

Wrathful rememberers : harnessing the memory of World War II in letters of support to Powell

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In 1989, at age 77, Enoch Powell was interviewed on the radio show Desert Island Discs (BBC4). Many years after the furore of his Birmingham speech had ebbed, the conservative figure was asked how he wished to be remembered. After giving some trite answer he confided : “I should like to have been killed in the war” (Hirsch 2018, p. 104). As had been his wont, he delighted in projecting an image of self-sacrifice for his fellow-countrymen. More tellingly, Powell’s avowal at the dusk of his life is an umpteenth illustration that, to quote Paul Gilroy, there is indeed “something neurotic about Britain’s continued citation of the anti-Nazi war” (Gilroy 2002, p. 97). As an academic hailing from a country -France- where memories of the Second World War are mired in embarrassment and guilt, this dimension appears to me as all the more salient.

It is therefore no surprise that British constituents harnessed the memory of World War II (and sometimes World War I) as a moral and political vehicle to vocalize their support of the populist leader back in 1968. In about one fifth of the 1500 letters investigated for this research, an oft-repeated argument is that Britons, thanks to whose bravery Hitler and the Luftwaffe had been repelled, were now, in the late 1960s, unable, unwilling or forbidden to repel a new invasion in the form of large-scale New Commonwealth immigration. By and large, the present research complements, illustrates and specifies rather than actually contradicts prior analyses of the same sources, by Whipple, Schwarz and Schofield (Whipple 2009 ; Schwarz 2011 ; Schofield 2013).

These private confessions often bemoaning the loss or the wounding of dear ones in the war weave together a public narrative of anger seething with a sense of betrayal, injustice and revanchist nostalgia. It is often a malleable ‘common-sense’, “a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions” (Crehan 2016, p. 145) utilizing the war in ways which most often deracialize the racial through demographic, geographical and historical references. This apparently common-sense approach rested on the notion that, to put it bluntly, size matters

twice : the size of the immigrant influx was perceived as just too large and the size of the country was perceived as just too small. To quote one letter from Hounslow, “we are just a speck on the atlas” (G). Yet, and as was to be expected, some give free rein to deep-seated prejudices they feel would normally be dismissed as “racialist” in polite public debate. In the words of Bill Schwarz, “Letter-writing in this mode functioned as a bridge between public and private, giving what were perceived as essentially private worries a public form. Letters gave voice, as putatively private and personal media, to what otherwise was unspeakable in public” (Schwarz 2012, p. 37 ; see also Whipple 2009, p. 719).

One evident reason for the Second World War to have been a pivotal cognitive map is simply that the great bulk of the letters were sent by constituents old enough to have lived through one or frequently two wars. Just how pivotal this cognitive map is is made obvious by the fact that in some cases it is impossible to tell whether certain Powell supporters *did* actually fight in the war. As in Powell’s statement at age 77 quoted above, many letters are unclear on this point. One retired man from Golders Green (North London) writes : “After fighting two wars for our freedom against invasion must we now sit back and allow England to be taken over by coloured forces, and put up with a government that is encouraging them?” (C). Unsurprisingly too, this cognitive map of the war reaches beyond supporters of Powell. Less than 10% of the mail that the Wolverhampton M.P received was critical of his immigrant-baiting, and among these letters war reminiscences were frequently summoned, albeit in an opposite manner. For instance, a man from Nottingham states that “in 1939 this country went to war against a man who felt that a particular race should be eliminated from his country. I don’t believe you in your more rational moments would deny the right of British citizens, whatever their colour, to live in Britain” (H). Likewise, a Skipton (West Yorkshire) trade unionist complained that “the ignorant, prejudiced demonstrations inspired by your words, the baiting and scuffles outside the Commons and elsewhere, are reminiscent of incidents during the persecution of the Jews in Berlin in 1935-8” (H). All in all, the letters in support harness the same themes, the same memories, invoke the war as a powerful vector of self-legitimization, but in a wholly different way, construing Britishness as inclusive identities rather than as exclusive, colour-based boundaries, depending on whether the war memorial frames are configured as universalist or instead nationalist, cultural ones (Ritscherle 2005, p. 4-5).

