

[Global Histories]

A student journal

“They Might Feel Rather Swamped”: Understanding the Roots of Cultural Arguments in Anti-Immigration Rhetoric in 1950s–1980s Britain

Author: Chiara Ricci

Stable URL: <http://www.globalhistories.com/index.php/GHSJ/article/view/53>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2016.53>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Oct. 2016), pp. 33–49

ISSN: 2366-780X

Copyright © 2016 Chiara Ricci



License URL: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Publisher information:

‘Global Histories: A Student Journal’ is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. ‘Global Histories’ is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

Freie Universität Berlin
Global Histories: A Student Journal
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut
Koserstraße 20
14195 Berlin

Contact information:

For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.

“They Might Feel Rather Swamped”: The Changing in Anti-Immigration Rhetoric in 1950s–1980s Britain

CHIARA RICCI

Chiara Ricci grew up in Italy and graduated in Pisa with a B.A. with High Honors in Philosophy with a major in ethics and civic education. After studying Global Economic History in London School of Economics, she is presently completing her M.A. in Global History at the Free University in Berlin, Germany. She has previously received study grants from the Erasmus Program to study in Germany and London. Her research interests include 20th century European and international history, international migration history, history of science, and the history of environment.

Conflicts offer privileged windows to understand social changes. This paper compares national press accounts of 1958 and 1980-1 outbursts of racial violence in Britain to show the interplay between racist narratives and anti-immigration arguments. While in 1958 the persistence of a colonial mindset led to the representation of black immigration as a threat to the racial integrity of the nation, in 1980-1 culture and particularly religion later emerged as an additional complexity. The theme of “cultural swamping“, which dominated the public and political debate regarding the 1980-1 race riots, points to novel understandings of “Britishness”, relying on notions of shared history and culture. Concerns about the impossibility of assimilating migrant groups due to their cultural difference date back to the late 1960s – 1970s, when male migration from the ex-colonies virtually stopped and first and second generations of post-colonial migrants decided to stay, forming black communities that were depicted as an internal danger to the unity of the nation.

Contemporary migration to Britain started symbolically in 1948, with the arrival of 492 migrant workers from Jamaica on board of the *Empire Windrush*. Since 1948, when the British Nationality Act restored the imperial concept of shared citizenship, granting the right to enter and work to all citizens of the colonies and Commonwealth,¹ there have been periodic arrivals of larger groups of new migrants. In the 1940s and 1950s, these new populations came predominantly from the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent. Although some restrictions were put in place during 1960s, there were further arrivals during the 1970s, especially due to family reunifications. Since the early 1990s, international migration from a much wider range of states has occurred in London, accelerated by rising globalisation processes as is the case in many of world’s cosmopolitan cities.² Although

¹ Kenneth Lunn, “Great Britain,” in *The Encyclopedia of Migration and Minorities in Europe from the 17th Century to the Present*, ed. Klaus Bade et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 22.

² For a global history of migration to Britain, see Dirk Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact: World Migrations in the Second Millennium* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Kenneth Lunn, “Great Britain,” 16-26; Roger Ballard, “Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Migrants in Great Britain since 1947,” in *The Encyclopedia of Migration and Minorities in Europe from the*

it is not possible to ascribe all the history of race and racism in Britain to the supposed “legacy of the Empire”,³ post-war migration chains have opened a new era of race relations in the United Kingdom (UK), since they marked the beginning of a significant coloured settlement in an area of the world that was previously mostly white. Looking at two key moments of violence as privileged windows to understand the social change with regard to race and migration issues, this paper aims to analyse the interplay of anti-immigration and racial discourses in British press from 1958 to 1985. This analysis will shed light on the how culturally based forms of exclusion progressively became more prominent than racist arguments centred on the notion of colour, and how blackness became connected to culture.

By 1950 about twenty thousand West Indian migrants had arrived in the UK since the end of the war;⁴ the number of coloured labour migrants – tiny if compared with the much higher rates of East Europeans and especially of Irish non-restricted immigration⁵ - increased steeply around 1954 and reached about 200.000 by the 1960s, due to new arrivals from the West Indies first, followed by South Asian and Africans in later years.⁶ Most of them were attracted by the post-war rapid economic growth, which brought about significant labour shortages in industrial areas of the Midlands and in the textile industry in Yorkshire and Lancashire.⁷ Similarly to guest workers in Western Europe, the striking majority of ex-colonial subjects that reached the country from South Asia, East Africa and the West Indian territories filled mostly unskilled jobs that allowed in turn for scarce social mobility and relegated immigrants to living in the most degraded urban areas,⁸ thus creating the premises for potential social conflicts. In this context the 1958 race riots reinforced the arguments against coloured migrants from the Commonwealth and the colonies.

By looking at different perspectives on the immigration debate, taking place in August and September 1958 in *The Manchester Guardian*, *The Times*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*, this paper will first follow the racialisation of the discourse

17th Century to the Present, ed. Klaus Bade et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 483-87; Myriam Cherli, “Moroccan Labour Migrants in Western, Central and Northern Europe since 1960s. The Case of Great Britain,” in *The Encyclopedia of Migration and Minorities in Europe from the 17th Century to the Present*, ed. Klaus Bade et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 577-79; Klaus Bade, *Migration in Modern European History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003); Dirk Hoerder, “Migrations and Belonging,” in *A World Connecting 1870-1945*, ed. Emily Rosenberg (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2012); Colin Holmes, ed., vol. 1 and 2 of *Migration in European History* (Cheltenham: Elgar, 1996).

³ Kenneth Lunn, “Immigration and Reaction in Britain, 1880-1950: Rethinking the *Legacy of the Empire*,” in *Migration, Migration History, History: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*, ed. Jan and Leo Lucassen (Bern: Peter Lang, 1997), 335-37.

⁴ Neil MacMaster, *Racism in Europe 1870-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 177.

