against a racist EU. In support of this, Kundnani cites Neema Begun's qualitative research conducted with a small sample of racialized minorities in Britain (around 20 participants) who seem to have voted to leave the EU because of Europe's racism and Islamophobia, its lack of protections for minority rights, and its poor treatment of refugees. How then can Kundnani explain Britain's hostile post-Brexit policies towards migrants and asylum-seekers? Consider the UK's €541 million deal with France to increase security in the English Channel in order to stop migrants from entering the country on small boats, or its plan to deport asylum-seekers to Rwanda. These are clearly not inclusionary measures that welcome people into the British nation or that show respect for minority rights.

Again, missing from Kundnani's explanation of Brexit are references to Eastern European migration. Brexit was in fact a vote against Romanian and Bulgarian migrants in the UK. These Eastern European

nationals had long been depicted in the British media as engaging in illegal activities and morally contaminating the country with their cultural values. They were seen as beggars, criminals, thieves, and squatters, were blamed for most crimes at ATMs, and were represented as disproportionately involved in the criminal justice system. Hate speech against Romanian and Bulgarian migrants is what led to the far-right UK Independence Party (UKIP) getting 4 million votes in the 2015 elections. Former UKIP leader Nigel Farage publicly said that Britain was experiencing a "Romanian crime wave," that London was facing a "Romanian crime epidemic," that Romanians will cause an explosion in organized crime, and that he would never want "to live next door to a Romanian." Let us also not forget former prime minister David Cameron's negotiations with the EU, prior to proposing the Brexit referendum, which were about limiting the number of EU entries into the UK and ending the right of Eastern Europeans workers to claim welfare benefits.

I understand the temptation to interpret Britain's desire to leave the EU as being based on some sort of moral ground. But the reality is that Brexit was primarily a xenophobic vote against those Europeans who were never part of the Eurowhiteness that Kundnani writes about.

The hate crimes that occurred immediately after the Brexit vote are further proof: an arson attack on a Romanian-owned shop in Norwich; a Romanian woman being pelted with rocks in Northern England; the murder of a Polish man in Harlow; a break-in at a Latvian home whose residents were called "fucking immigrants." In September 2016, *The Guardian* contacted all EU embassies in London and inquired about

the rates of racist and xenophobic incidents that they had recorded after the vote. Of the sixty incidents reported, all were perpetrated against Eastern Europeans.

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Kundnani's Own Eurocentrism

The EU at its start was made up mainly of the Western colonial nations, but it now also includes post-socialist and post-communist states. In typically Anglocentric fashion, Kundnani shows how these states are still nobodies at the European table.

Although he writes that the EU used to view the Soviet Union as Asiatic, he fails to analyze what this means for the post-communist countries that are now part of the EU. Attempts to homogenize these Eastern Bloc states on ethnocultural grounds and to incorporate them within "whiteness" obliterate the history of communist and socialist societies, which created different types of modernities (for a lack of a better term) that de-commodified people from the market logic, hence modernities at the opposite pole from those of the colonial market societies, which established themselves economically through the commodification of humans in the Atlantic slave trade.

I have yet to read a book titled "British Whiteness" or "American Whiteness" or "Anglo-American Whiteness." The fact that whiteness does not need to be named in conjunction with the sources that produced it reveals the concept's epistemological imperialism. *Of course* "whiteness" means the same thing everywhere, since surely

everyone on the globe thinks the same way the Anglo subject thinks and has the same understanding of the axes that produce differences the world!

Seeing Europe as the homogeneous epitome of colonialism, where every subject is a privileged subject due to an imagined appurtenance to an ethnocultural identity, further cements the belief in European superiority. The expectation that Kundnani places on Europe to turn its gaze inwards and interpret itself rationally, in the “correct” Anglo-American way, merely reveals Kundnani’s own Eurocentrism.



BIOGRAPHIES

Raluca Bejan is Assistant Professor of Social Work at Dalhousie University, in Halifax, Canada. Prior to this, she was an Assistant Professor of Critical Social Policy at St. Thomas University, in Fredericton, New Brunswick, from 2018-2020. She was a Visiting Academic at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS), University of Oxford, UK, in 2016 and 2018.

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