As has already been posited in the “populism” section of the introduction, letters of support and Powell’s speeches made up a long-distance conversation of sorts, with letters being sent as offerings that the Tory leader could avidly quote in his next speech (Schofield 2009, p. 25-6). Numerous letters include references such as “do not bother replying, you must receive thousands of such letters” as well as “feel free to use to what I just told you”. In this sense, the contact that Powell was establishing with disgruntled constituents from across the country was an asymmetrical ritual of interaction wherein Powell’s messianic extraordinariness is in stark contrast with the assumed (or proclaimed) ordinariness of constituents.

A complex intersectionality informs many of these epistolary offerings to Powell : gender references abound (“I lost my husband in the war”) and are interspersed with racial ones (“we did not need coloured immigrants to defend ourselves in the war”), class ones (“it is us the ordinary folks who were expected to bear the burden of the war and now of this new invasion”) as well as cultural ones (“Germans were much less different from us than the Pakistanis”).¹ As for the social frames of memory which inform these documents, they are broadly of three types : individual, familial, national. The second one, in classically Halbwachsian fashion (Halbwachs 1992 [1925], p. 54-83), is absolutely central, and does confirm the sense of epistolary offerings since family history traditionally belongs to the private rather than the public realm.

After a brief study of the way Powell had instrumentalised the memory of the war in his rhetoric against immigration up to and including in his 1968 Birmingham speech, I will try and analyse the way memories of the Second World War promoted a discourse on displacement and disempowerment among those self-styled ordinary voters. Then emphasis will be laid on the sense of “great betrayal” that memories of the war generated among them. The focus will be placed on how among some of those constituents supportive of Powell, the immigrant presence was experienced as a symbolical re-enactment of the war, but in a manner

¹ These are not verbatim quotes from actual letters but ideal-typical summaries of letters studied that refer to the war(s).

which was different, if not contrary, to the war as “defining the nation’s finest hour” (Gilroy 2002, p. 95). Such deeply controversial reconfigurings of the war confirm, again after foundational work by Halbwachs, the processual nature of collective memory as a continually repeated reproduction of the past in present socio-cultural contexts. Lastly in this chapter, I will try to explore the extent to which the war and the pre-1939 period were mobilized in order to nurture a Welfare chauvinism common-sense.

I/ Memory-peddling, or Powell’s exploitation of the war

At least twice prior to the huge inflow of supporting mail did Powell invoke war memories in his effort to rally Britons against coloured immigration. The war was a key theme in his rhetoric, albeit not the central one. It was completely absent, for instance, from his Walsall speech delivered on February 9th 1968, as well as from his Eastbourne speech to the London Rotary Club on November 16th of the same year. The first of the two times Powell instrumentalised such memories was in his *Daily Telegraph* piece entitled “Facing Up to Britain’s Race Problem” (16. 02. 1967), 16 months prior to the Birmingham speech. In it, he depicts the situation of ordinary folks in Wolverhampton who cope astonishingly peacefully with what they see as an invasion of coloured immigrants. In it, he states : “Acts of an enemy, bombs from the sky, they could understand; but now, for reasons quite inexplicable, they might be driven from their homes and their property deprived of value by an invasion which the Government apparently approved and their fellow-citizens – elsewhere – viewed with complacency”.

The second time Powell used those memories was of course in the Birmingham speech itself. The harassed lady mentioned in it is described as having “lost her husband and her sons in the war. So she turned her seven-room house, her only asset, into a boarding house”. Importantly, in this laconic reference by Powell are interwoven some of the most recurrent themes of the letters sent immediately in the wake of the speech : the sense of being betrayed by the State that protects immigrants but does not help deserving Britons who have bravely defended the country, the sense of being displaced and outnumbered, the sense of having one home’s potentially invaded by unwanted Others soon to be protected by the law of the land.

II/ Displacement and disempowerment

Powell and Churchill : Numerous constituents hail Powell as the only mentally sane politician, thus echoing his Birmingham utterance, i. e. “we must be mad, literally mad...”. All other statesmen, according to these constituents, either turn a blind eye to what they regard as a national scourge or treacherously abet it in order to secure for themselves a political place in the sun. Implicit or explicit references to war, appeasement and invasion abound, and in them Powell is turned into a new Churchill, the one man able to address (or at least echo) these constituents’ sense of displacement and disempowerment.