⁵ Holmes, “Hostile Images of Immigrants,” 334.

⁶ Leo Lucassen, *The Immigrant Threat. The Integration of Old and New Migrants in Western Europe since 1850* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 124-25;

⁷ Ballard, “Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Migrants in Great Britain,” 483-87.

⁸ Lunn, “Great Britain,” 23; Bade, *Migration in European History*, 217-75; Leo Lucassen, *The Immigrant Threat*. 135-36.

about immigration at the aftermath of Notting Hill riots. Newspapers depicted black immigration as a dangerous and unwholesome process due to the blackness of the immigrants. A range of different publications will be utilised to enter the historical debate. Important public affairs were mostly discussed in respectable newspapers such as *The Manchester Guardian* and *The Times*; while in this period the former was closer to the Labour Governments, the latter was closer to the Conservative Governments' opinions. On the other hand, sensational newspapers such as *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Express* reflected perspectives and interests of respectively the working and the conservative middle-class. Far from being less relevant than more elite publications like *The Times* and *The Manchester Guardian*, tabloids are helpful to understand the terms of the public debate, since as rightly noted by Martin Conboy, they have been prominent influential factors in the mediation of everyday life in the UK.⁹

The second section of the paper will focus on the period of 1960s – 1980s, by counterposing newspapers to the more emotional language and rhetorical style of prominent public figures of the Conservative landscape, as they most clearly show the rhetorical change of the anti-immigration debate in a cultural direction. Since the Conservative and the Labour discourse on migration differed significantly between 1960s and 1980s, and as immigration became a prominent topic in Conservatives' politics and newspapers, for that period this paper will focus on the Conservative press. By means of a discourse analysis, the newspapers accounts of the "race" riots in 1980s will make apparent the discursive shift from anti-immigration arguments, in which the notions of race and colour were central as it was the case in the press discourse in 1950s, to cultural arguments that, without replacing the racial ones, had slowly become more prominent.

"Keep Britain White": Claims of Racial Superiority in the Public Response to Notting Hill 1958 Race Riots

On the background of the contested liberal migration policy set by the 1948 British Nationality Act,¹⁰ the 1958 riots fueled the racist construction of the argument for the introduction of a more restrictive policy targeting immigration of black migrants. The analysis of the newspapers' discourse following the Notting Hill riots, which widely agreed on condemning black immigrants for the outbreaks of racist violence, despite their role as the victims of this violence, shows how anti-black racism was powerfully embedded in language and construction of group identities.

⁹ Martin Conboy, *Tabloid Britain: Constructing a Community through Language* (London: Routledge, 2006), 46-68.

¹⁰ For a description of demographic aspects of post-colonial migration to Britain in connection to 1948 British Nationality Act, see Lunn, "Great Britain," 23-25.

Events in the London borough of Notting Hill unfolded on 23 August 1958 and went on for about two weeks, preceded by a similar violent unrest in Nottingham.¹¹ Tensions in the area, where during the 1950s a great number of West Indians migrants ended up living in decrepit overcrowded tenements, rose on the night of 23 August, when a group of nine white youths allegedly embarked on a “nigger hunting expedition” armed with iron bars, blocks of wood and knives, as authorities were eventually able to reconstruct.¹² The area finally exploded a week later on 29 August, ignited by a minor dispute between a black man and his white wife. A white crowd soon materialised to defend the woman, who did not want to be defended.¹³ Later in the night, white mobs of several hundred people took to the streets carrying racist banners with the slogan “Keep Britain White”, assaulting West Indian inhabitants and besieging their homes and clubs.¹⁴ On 3 September *The Times* argued in a reportage from Notting Hill that there were three major allegations against coloured inhabitants of the district where riots unfolded:

They are alleged to do no work and to collect a rich sum from the Assistance Board. They are said to be able to find housing when white residents cannot. And they are alleged of any kind of misbehaviour, especially sexual. [...] Several men told to your Correspondent that their wives had been accosted by coloured men, and many told the story of a young white girl who is said to have been raped by one. Several houses in the troubled district are generally believed by local people to be brothels.¹⁵

Interestingly, *The Manchester Guardian* agreed with *The Times* on the interpretation of the Notting Hill events, which subtly suggested that West Indians were actually responsible for the disorders and thus partially absolved the white mobs for their violence. The fact that two newspapers that were generally politically opposed to one another gave the same interpretation of the facts shows the power of the general discourse against coloured migrants. A few days after the main outburst of violence in Notting Hill, *The Manchester Guardian* published a long article reporting on the state of the police enquiry about the Notting Hill events. While qualifying the aggression as “hooliganism”, the newspaper also reported about the allegations of West Indians taking housing over as follows:

[The officers from the welfare service admit] that there might be real grounds for resentment over housing, for there have been cases of coloured landlords attempt-

¹¹ MacMaster, *Racism in Europe*, 178-79.

¹² “55 Charged After Racial Disturbances”, *Times*, September 2, 1958, 7.

¹³ “Woman Shout a Warning”, *Daily Express*, September 1, 1958, 1.

¹⁴ “Keep Britain White Call in Notting Hill Area”, *Times*, September 10, 1958, 5; “Race Riot in London”, *Daily Express*, September 1, 1958, 1.