For instance, Powell is regarded as a lone voice telling truth to power : “Like Churchill in the 1930s, you will just have to go pegging away against the stream” (G), writes a man from Cheshire. Another man also from Cheshire states : “Remember Winston Churchill, who was a ‘lone voice crying in the wilderness’ for so long –I have no doubt that eventually you will be proved right, as he was” (A). Powell is time and again presented as a political reincarnation of the hero of the war, be it in terms of bravery and love of country (“like Churchill in the pre-1939 era, you stand alone [...] as the one politician with sufficient courage and patriotism”, G), visionary power (“we might one day need Powell just as much as the country needed Mr Churchill’s far-seeing powers”, G), oratory skills (“this is the speech we have all been waiting for [...] it is the best since Winston Churchill’s on the ‘Battle of Britain’ ”, G), or almost God-ordered mission to save Britain (“Churchill once saved this country, may I suggest that you could well do the same”, G). Like other political prophets, Powell’s voice will probably go unheeded, a pessimistic scenario well in tune with populist critiques of the elites’ out-of-touchness. A constituent from Cornwall regrets that a “warning like this has been long overdue, but I am afraid it will be disregarded, as Winston Churchill was when he spoke of the Nazi menace” (B). The ghost of Churchill is so often summoned that sometimes the name “Churchill” itself needn’t be mentioned. “I can remember one or two voices crying in the wilderness in 1933-4-5 about the German menace. They were denounced as war-mongers as you are now being denounced as inciting racial warfare. Events proved them right as they will surely prove you right if we do not act urgently now” (G), writes a

man from Surrey. Another man from Torquay (Devon) states that “This is a time when a *man* makes his mark in history by forgetting politics and politicians –a time when, as at Dunkirk, only the truth rings true” (B).

The Powell-Churchill parallel was given credence by glossing over -or being unaware of- the self-evident fact that the so-called “dark million” lived in a country with a population approximating 55 million in the late 1960s. This did not register, though, either with the working- and middle-classes living in multiracial neighbourhoods of Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds or with Cornwall, Surrey and Devon folks who lived many miles away from any coloured immigrant clustering but felt, nevertheless, that the imagined community of Britain was threatened by the alien presence. Therefore, and this point bears repeating, the “invasion common-sense” was like Gospel truth to these supporters. One woman from Coventry wrote that “we are obviously becoming a large ‘resistance’ movement in ‘our’ own country” (G). A retired man from London bitterly quipped : “together with millions of Britishers in 1939 I was fighting to prevent England being invaded –but what the hell do they call this now, tourism ?” (B).

Stealth : The theme of invasion is all-pervading, in letters which frequently point out the insidiousness of the perceived menace as opposed to the evidence of the Nazi aggression embodied by the deafening sound of bombings. In this respect these perceptions are evocative of well-oiled anti-Semitic or anti-Catholic discourses, with themes such as “peaceful penetration”, “domination by stealth”, etc. (Kushner, 1989 ; Gallagher 1987, p. 138-9). One woman, an old-age pensioner from London, regrets that “the ‘socialists’ have allowed this country to be invaded, a thing we fought the Germans twice, to keep out the enemy” but “now they are infiltrated” (A). A man from Dagenham (Essex) writes : “After all if we were at war we would repel any invaders, but because we are at peace we are prepared to let peaceful invaders enter” (C). Another Londoner draws an analogy with the fall of Rome. Like Rome Britain is “being colonized by her colonies” according to him : “It is heart-breaking to see the country we fought for, being handed over to an unarmed one”. Such comments are often interspersed with scathing accusations of felony in high places as well as with narratives of decadence and national suicide. A woman from Farnham (Surrey) admits to being “saddened at the prospect of our country, which has survived two devastating wars, being dominated by

an alien race and culture within a few generations. This is inevitable as they reproduce at a fantastic rate” (B). Another man from Surrey (New Malden) writes that “after all, we fought two wars to prevent being over-run by other nationals, and, as you say, it is national suicide to allow this invasion to continue” (C).