¹⁵ “London Racial Outburst Due To Many Factors”, *Times*, September 3, 1958, 7.

ing to evict white tenants [...] all with the purpose of driving the sitting [white] tenants out so that the West Indian may have enough room for his family and friends.¹⁶

Of those three allegations newspapers particularly stressed the anxieties about the exacerbation of housing problems, which had been growing all over the country for the previous few years.¹⁷

As *The Times's* reportage on "West Indians Settlers" bluntly put it as early as 1954: "...what are likely to be the feelings of more than 50,000 would be white tenants in Birmingham, who have waited years for a decent house, when they see newcomers, no matter what their colour, taking over whole streets of properties?"¹⁸ Due to scarce social mobility and the establishing of migration chains, settlers of the same ethnic group started to cluster in decaying suburbs in the poorest sections of London and other industrial cities,¹⁹ suburbs previously only inhabited by members of the white working class that reluctantly accepted to share tenancies with black tenants. Thus landlordism, declining property values, spiralling rents, overcrowding, dilapidation and decay were cited as the inevitable consequences of black settlement.²⁰ Black people not only created "slums", it was argued,²¹ but these "new Harlems"²² had their provenance in the racial character of the inhabitants, as the persisting reference to the colour of the migrants shows. As historian of racism Neil Macmaster points out, due to the persisting of a colonial mindset

¹⁶ "Hands of British Fascists Seen Behind Race Riots," *Manchester Guardian*, September 5, 1958, 5.

¹⁷ "The West Indian Settlers – First Signs of a British Colour Problem," *The Times*, November 8, 1954, 7: "Let it be admitted that, once the coloured immigrants are here, there is work waiting for them [...]" ; "Plan to Help Immigrants – No Employment Problem," *Times*, September 6, 1955, 4: "British local authorities are worried about the exacerbation of their local housing problems, for the West Indians naturally tend to concentrate in few areas. But employment is not a problem. The immigrants never fail to get the work they have come to find, even though men who consider themselves skilled sometimes have to be content with labouring jobs."

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Lunn, "Great Britain," 23; Ballard, "Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Migrants in Great Britain since 1947," 483-84.

²⁰ "The West Indian Settlers", 7.

²¹ "Slums in the Making," *Times*, November 8, 1954, 7: "Uncontrolled West Indian immigration places upon local authorities a burden that they have no means to carry. Civic leaders must stand helplessly by while they see what are virtually new slums in the process of creation. [...] Brixton becomes a sort of transit camp for immigrants for a few days after each ship has docked. Houses owned by coloured landlords or occupied by coloured tenants are filled up with immigrants [...]"

²² The term "Little Harlem" or "new Harlem" for designing areas inhabited by the West Indian migrants was commonly used, as a letter to the *Times* published on October 25, 1955 shows, while pointing that allegations of discrimination against black immigrants were false: "The publicity recently given to the departure of 250 West Indians returning to the Caribbean and to allegations that during their stay they suffered from a colour bar and confinement to cramped slums in coloured Little Harlem districts English cities draws attention to two matters of some importance."

that in many ways emphasised the superiority of the white man with regard to the colonised, white residents perceived the presence of black newcomers as a symbol of their own exclusion from society,²³ and experienced their presence as an invasion, as a taking over of “our women”, “our housing”, “our jobs.”²⁴ Newspapers echoed the political discourse that legitimated those popular racist claims. However, the riots contributed to the shift in the debate to even more openly racist tones. In the aftermath of the riots, *The Times* reported that Michael Webster, the Independent candidate in the 1959 general election, stated that a multi-racial society was a “biological sacrilege” and that since ‘Negroes’ were on a “lower evolutionary plane”, their presence was lowering the standard of the English people.²⁵ A month before, the Conservative Home Secretary Richard Butler had claimed that “[the] English have always been a particular human race.”²⁶ Although both Butler and Webster were speaking in the highly emotional context of the riots, these voices reveal the survival of a colonial mindset. In contrast with what is often held, that biological arguments of racial superiority disappeared from the political language about race relations after World War II together with eugenics as a colonial science, the Conservative arguments against black immigration reveal the persistence of a language still imbued with biological arguments at the turn of 1960s.²⁷

While blaming black labour migrants for problems that were very real, including scarce investments and poor housing, following the riots newspapers argued for more restrictive migration policies against West Indians. As soon as 3 September the *Daily Mirror*’s headline claimed “Black v. White. What we must do” and in a long editorial the newspaper drove a clear link between public order and black immigration control. Utilising emotional language, the editorial appealed to “every decent person” who was ashamed of outbreak of race rioting and violence, and envisaged a programme that was openly racist for the biological terms in which the discussion was set (“Black vs. Whites”) and for labelling black migrant workers as “evil” in connection with their blackness:

Every decent person in this country is ashamed of the outbreak of race rioting and hooliganism in British streets [...]. Commonwealth citizens – whatever the colour of their skin- must not be allowed to come to Britain unless they have a job AND home to come. Britain is the only Commonwealth country which allows immi-

²³ MacMaster, *Racism in Europe*, 178.

²⁴ “London Racial Outburst Due To Many Factors,” *Times*, September 3, 1958, 7.

²⁵ “Colour Bar As Election Issue,” *Times*, September 18, 1958, 3.

²⁶ “Butler Speaks on Race Riots,” *Daily Express*, September 17, 1958, 7.

²⁷ For eugenics as a colonial science used to argue a biological basis for the racial superiority of whiteness, and on its gradual abandonment as a scientific discipline after World War II, see MacMaster, *Racism in Europe*, 1-27; Richard Geulen, “The Common Grounds of Conflict: Racial Visions of the World Order, 1880-1940,” in *Competing Visions of the World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s-1930s*, ed. Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 69-96.

grants to pour in without restrictions. This policy has failed. It must be scrapped. Or the growing competition for housing and employment will spark off more trouble. [...] The coloured evil men must be sent back home.²⁸

That the very blackness of these migrants was the real issue is also supported by the fact that they were not the only large group of settlers in the UK, since European Jews and Irish-born citizens largely outnumbered West Indians throughout the 1940s and 1950s.²⁹ Yet West Indians were the only group to be stigmatised for exacerbating housing shortages in London³⁰, and the only group whose presence woke – as shown above – fears of racial contamination.³¹ British historian of migration Colin Holmes has noted that European Jews coming from Poland under the European Volunteer Workers scheme remained almost untouched by anti-immigrants sentiments in 1950s, even though they had been persecuted for centuries for racial and religious reasons.³² Macmaster argues that the new wave of moral condemnation in the aftermath of World War II led to the ban of anti-Jewish racism from the “respectable” political discourse, while leaving colonial-based racism almost untouched.³³ This helps to explain the evidence that West Indians became the target of xenophobic, anti-immigrant rhetoric in the newspapers, despite the fact that they were not the only large group of immigrants in Britain at that time.

As argued above, colour-based racist claims pervaded the debate around migration issues in 1950s Britain. Due to the persisting of a colonial mindset, blackness was far more prominent than other characteristics of the immigrants. The Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962 led to a virtual halt in primary immigration for labouring purposes, dramatically reducing the number of new arrivals.³⁴ However, The new legislation could not prevent family reunifications as this form of immigration was protected by international law. In this way the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act led to the opposite of the desired outcome, as its implementation accelerated family reunification and their permanent settlement in Britain, paving the way for new fears that added additional complexity to the

²⁸ “Black vs. White,” *Daily Mirror*, September 3, 1958, 1-2.

²⁹ Holmes, “Hostile Images of Immigrants,” 333.

³⁰ “Butler Speaks on Race Riots,” 7; “West Indian Settlers,” 7.

³¹ “Colour Bar As Election Issue,” *Times*, September 18, 1958, 3.

³² Holmes, “Hostile Images of Immigrants,” 333-34.

³³ MacMaster, *Racism in Europe*, 171-81.

³⁴ Lucassen, *Immigrant Threat*, 126: 1962. Lucassen argues that the Commonwealth Immigration Act introduced a system that, by giving access to those who already had a job or specific qualifications only, made it virtually impossible for people from the West Indies and South Asia to migrate, since due to wealth disparity and racism they were unable to get jobs in advance or gain the desirable qualifications. Whereas the short-term effect of the law was a sharp increase in immigration from those who wanted to escape the ban (from 5,000 entries from West Indies in 1959 to 15,000 in 1961), thereafter immigration continued only in the reduced form of family reunion. After 1970 immigration from West Indies and South Asia came to a virtual halt.

picture.³⁵ While in the 1950s the anti-immigration discourse targeted the first generation of black migrants coming primarily for labouring purposes, from the late 1960s onwards it mainly targeted those who decided to stay, and by settling down in “black enclaves” inside inner cities menaced the integrity of the nation from within, as the following section shows.

1960s – 1980s: Immigrants as Enemies Within

The language of the anti-immigration discourse shifted at the end of 1960s from “colour” to “culture” so that Caribbean, African and South Asian minorities³⁶ were now constructed as an “alien wedge”³⁷ endangering the cultural, moral, linguistic integrity of Britain – thus adding a further dimension to the “racial” superiority discourse. While “race” itself was no longer directly mentioned, concerns about the cultural and religious background of the immigrants became more prominent in the political and popular discourses about immigration and race-relations, and were instrumentally used to exclude non-white minorities from the national body.

1968 marked a milestone in history of race and racism in Britain, as former Conservative MP Enoch Powell pronounced his infamous speech remembered as “Rivers of Blood” in Birmingham, a city with an industrial area that was largely populated by “black and ethnic minorities,” as Jamaican, Indian and Pakistani communities were named by Birmingham local authorities.³⁸ Although Powell’s most racist claims for repatriation of black migrants met the unanimous rejection of Tories (as well as being rejected by the Labour and the moderate sectors of the public opinion) it is useful to look at his rhetoric closely, as Powell’s language of

³⁵ MacMaster, *Racism in Europe*, 181-83; Bade et al., *Encyclopedia of Migration*, 21-25.

³⁶ In the period under examination in this section (1960s - 1980s), the Conservative public press indifferently regarded all West Indians, South Asian and African minorities as “blacks.” It is worth noticing that the anti-immigrant discourse in 1950s mainly targeted West Indians instead. As a clear example of the 1980s Conservative discourse “blending” all groups of migrants together see Richard West, “The Man Who Ruined Jamaica”, *The Spectator*, August 21, 1981, 8. In this article about crime and disorder in Caribbean societies (imbued with racial stereotypes), the author explicitly mentions that the public discourse does not differentiate among ethnic groups (sarcastically speaking of the the Labour Party as of the “Race Relations Industry” as they promoted an anti-discrimination legislation that had been contested by some white citizens because it eroded their privileges, but taking distance from what he calls “the xenophobic right”): “The English public, in those days, took an interest in the special characteristics and problems of West Indian islands and mainland territories [...]. Nowadays all West Indians, including those of Indian or mixed race, are bundled together as ‘blacks’. Even Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis and Africans from Africa are lumped with West Indians under the label of ‘blacks’. This arrogant and insulting label for all people not European, conforms to the prejudice of the xenophobic right; still more to that of the left, and of the Race Relations industry.”

³⁷ Enoch Powell, Keynote presented at the General Meeting of the West Midlands Area Conservative Political Centre (Birmingham, April 20, 1968). Accessed on April 30, 2016. URL: <http://enochpowell.net/fr-79.html>.

³⁸ Bernhard Perchinig, “Race-Relations” Politik in Birmingham 1945-2000,” in *Zuwanderung und Segregation: Europäische Metropolen in Vergleich*, ed. Heinz Fassmann, Joseph Kohlbacher and Ursula Reeger (Klagenfurt: Drava, 2002), 87-88.

war and invasion entered into the political vocabulary of the Conservative party on migration issues. In his most famous intervention in Birmingham Powell classified black Commonwealth citizens as an “alien wedge” which threatened the notion of legality that had long informed British culture; in contrast to them he depicted the white majority as an oppressed minority:

This does not mean that the immigrant and his descendants should be elevated into a privileged or special class or that the citizen should be denied his right to discriminate in the management of his own affairs between one fellow-citizen and another [...]. The sense of being a persecuted minority which is growing among ordinary English people [...] is something that those without direct experience can hardly imagine.³⁹