A cultural menace : Whether retired or not, numerous constituents were aware that many of their fellow-country people would balk at filling the gaps in the job market that were filled by immigrants. This is why the cultural and civilisational menace allegedly embodied by immigrants is a recurrent theme whilst the threat for British jobs is much more rarely described. That perception is in sync with much more recent research on far-right discourses and perceptions, for instance within U.K.I.P (Goodwin & Milazzo 2015, p. 308-9). A woman from Waltham Forest bitterly notes that “My first husband was killed in the last war fighting for freedom against invasion of the Germans but now we are up against a bigger invasion –the coloured population which is overflowing our shores and changing our ways of life” (D). A man from Cricklewood (North-West London) believes that “many of us fought during the war in various parts of the world to preserve our country and our way of life !” (E). One apparently uneducated, retired woman from East Ham, expresses ethnocentrism most bluntly, taking pride in the fact that Britons “believe in one God, not like the Puckistan [sic.]” (C).

The following are among the strongly prejudiced or overtly racist statements, which were here expressed unabashedly to Powell :

“British boys died fighting to make England a land fit for filthy niggers to defile and pollute” (Man, London) (C)

“It may be interesting to know that one of the reasons that Hitler hated the Jews was because he accused them of allowing coloured people into Germany to bastardize the race ; and they way things are going here, that is exactly what is happening. I think it is criminal” (Man, Cardiff) (A).

“Hitler solved his racial problems with greater economy and efficiency” (Woman, Croydon) (G).

White Exile : The displacement and disempowerment motif finds a logical outcome in what is believed to be large-scale emigration to predominantly-white parts of the former Empire, i. e. Canada, but mostly Australia and New Zealand. The sense of displacement is expressed in the choice word itself, for “expatriation” or “expat(triate)” are never used in letters, only “emigration”, “emigrant”, “immigrant”. “Expat(triate)” being used for white immigrants from powerful countries and “immigrants” for often less white folks from less rich countries (Koutonin 2015), this word choice illuminates a perceived racial inversion whereby the “black man” indeed does seem to have the whip-hand over the “white man”. It also echoes this disgruntled constituent’s confession to Powell in the Birmingham speech : “If I had the money to go, I wouldn’t stay in this country”. One grandfather from Camden says “it is dreadful to think that having fought two wars in my lifetime to preserve our way of life, to see it handed over to an alien race”, and that he is personally acquainted with 4 families who are leaving to go to Australia (B). A Labour party stalwart from Portsmouth says that his whole family served in the army through several wars, “but, I also say to any youngster, leave this country, with God as my witness” (B). Absence of individual or familial agency is perceived in two complementary ways : constituents do not choose to stay in their neighbourhoods, they have to and feel trapped in them, and if they leave the country they do not choose to either : this immigration is no expatriation indeed but rather a form of exile in its classically tragic sense. The perceived emigration process exposes as empty lies slogans such as “from the cradle to the grave” as a foundational motto to the British Welfare State or “most of our people have never had it so good” in Macmillan’s speech about post-war prosperity (Bedford, 1957).

III/ Turning in their graves

The sense of having been betrayed by the Wilsonian elite that introduced the Race Relations Bill at Parliament pervades the letters to an astonishing degree. The more solid the war credentials are considered to be, the more seething the indignation against elites appears. Quite often, these credentials are presented as so many badges of merit at the very beginning of letters. They are individual ones or embrace whole families, which in turn only aggravates the sense of betrayal, especially if relatives died in the war. Examples of such legitimizations of moral credibility abound. They are sometimes couched in nationalistic terms, such as here

with this man from Derby : “At just turned eighteen years of age I was awarded the Mons Medal for what I naturally thought was defending my homeland against the foreigner” (C) or this other man from Stoke-on-Trent: “I joined the forces not to save the Poles, the Jews, the Czecks or any other race, but to help in saving my country and my family, and then I stayed in the army for 19 years always glad to give my best endeavours to the land I love most of all” (B). This woman from Stockport also vindicates the massive war sacrifice for national, rather than universalist, ends : “Our loved ones didn’t die in two wars to make England free for coloured people –they died for us, it’s enough to make them turn in their graves !” (D). Such nativist readings of the war one generation after the armistice are at loggerheads with the way, during the conflict, British racial tolerance was advertised at home and abroad as the universalist antithesis of Nazi Germany (Rose 2003, p. 245-259).