Powell’s indignation refers to 1968 Race Relations Act. The Race Relations Act made it illegal to refuse housing, employment or public services to a person on the ground of colour, race, ethnic or national origins, thus addressing those situations of social disadvantage that had led to 1958 urban unrest. Nevertheless, it met the fierce opposition of those who, like Powell, were indignant that the new legislation attempted to erode their privilege over black immigrants in the search of jobs, homes and other goods.⁴⁰ Although stressing that the numbers of this alien wedge were important, for Powell the character and effects of the black settlement were the real core of the issue. In Powell’s opinion, while a few immigrants honestly tried to integrate into Britain society, it would have been a dangerous misconception to hope that the growing majority of them was willing to. In his speech Powell forecasts instead a future of black colonisation of Britain, as “the black man will hold the whip hand over the white man.”⁴¹ This is an important point for the analysis of Powell’s rhetoric, since not only in his Birmingham speech, but also in a keynote presented in November 1968 at London Rotary Club and in other interventions on immigration, the masculine black remains (either in the form of “wide-grinning piccaninnies” or “black men”), while the white is transformed into a vulnerable old lady, into a sick wife unable to obtain hospital beds,⁴² into

³⁹ Enoch Powell, Keynote presented at the General Meeting of the West Midlands Area Conservative Political Centre.

⁴⁰ Solomos, *Race and Racism in Contemporary Britain*, 68-82.

⁴¹ Enoch Powell, Keynote presented to London Rotary Club (London-Eastbourne, November 16, 1968). Accessed on April 30, 2016. URL: <http://enochpowell.net/fr-83.html>.

⁴² Powell, Keynote presented at the General Meeting of the West Midlands Area Conservative Political Centre: “They found themselves made strangers in their own country. They found their wives unable to obtain hospital beds in childbirth, their children unable to obtain school places, their homes and neighbourhoods changed beyond recognition [...]. Eight years ago in a respectable street in Wolverhampton a house was sold to a Negro. Now only one white (a woman old-age pensioner) lives there. This is her story. She lost her husband and both her sons in the war. So she turned her seventy-second house, her only asset, into a boarding house. She worked hard and did well, paid off her mortgage and began to put something by for her old age. Then the immigrants moved in. With growing fear, she saw one house after

the only white child in a class full of black children.⁴³ Notably, campaigners in the 1950s against black immigration had already talked about the settlement of black immigrants as a form of “colonisation” of Britain,⁴⁴ due to “uncontrolled” rates of black immigration.⁴⁵ However, here the black man does not only threaten Britain because of his very blackness, but also because he poses the threat of moral and urban decay: the old lady, as a personification of the white nation, was teased by the cry of “racialist” by the black immigrants, who also push excreta in her letter box.⁴⁶ Powell was outraged; he was “filled with foreboding.” Like the ancient Roman he saw “the River Tiber foaming with much blood”, forecasting a “race war like in the US.”⁴⁷

Notably the racism displayed here was concerned with mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion and no longer with racial contamination as it was still the case in 1950s. Moreover, it relied on a conception of national belonging and “homogeneity”, (some were “fellow citizens” while some were not) defined not only in biological terms (as he often referred to his audience as “whites”),⁴⁸ but also in cultural terms. National belonging or “Englishness” relied quite explicitly on notions of shared history, customs and kinship which excluded black minorities from the national and political body, as Powell remarked in his intervention at the Rotary Club in Eastbourne, London:

To suppose that the habits of the great mass of immigrants, living in their own communities, speaking their own languages and maintaining their native customs, will change appreciably in the next two or three decades is a supposition so grotesque that only those could make it who are determined not to admit what they know to be true or not to see what they fear. [...] The West Indian or Asian does not, by being born in England, become an Englishman. In law he becomes a United Kingdom citizen by birth; in fact he is a West Indian or an Asian still.⁴⁹

another taken over. The quiet street became a place of noise and confusion. Regretfully, her white tenants moved out.”

⁴³ “I told him of a constituent whose little daughter was now the only white child in her class at school.” Enoch Powell, speech presented at Walsall, February 9, 1968. Accessed on April 30, 2016. URL: <http://enochpowell.net/fr-80.html>.

⁴⁴ “The West Indian Settlers,” 7: “West Indians colonies have sprung up during the last two years in several parts of London, in Birmingham, Nottingham, Leeds, Sheffield.”

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*: “[in those streets that have become almost exclusively populated by West Indians] lies the core of the present social difficulties about uncontrolled West Indians immigration.”

⁴⁶ Powell, Keynote presented to London Rotary Club.

⁴⁷ Powell, Keynote presented at the General Meeting of the West Midlands Area Conservative Political Centre.

⁴⁸ The white vulnerable lady (Powell, Keynote presented at the General Meeting of the West Midlands Area Conservative Political Centre), the only white child in a class full of blacks (Enoch Powell, speech presented at Walsall).

⁴⁹ Powell, Keynote presented to London Rotary Club.

Powell’s greatest concern was that even the offspring of immigrants remained tied with their homeland overseas in terms of language, habits, and culture at large; the growing number of foreigners, due to their higher birth rates, had thus the power to erode English culture from within, transforming entire cities into “alien territories,”⁵⁰ contaminating the natives’ culture and way of life. Rather than evoking the common past of the Empire and Commonwealth, the differences between Britons and non-white Commonwealth citizens were stressed. The first effect of Powell’s rhetoric was thus to draw the frontiers of identity⁵¹ more tightly around the British Isles, since only those raised in a supposedly immutable English culture seemed to be part of the community he referred to as “English.” Culture became then connected to blackness, as the target of Powell’s anti-immigrant rhetoric was, once again, not European or white immigrants from the Commonwealth and Colonies, but rather West Indians, Asians and black Africans.

Powell continually emphasised from the late 1960s to 1980s that the social and cultural fabric of British society was likely to be undermined by the massive presence of individuals from a different cultural, racial and religious background.⁵² While his interventions were always and unanimously rejected as “racist”, the racial discourse he gave voice to gained new respectability through the Conservatives’ adoption of his language of war and invasion, which contributed to the further racialisation of the immigration debate in the 1970s and 1980s. In a much quoted television speech in February 1978 Margaret Thatcher linked herself to that discourse. Referring to trends in New Commonwealth (coded-term for “non-white”) and Pakistani immigration, she said:

That is an awful lot and I think it means that people are really afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture and, you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in.⁵³

⁵⁰ Powell, Keynote presented to London Rotary Club: “[If we do not stop it] The very growth in numbers [of the immigrant population] would increase the already striking fact of dense geographical concentration, so that the urban part of whole towns and cities in Yorkshire, the Midlands and the Home Counties would be preponderantly or exclusively Afro-Asian in population. There would be several Washingtons in England. From these whole areas the indigenous population, the people of England, who fondly imagine that this is their country and these are their home towns, would have been dislodged [...] I do not believe it is in human nature that a country, and a country such as ours, should passively watch the transformation of whole areas which lie at the heart of it into alien territory.”

⁵¹ For an analysis of how British as a people are constantly redefined through their interactions with different “frontiers of identity”, see Robin Cohen, *Frontiers of Identity: the British and the Others*. Warwick: Longman, 1994.

⁵² Solomos, *Race and Racism in Contemporary Britain*, 122-26.

⁵³ Gordon Burns, TV interview with Margaret Thatcher, broadcasted on *Granada World in Action* (January 27, 1978). Accessed on April 30, 2016. URL: <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103485>.

When Thatcher said that a minority could scare the majority once it became a big one, she denied that hostility towards black communities in the country was a form of racism and she gave voice to the old argument displayed since the 1958 debate about race riots: the argument that it is a natural thing that people prefer to live in a culturally homogeneous milieu, not to become a multi-racial society and not to see their neighbourhoods change character because of people with different habits. However, the most prominent theme here is not the concern with racial superiority, but with the threat posed by the immigrants to the cultural integrity of the host society. To the contemporaries, such a construction did not even have to rely on the notion of racial superiority in a narrow sense: to those who accused the Conservative party of racism, Thatcher answered that controlling the number of those who were coming in was necessary “for the sake of racial harmony.”⁵⁴ While connecting her rhetoric to the “ancient traditions” of respect and safety under the law, Thatcher also expressed her concerns for those mostly black urban areas, as Notting Hill was in 1950s and Brixton and the East End had become since 1970s-1980s, in which it was seen as impossible to enforce British law and culture.⁵⁵ However, beyond the immediate reference to the security debate, the main concern was the threat posed by a multicultural society to the British way of life. A more recent version of this argument can be found in a piece that appeared in 1985 in on the conservative weekly magazine *The Spectator*, in the aftermath of the 1985 major outbreaks of violence involving black youths:

There is no doubt that a majority of West Indians and Asians wish to be British. But not all. There are elements, like the Rastafarians, who are utterly antipathetic to British society and do not wish to be assimilated. Furthermore, Islam is alien not only to English but to Western Christian culture in such things as its treatment of women, while such matters as ritual slaughter cause grave offence to the English who, whether hypocritically or no, have a long tradition of concern for animals. Can, should, such things be tolerated, especially when the shadow of Islamic fundamentalism presents a real threat to English culture? [...] The refusal of so many immigrant groups to respect English culture and law, combined with the perverse, suicidal self-hatred of the modern English intelligentsia — which is so remote from popular feeling— makes me profoundly depressed about our future.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Margaret Thatcher, Speech to Conservative Party Conference at Brighton, (Brighton, 3 October 1978). Accessed on 2016, 25 June. URL: <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103764>.

⁵⁵ Thatcher, Speech to Conservative Party Conference at Brighton: “National uncertainty continues, and with it the continued weakening of one of our most ancient and deep-rooted traditions—respect for and safety under the law. When a rule of law breaks down, fear takes over. There is no security in the streets, families feel unsafe even in their own homes, children are at risk, criminals prosper, men of violence flourish, the nightmare world of “A Clockwork Orange” becomes a reality.”

⁵⁶ Gavin Stamp, “A Culture in Crisis,” *The Spectator*, October 11, 1985, 19-20.

Here the differences between white Britons and the religious and ethnic minorities present in the country are radicalised. The metaphysical notion of "English" or "Western Christian culture" no longer excludes on the basis of skin colour but more and more on the basis of a supposed immutable "cultural belonging." Religious or ethnic minorities were viewed as threatening the "English" society from within. This shift in focus – no longer on newcomers, but rather on minorities present in the country – reflects the fact that by the end of the 1970s young male migration from the Commonwealth had virtually stopped, but family reunifications had led to the formation of black communities settling down in the UK.⁵⁷ Since the beginning of the 1980s anti-immigration narratives, for example in *The Spectator*, centred on the theme of political and social alienation of black enclaves inside the inner cities, where British law and order could not be enforced:

For the police, that arch symbol of all he [the Rastafarian man] hates most, he reserves a special repugnance, and with increasing frequency they have become the targets for his bricks and bottles and, more recently, his petrol bombs. The social workers, the Christian church and the Commission for Racial Equality he regards with contempt. They come up with all the predictable answers: unemployment; bad housing; police harassment; lack of family life; inadequate education. Correct these conditions, they say, and the Rastafarians will take their place in the mainstream of British life; the problems which they now pose will melt away. The Dreads know better. They see themselves locked in perpetual conflict with white society; they don't want to join it. They regard the struggle as a straightforward biblical confrontation between good and evil. Their aversion to White is central to their religion; they cannot abandon it and remain Rastafarian. And if they are not Rastafarians they are nothing.⁵⁸

In the context of the quote above, the reference to the Rastafarians may be explained in the context of 1980-81 race riots, a violent outbreak that some regarded as a reaction of black youths to their exclusion from white society. Further, these riots have been linked to the emergence of transnational "black" movements such as Black Power or the Rastafarians, as the literature points out.⁵⁹ Thus according to a certain discourse it was the supposed pathological black culture of hate and crime⁶⁰ that reportedly led to the race riots in London metropolitan area of Tottenham (mostly populated by West Indians migrants and their descents) in August-

⁵⁷ Lunn, "Great Britain," 19-25.