In many cases exposure of the Race Relations Bill is never far from such self-presentations, as in this constituent from Essex : “I spent a long time with the R.A.F. during the war, under the impresion [sic] that I was fighting for freedom. Who’s [sic] freedom ? I fail to see any left in this dead country of mine when I am told who I must not refuse to sell my own house to” (C). Narratives of personal sacrifice to the nation frequently include stories of years of hard work, as with this retired man from Wrexham (North Wales) : “I started work down the coal-mine at the age of 14, continued at that class of work until the age of 65, to receive O.A.P with the exception of my service in the Royal Navy in the 1914 war” (B). Likewise, individual merit may extend to some who are not British : “I speak as an Irishman who served eighteen years with the British army, including the six years of the last war and my father before me served for twenty two years” (E). As is the case here and in so many other cases, merit and moral credibility are almost construed as quantifiable givens which are accumulated within a family unit, and are only exacerbated by the number of dead dear ones during the war : “On the day that Chamberlain declared war I was up at the recruiting offices of the R.A.F within two hours. I feel therefore, that I, my two brothers (and in other wars going back as far as the Boer War) the male members of my family have done their share only to be told virtually by Callaghan and Co. ‘you must be prepared to take second place to ‘British Citizens’ ” (D). Or, in more laconic terms, “My brother like millions of others gave his life to this country, God only knows what he could think today” (G).

According to these constituents, this great betrayal can only have occurred because the large bulk of Britons are thoroughly naive or “literally mad” (to quote Powell), because the elites are treacherous and / or “literally mad” too, and because the immigrants are hell-bent on exploiting the generosity of British welfare. In many cases frustration and indignation against this perceived unfairness to whites are expressed in terms of abuse, against the elites and / or against immigrants. One man from Worthing (West Sussex) laments: “To think that I spent 4 years in France so that super educated subintelligent nit-wits could live safely to tell me years later with whom I am to live and how!” (G) and another man from Worcestershire (who lived in Birmingham for 50 years) writes : “25 years ago many of us were fighting to ensure the freedom of our country for our heirs, but the forthcoming Bill will reduce us to nothing more than puppets to be operated by the ever-increasing number of ‘smart Alec’ immigrants encouraged by and protected by the proposed Act” (G). A woman from Essex declares : “How unjust it is to expect we English, after giving our substance in war, to save our beloved country, should *now* be expected (or rather *forced*) to bow the knee in all things to a host of scroungers” (C).

In numerous epistolary testimonies, the individual is interspersed with the familial and the national, where, typically, “English” is confused with “British”. Some eloquent illustrations of this interconnection include references to war cemeteries or memorials, wherein private mourning is solemnly reflected upon public sites of memory which, in these people’s perceptions, are symbolically defiled both by Wilson “and some of his cronies” (B), as well as by the coloured immigrants who have been let in by the “weak politicians who have not got the guts to back up our sacrifice” (B). One man from Gloucester writes: “Every time I pass a war memorial in a village or town I think that the men whose names are inscribed fought and died to protect something which is now being given away by a minority” (G). Another man, from Liverpool, described his cycling in the Yorkshire countryside and his being moved by forests of soldier crosses in war cemeteries : “My heart seemed to swell with pain at the thought of those sleeping dead and the sorrows of their womenfolk. They were ploughmen and other simple craftsmen. They had died that I might live. This should be a land with room for the sons of those heroes to live” (G). It therefore comes as no surprise that to many of those constituents supportive of Powell, the influx of coloured immigrants brought about a symbolical re-enactment of the war challenging hitherto shared memories of a glorious “People’s war” (Schofield 2009, p. 210).

IV/ What “finest hour” ?

In what was a largely shared feeling, a woman from Cambridge argued that “all the losses in the two world wars were in vain” (G). Another man, from Hainault (Essex), more bluntly claims that “When I was in the war one of the things I fought for was the right [sic] to tell a bloke I did not like him, and to be able to sell my house to who I liked” (A). An elderly lady from Northampton, whose husband was mutilated in the war, avows that “it makes one feel –what an appalling waste- we won the war but not the peace” (A). Another commonly shared perception was that it may have been preferable for the Germans to have won the war, either because German civilization is white, Christian, European, or because the 1945 victory was doubly pyrrhic : the human cost was frightening and in these Powell supporters’ eyes the military victory only paved the way for large-scale immigration. Below is a compilation of such declarations :

How many of our young lads would have gone off to fight so bravely if they could have foreseen the future? Very, very few I imagine (G).