⁵⁸ Micheal Humfrey, "A Time of Dread", *The Spectator*, July 31, 1981, 8. The Conservative public identified the Rastafarian culture with black culture at large: see West, "The Man Who Ruined Jamaica". Further, the author of "The Jamaican Problem," *The Spectator*, October 18, 1985, uses the term "Jamaican" and "West Indian" interchangeably.

⁵⁹ Lucassen, *Immigrant Threat*, 127-29.

⁶⁰ Humfrey, "A Time of Dread," 8.

October 1985.⁶¹ Crucially, however, in Gavin Stamp's article quoted above, Islam is first mentioned too, reflecting the fact that in 1980s the "shadow of Islamic fundamentalism"⁶² started to be perceived as a main political problem. The mention to Islam shows how the discursive shift that started in the late 1960s with Powell's speeches had come to maturity. In late 1980s the religious values of the immigrants appears to have become more prominent than concerns about blackness, and to be a key notion around which exclusion and fear were constructed.

The newspaper discourse regarding the 1980s "race" riots in England largely deployed the above mentioned themes of law and order, diffuse criminality among black youth and "cultural swamping". The 1980s riots were substantially different from 1958 events, when white mobs attacked black neighbourhoods: in 1980s riots were set off most frequently by an incident in which the police arrested a black youth or used violence considered unwarranted or excessive. In reaction black youths with some white peers attacked the police with stones, bricks, iron bars and petrol bombs;⁶³ street fights ended in hooliganism, arson, and shop pillaging followed by major police operations and hundreds of arrests. Events unfolded first in Bristol in April 1980, but received growing attention in the press when rioting spread to London and Liverpool one year later (in April and July), with major outbreaks in Birmingham.⁶⁴ Reactions to 1981 events across the national press showed great surprise and fear. Referring to the events in the Brixton borough in London on 13 April, *The Times* printed an article titled "Running Battles in Streets",⁶⁵ and continued reporting the events as the "worst public disorder seen in mainland Britain for years". The inner parts of the cities were described as being virtually taken over by black mobs.⁶⁶ The *Daily Express's* first page was similarly titled "Britain in Turmoil" when disturbances occurred again in July, stressing the national dimension of the disturbances.⁶⁷ Sociologists' earlier predictions from other countries, notably the US, about the possibility of riots in England had been arrogantly dismissed; up to 1981 British politicians and press assumed that riots in the US were the effect of racial inequalities that had not been seen in the UK.⁶⁸ Several forms of anti-racist activism, both at the popular level (the 1964-5 Campaign Against Racial Discrimination, and Rock Against Racism in the 1970s), as well as at the institutional level (the progressive radicalisation

⁶¹ "Merchants of Hate," *Daily Express*, October 10, 1985, 8; "The Bloody Battle of Tottenham. Policeman Murdered in Terror Riots," *Daily Express*, October 7, 1985, 1.

⁶² Gavin Stamp, "A Culture in Crisis," *The Spectator*, October 11, 1985, 20.

⁶³ Carole F. Willis, "The Police and Race Relations in England," *Police Studies* 8.4 (2005), 227.

⁶⁴ Lucassen, *Immigrant Threat*, 127-29; Solomos, *Race and Racism in Contemporary Britain*, 160-74.

⁶⁵ "Mr Whitelaw Expected To Announce Inquiry Into Brixton Riots Today," *Times*, April 13, 1981, 1.

⁶⁶ "There Must An Enquiry," *Times*, April 13, 1981, 13.

⁶⁷ "Britain in Turmoil," *Daily Express*, July 11, 1981, 1.

⁶⁸ Willis, "The Police and Race Relations in England," 227-28.

and engagement of the Race Relation Institute from 1973)⁶⁹ and the progressive implementation of anti-discrimination legal measures (1965 and 1968 Race Relation Acts)⁷⁰ informed race awareness throughout the 1960s and 1970s and significantly challenged old stereotypes and practices. Together with black youth militancy, all those forms of anti-discrimination activism and legislation helped to produce diverse and competing narratives about race relations that acknowledged the necessity to tackle economic and social inequalities to avoid similar disorders in the future. *The Times*, due to its closeness to the 1981 Conservative government, pointed to the need of a serious sociological enquiry about the causes of the rioting,⁷¹ and to the socio-economic rather than to the racial dimension of the disturbances.⁷² Yet economic inequalities persisted,⁷³ alongside to the ideological, systematic exclusion of black immigrants from the national body,⁷⁴ and to the *a priori* criminalisation of black youth,⁷⁵ that reached the dimension of a real “racial profiling” and led to fifteen times as many arrests among black populations as among white populations by the police.⁷⁶ In this context the *Daily Express* reportage on recent events in London borough of Brixton pointed to a link between criminal culture and blackness:

How many riots in how many cities? [...] How many weekends like the past one is the civilised country to suffer before the authority asserts itself? How much racial violence are we to put up with before the interests of the white majority are considered? [...] There was neither law nor order in the streets of Toxteth and Southall. Disorder is infectious. In recent years we have seen it spreading and becoming more virulent. There are some parts of our cities in which disorder is endemic.⁷⁷

In this article black youths are being clearly marginalised from white society, “the civilised country” that was being subjected to their racial violence. The jour-

⁶⁹ Solomos, *Race and Racism in Contemporary Britain*, 140-59.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 68-81.

⁷¹ See the *Times*’ editorial on 13 April 1981 at the aftermath of the first outbreak of violence in Brixton: “There Must Be an Enquiry,” *The Times*, April 13, 1981. An enquiry chaired by English judge George Scarman eventually took place; the report pointed to problems of racial disadvantage and inner city decline that created the dispositions toward violent protests (Solomos, *Race and Racism in Contemporary Britain*, 114-20).

⁷² See the in-depth analysis by modern historian Philip Waller about the outbreak of “racial” violence in Liverpool and London, pointing at depoliticising the racial dimension in its colour terms (it was not about a racial war of black citizens against white citizens) and calling for action against ongoing social and economic inequalities: Philip Waller, “Liverpool: Why the Clue to Violence Is Economic, Not Racial,” *The Times*, July 7, 1981, 12.

⁷³ Lucassen, *Immigrant Threat*, 139-43.

⁷⁴ Solomos, *Race and Racism in Contemporary Britain*, 122-39; Gilroy, “*There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*,” 43-71.

⁷⁵ Solomos, *Race and Racism in Contemporary Britain*, 99-120; Willis, “The Police and Race Relations in England,” 227-30.

⁷⁶ Lucassen, *Immigrant Threat*, 128.

⁷⁷ George Gail, “Just How Much More,” *Daily Express*, July 7, 1981, 1.

nalist, claiming to speak for the white majority (depicted here as an oppressed minority), makes an appeal to the authorities for re-establishing law and order in those parts of the cities now controlled by black youths. According to him black immigrants were leading cities to urban and moral decay, not because of their blackness, but rather because they were corrupting the way of life of the English people in those areas where they tended to settle in after migrating, so that now “the English people fears disorder, suffers from crime, is hurt by violence and asks protection from mobs and thugs”.⁷⁸ Similar narratives highlighted the externality of West Indians and Asians from the national body rather than the racist institutions and processes that still worked against black immigrants at several levels of society. These institutions made it impossible for immigrants to move out from ghettos to more central, but also more expensive parts of the cities. In fact, while condemning all “teenage black, yellow and white skinhead,” the journalist pointed out that “the liberal experiment of integration has failed and many are tempted into crime.”⁷⁹ Crucially, only pictures depicting black youths fighting white police accompanied Gail’s reportage from Brixton, reinforcing the link between blackness and criminal culture.⁸⁰ Due to the discursive shift from colour to culture, people started connecting blackness with black culture, and black culture to drug taking and violence.⁸¹ The Conservative newspapers’ discourse, by presenting riots as a planned, military action with an anti-white, anti-English function,⁸² appears thus connected to the discourse that had since the late 1960s depicted black communities as an enemy within. This enemy within was thought to be engaged in activities threatening the security of British society as well as its national unity, and relegated immigrants to an intermediate position between exclusion and inclusion in the polity.

Conclusions

Racist narratives played a major role in shaping the discourse about migration and national belonging in 1950s - 1980s Britain. Black immigration from the Commonwealth and Colonies was first portrayed as a threat to the racial integrity of the nation, yet culture and particularly religion later emerged as an additional complexity. The outbursts of racial violence at different points of time can offer windows through which we can observe the transformation of cultural perception

⁷⁸ Ibid., 1.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 2.

⁸⁰ Downing, John and Keith Butler, “Express Pictures Special”, *Daily Express*, July 7, 1981, 7-9.

⁸¹ West, “The Man Who Ruined Jamaica”: “Strangest of all, when English people talk of the ‘blacks’ or ‘black culture’, they unconsciously speak of Jamaican phenomena such as the Rastafarians, ‘Back to Africa’, reggae music, dope taking and violence.”

⁸² “Terrible Outrage,” *Daily Express*, August 10, 1985, 8 (editorial): “Handsworth, Brixton, and now Tottenham. There was nothing spontaneous about any of the riots. They were planned and there is evidence that Sunday’s was organised on military lines.”

of race and immigration, since the conflicts themselves are instrumental in gaining better understandings of social changes.

By means of a discourse analysis conducted on articles in the national press and the speeches of prominent public figures, the present discussion has shown that 1958 rioting contributed to the racialisation of anti-immigration narratives. The persisting of a colonial mindset led to the social construction of a black-immigration problem. Newspapers reflected the racialised construction of biological anti-immigration arguments, focusing on English racial superiority. All newspapers agreed on black immigrants stealing jobs, women and housing from the English, regardless of their political orientation. But newspapers also contributed to shape the immigration debate in racial terms. The *Daily Mirror's* editorial calling for immigration stop under the title "Black vs. White"⁸³ is a good example of the racist tone the immigration debate transversally assumed. However, the ways in which the national and racial discourse changed from the late 1960s up to the 1980s reveal an emphasis on the role of social and cultural transformation brought about by immigrants. The theme of "cultural swamping" in newspapers and political debates went hand in hand with the recourse to a notion of shared history and culture, commonly thought of as "Englishness". Although migrant-related tensions had manifested since the beginning of contemporary migration to Britain, from the end of the 1960s concerns about the impossibility of assimilating migrant groups due to their different culture became more prominent in comparison to the colour issue. Claims of superiority of one race over another did not disappear, but became more implicit, while the discourse more prominently focused on cultural difference as an internal threat to English culture, rather than using justifications based on biological arguments. Black culture and not blackness itself was thus used as a tool for discrimination against descendants of black migrants who settled in the country – as in the case of 1980s riots.

The present discussion is aimed at contributing to the understanding of race and migration issues from a historical perspective. Anxieties linked to the emergence of multi-cultural societies and fears of "cultural swamping" are not specific to post-war Britain, since similar tendencies can be observed in almost every Western society and are still happening in contemporary societies, as shown by the recent refugee crisis and the resurgence of extreme-right movements across Europe. By focusing on long-term tendencies, recurring images and themes, historians can shed light on the evolution of fears and anxieties that have contributed to the present debate regarding migration and asylum seeking worldwide.

⁸³ "Black vs. White", *Daily Mirror*, September 3, 1958, 1.