As a police officer at Notting Hill in London during the war, the raids and the bombs, I shuddered at the prospects of being invaded by the Germans. Now, on second thoughts, I am not so sure. I think it would have been better for us to have been invaded by the Germans ! (G).

“We would have been better off if we had accepted Germany instead of throwing our youth away to reject them. My family has been decimated over the centuries and the last two world wars, fighting to keep separate and independent and for ‘King & Country’ uselessly if the Race Bill and the Immigration Act is successful without going to a plebiscite of Income Tax paying voters” (D).

“I would rather have surrendered to the Germans than lose my freedom to the immigrants” (F).

“I would rather have as neighbours some of the Germans who I fought against than almost any of those coloureds!” (F).

“I would go as far as to say that the people of this country would have been given far more consideration under German rulers. I often wonder who won the last great war, when I think about the state of this country today” (A).

“I feel I would prefer to have lost the last war now than be faced with the future which intellectual do-gooders have in store for us” (D).

From what is perceived as an unquestionable given -the New Commonwealth influx as an invasion and the Race Relations Bill as a reverse type of discrimination, which taken together signal a demographic and political take-over of the non-whites-, various conclusions are ventured which are always presented as highly subjective and personal judgments, hence the recurrence of the first person (‘I think’, ‘I would rather’, etc.). The tentativeness of such apparently common-sense perorations (‘I am not so sure’, ‘I feel’, ‘I often wonder’) is mostly owing to the fact that Nazis are not any more presented as the real historical enemy of the country, even by those who had relatives killed by the Germans. This tentativeness is also explained by the way self-styled patriots are here compelled to question traditional frames of reference in British / English national sentiment, through what can only be described as a nativist and populist form of revisionism challenging the nation’s “finest hour”. There is something profoundly disturbing and ironic in the fact that these respectable, ordinary constituents should, in their private confessions to Powell, express views which, in the decades that follow, would be associated with the National Front, the British Movement, Blood & Honour and Combat 18 (Pollard, Feldman 2016, p. 330).

That perception is also profoundly tragic : these constituents, believing that immigrants have stolen the land (the invasion common-sense), the laws and British freedom (as epitomized by the Race Relations Bill), are led to believe that immigrants have symbolically deprived them of the most glorious episode in their recent history. In some way too, these people also feel that they have even been stolen their nostalgia of pre-multiracial Britain. Left with nothing to be proud of as Britons, these constituents are also forced into a national realization of symbolical emasculation : as a woman from Reading puts it, “This is the first time in British history that British people have behaved like jelly and *allowed* an invasion to take place” (B) which itself is a tragic sign of national decline, another theme which runs through the letters (Whipple 2009, p. 720). This stultification of virility among a people with erstwhile Churchillian qualities of bravery complements Powell’s exposure of the “literally mad” character of the British, who as a nation are compelled to come to terms with their debility in body and brain.

Such gutlessness, also actively fuelled in those folks' perception by the undeserved entitlements of the British Welfare State, starkly contrasts with the State's bureaucratic force in carrying out its anti-discrimination schemes, through descriptions that also borrow extensively from war imagery. One woman from Bristol refers to the poison of the 1968 legislation, before warning : "We have to be careful, of course, or the Race Gestapo will get us" (G). Another woman, from South London, vilifies what she sees as the "Gestapo methods" of Mr Callaghan in carrying out his asinine anti-discrimination schemes. These are only inflated versions of the far-right critique of the "race-relations industry", which had already become routine in the late 1960s (Esteves 2018, p. 123). They also illuminate the deep suspicion of public agents and of "The State" among those constituents, much of whose adulthood had been spent before the emergence of the post-1945 Welfare State.

V/ Welfare chauvinism

Although it has been challenged by some scholars (Banting & Kymlicka 2006), there is a widely-shared, uncontroversial sense that public trust in Welfare redistribution tends to rest on a broad assumption of likeness : the stronger the sense of imagined community within a nation, the more likely taxpayers will be to acquiesce to tax schemes funding schools, hospitals, unemployment benefits, etc. After all, the great state-builders at the root of welfare provision (T. H. Marshall, William Beveridge, Gunnar Myrdal in Sweden) hardly believed otherwise (Wolfe & Klausen 1997, p. 240). It therefore should come as no surprise that Welfare chauvinism was a powerful driver of epistolary support to Enoch Powell.

Hardly substantiated as historical facts because the overwhelming majority of immigrants were in Britain to work, Welfare chauvinist perceptions, like others, were internalized as unquestionable givens when Powellites put pen to paper in the Spring of 1968.² These were often vocalized in blunt terms, such as here with this man from Havering (East London) : "As an ex-serviceman from the last war I object to providing from my taxes a

² I personally agree with sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad's analysis of immigration and work as being intrinsically inseparable (Sayad 2004).

utopia for these people” (G). “These people” as alleged Welfare recipients are often singled out for their absolute Otherness. For instance, one woman from Winchester inveighed against Pakistanis who were “invited” to Britain in order “to do things we feel are wrong –such as having several wives – and even utterly beastly things, such as the cruel ritual killing of food-animals”. According to her, these foreigners were “not merely stealing our birthright, and that of our children, but being handed it on a plate!” (D). Here again, the theme of elite betrayal is woven into gritty expressions of Welfare chauvinism, as is also the case in the following question : “Was it all a land fit for heroes to live in and their descendants, or to make it a Black paradise?” (G). Very often, it is assumed that what drew immigrants to Britain in the first place was not the prospect of jobs, which is quite rarely mentioned, but rather the possibility to sponge off Welfare help. Again, such deprecatory gossips, which were circulating even in white-only villages of Surrey, Devon, Somerset were raised into undeniable givens with the force of truth. The main reason why this is so is because stereotypes thoroughly identifying racialized Others with “idleness” have been so deeply-rooted. These may be fuelled from contemporary media narratives about the (Black) “Underclass” in the U.S., Britain and South Africa (Goldberg 2009, p. 238) or from more historical stereotypes harking back to colonial times themselves. As McClintock puts it, “Of all the stigmata of degeneration invented by the settlers to mark themselves from the Africans, the most tirelessly invoked was idleness” (McClintock 2009, p. 364).

The war itself is sometimes summoned into the nativist rants dismissing immigrants as a bunch of undeserving scroungers. Rather than wonder about the contribution to the Welfare State made by New Commonwealth immigrants (Simpson 2018), some constituents expel these further away from mental constructions of the deserving imagined community by denying their very role in the war effort itself. One woman claims : “We managed during the war years in hospitals and factories without coloured people” (G), which perfectly fits with totalizing narratives around the Second World War that, aided during and after the conflict by media representations, efficiently produced a consensual, cohesive memory of the war that excluded all more or less marginal groups from representations of the war (Calder 1991, p. 658-689). Whitewashed memories of Dunkirk, the Blitz and the Battle of England expelled non-white colonial soldiers from the imagined community of Britain at its celebrated “finest hour”, thereby denying post-1945 immigrants of any legitimacy to Welfare help, that is, supposing these immigrants did claim some of these benefits at all. The necessity to obliterate

colonial contributions to the war effort allowed these Powellites to deprive these immigrants of their British citizenship by ignoring their very highest duty as citizens : that of being ready to sacrifice their lives and to kill unknown others for the so-called “Mother country” (Yuval-Davis 2006, p. 208). It is important to underline the sheer strategic and symbolical power of that amnesia.

Welfare chauvinism is boosted in some of the letters not only by the above-mentioned cultural otherness of immigrants, by racially myopic visions of ‘White Dunkirk’, but also by personal recollections of having endured tough times when the Welfare State itself was inchoate. This too is a form of revanchist nostalgia, taking the broad form of “why would they be helped whereas I was never helped once ?”. One woman from Hounslow (West London) argues : “In the last 2 world wars, we were supposed to be fighting for a better world !!! Some hoped ! I sometimes think we could achieve a lot if only the so-called welfare state, family allowances, social security etc... were all abolished, and people paid their own insurances against these things” (G). An ex-service man living in Kent feels he is watching his “country being turned into a human cesspit”, and says he never claimed any benefit in his life before adding : “My generation has lived through two world wars, brought up our families during the depression on starvation wages, and are now being pauperized in our old age to give aid to every denigrator of Britain and finance their crazy schemes”. Such feelings cohere with contemporary fieldwork, particularly Jeremy Seabrook’s 1969 exploration of White Backlash in Blackburn (Seabrook 1971). It also chimes with analogous narratives in the United States, where race and generation boundaries coalesce into countless individual and family stories of “pulling oneself by the bootstraps” that descendants of Irish, Italians, Poles and Slavs hurl at African-Americans dismissed as undeserving freeloaders (Katznelson 2005 ; Jacobson 2008, p. 177-205). In some letters to Powell, such rhetoric goes beyond Welfare chauvinism, to question the very existence of Welfare help itself, one effect of which is, it is claimed, to produce a nation of gutless whiners. In this sense then the introduction of Welfare schemes is construed as a major facet of British national decline, yet another controversial perception.

Conclusion : emotions in distasteful movements

As has been made evident in these pages, epistolary illustrations of White Backlash and their connection to the war are systematically interspersed with strong, sometimes contrasted emotions of anger against perceived injustice, of fear, of shame. These, following what might be termed the rehabilitation of the ‘emotional’ in the analysis of social movements (Pilkington 2016, p. 178), need to be studied sociologically, not just as autonomous psychological phenomena (Jasper, Goodwin, Polletta 2001, p. 47). One of the stumbling blocks here is that, as Jasper, Goodwin and Polletta put it : “It is hard to identify emotions from brief newspaper accounts of protest events. Historical research precludes the participant observation that may be the best means for identifying the emotions of protest” (*Ibid.*, p. 5). If the many thousands of epistolary offerings to Powell allow for longer unburdening of emotions than mere letters to the editor, it does remain that White Backlash ethnographies by Gest, Lamont, Ezekiel, etc. are in themselves better suited to the analysis of the role of emotions in social movement and contentious politics than archival material which, however abundant, has been stacked in dusty boxes for decades.

These structural differences notwithstanding, the study of emotions in “distateful movements” faces some common hurdles, one of which needs detain us here. “Distateful” is understood as meaning “individuals and groups with whom the researcher shares neither political orientation nor way of life and whose politics and / or way of life are found objectionable” (Esseveld & Eyerman 1992, p. 217). In her seminal ethnography on the English Defence League, Pilkington refers to the way research into the lived realities of far-right activists is often explicitly or implicitly discouraged in academia. Against the deterring effects of what she calls a scholarly “*cordon sanitaire*”, she states that “uncomfortable views, and those who express them, have to be treated seriously, academically and politically, rather than dismissed, caricatured or ridiculed [...]. Some will consider this too high a price to pay” (Pilkington 2016, p. 1). The contagion by stigma for those carrying out research into the categories of voters who hold views and ideologies repugnant to most academics also means that some of the researchers into far-right or nativist movements have often combined such research with studies of stigmatised ethnic minorities and immigrants, as though they deemed this necessary in order to pre-empt any accusation of “racism”. This has been the case in the academic trajectories of Gest, Ezekiel, Pilkington for instance.

Although letters of support to Powell were sent half a century ago, the political afterlives of Powellism, the effects of which were daunting in the run-up to the Brexit vote, mean that research into the way Powell supporters voice their loathing of anti-discrimination legislations, their fear of immigrant influxes, and their shame at feeling that the identity of their nation as they see it is being diluted proves in itself controversial business too. It is worth quoting Schofield's methodological advice : "Both efforts, to humanize and dehumanize Powell, fail as history" (Schofield 2013, p. 10). This advice ought to be extended to any research into Powell supporters, their responses, their fears, their anger, their sense of injustice. For both indeed a robustly interpretivist approach is warranted, an approach "which seeks to know the social world through understanding the meanings actors ascribe to it" (Pilkington 2016, p. 4). This is probably the only way out of a political, moral, epistemological catch-22, wherein academics are either called upon to stigmatise stigmatisation or to express a degree of empathy towards a silent majority vociferating how marginalized it is.

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