

## ILLUSIONS OF CONTROL<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. 'Taking Back Control'

At the heart of the case for Brexit was the idea of 'taking back control'. The British people were no longer the directors of their own destiny and needed to reassert control over their own affairs. Which affairs, specifically? There were multiple targets, but immigration was central: 'Vote Leave', the British people were told, so that '[w]e'll be in charge of own borders'.<sup>2</sup> It was crucial, so the argument went, that the British government, and not individual migrants or Brussels, have the final word over who enters the country. Writing before the Brexit vote, political theorist David Miller (2016) described this connection between immigration and self-determination as follows:

In Britain, immigration has come to stand for something more than immigration itself. The British government's inability to control (intra-European) migration is seen as emblematic of a wider loss of control. Many Britons feel that they are no longer in charge of their own destiny: 'Take back our country' is a slogan that resonates along the campaign trail.

Similar values have been appealed to in United States by people arguing for greater fortification of the southern border and generally providing increased funding for immigration enforcement. Conservatives insist that the 'rule of law' must be reestablished more firmly, meaning that the state must have stricter discretion over whom gains admission.<sup>3</sup> It is crucial that the United States government, and not individual migrants or smugglers, have the final word over admission.

What these arguments have in common, at base, is an appeal to the importance of collective self-determination (or related notions of 'national

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self-determination', 'sovereignty', and so on): the right of the British people, or the American people, to be in charge of what takes place within their territory. The arguments use that appeal to support an increase in the state's capacity to set and enforce rules about immigration, whether that capacity is being 'taken back' from transnational institutions or individual migrants.

What shall we make of these arguments? Some will be tempted to dismiss them out of hand as pretextual rationalizations for nakedly racist/xenophobic motivations, given how much racism and xenophobia has historically been entwined with movements for immigration restrictions. And I will argue later that the role of race (along with ethnicity and religion) is indeed crucially relevant in this context. But I want to begin by granting that these arguments are at least sometimes made in good faith. For the value of self-governance is shared by many people across the political spectrum. And restrictionist policies have at times been endorsed, or at least acquiesced to, by people who profess a generally antiracist outlook. For example, there were left-wing supporters of Brexit ('Lexit') who tried to distance themselves from any overt racist imagery associated with Vote Leave and Leave.EU. It is worth engaging in a serious analysis of whether there was (and is) any basis to the 'taking back control'-type arguments for discretion over immigration.

In what follows, I will first show (sections 2 and 3), drawing on recent philosophy of immigration, that the collective self-governance (CSG) argument for increased discretion over immigration has some significant apparent strengths, both philosophically and politically. I will review some existing ways to address the argument (section 4), showing their weakness, and then give my own novel responses to the argument. First (section 5), I will show that it rests on a simplistic understanding of what is required for CSG. Second (section 6), I show that sometimes movements to enhance discretion over immigration can actually create *setbacks* to CSG. A close examination of the role of race and racial discourse in the Brexit debate and US immigration policy reveals that even (apparently) left-wing movements for immigration controls can prevent, and have prevented, members of the polity who are people of color from participating fully in CSG. In the end, policies such as Brexit and increased enforcement at the southern border may be doing little to protect CSG in the relevant countries and are in fact significantly damaging it.

## 2. The Collective Self-Governance (CSG) Argument

Before presenting the CSG argument itself, let me explain a little more carefully what exactly the conclusion of that argument is. Often when we talk about immigration, in our political lives or within philosophy, we are considering whether

particular immigration policies should be adopted, such as a state admitting more unskilled workers or reducing the number of refugees admitted. The argument that I am interested in has a slightly different focus. Rather than asking the audience to endorse particular restrictions on immigration, it aims to persuade us that states need to maintain and expand their *capacity* to determine who does and doesn't enter the territory: their 'discretion over immigration', as I will call it. That can include having the formal authority to make rules over admission—which was at stake in the Brexit debate—and it can also include having the de facto ability to ensure compliance with those rules—which is at stake in debates about enforcement of immigration law in the United States.

The CSG argument made by political actors tries to mobilize concerns about CSG to justify shoring up state discretion over immigration. CSG has also played an important role in recent philosophical work by theorists seeking to defend a state's right to control its border. I do *not* wish to imply that any of those theorists would endorse any of the political positions that I have mentioned. I will just be drawing on their work to present the CSG argument in its strongest form.<sup>4</sup>

#### The CSG Argument

1. Political communities ought to protect their capacity for CSG.
2. CSG is diminished when political communities lack discretion over immigration.

Therefore,

- C1. Political communities ought to protect their discretion over immigration.  
Therefore,
- C2. Political communities ought to protect their states' discretion over immigration.

Let me now clarify this argument in some more detail, including the meanings of its premises and why someone might adopt them.

The first premise states that collective government is a value that ought to be protected. Can this be defended? As Sarah Song points out, CSG is a *widely shared* value, as seen in documents such as the UN Charter (2018: 53).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, CSG appears to be a very *weighty* value. Resistance to colonialism, for example, often emphasized not only the various more specific harms and wrongs of colonialism—such as exploitation, murder, and so on—but also the sheer problem of one people being subjected to the rule of another. The precise source of this value is a very large topic, but Song suggests (plausibly) that it ultimately derives from the importance of *individual* self-governance—the ability of an individual to shape their own life in light of their basic commitments (56). CSG serves as a means for

individuals to play a role in shaping the legal rules that they must live by. The first premise thus stands on relatively secure footing. CSG is a widely shared and seemingly very important value, and so it is quite plausible to think that it is something political communities ought to aim to protect for themselves.

The second premise seeks to connect CSG with the ability to control immigration. What is the connection supposed to be? Song suggests that CSG requires that a state be able to make binding rules (in the form of laws) about what takes place within that territory.<sup>6</sup> For example, it was considered an increase in CSG in Wales when certain territorial rulemaking powers were transferred from Westminster to Cardiff, such as the ability to make laws governing health care, education, and transport within the territory of Wales. The case for premise two is that the ability to make and enforce laws regarding immigration is, no less than the ability to make and enforce health-care laws, something that affects a people's capacity to regulate what takes place within its territory. Both health-care and immigration laws dictate what takes place within a territory; they just do so in different ways: the one set determining access to hospitals and so on within the territory, the other determining who is able to be present or reside in the territory. As Song puts it, rights to control immigration should be seen as one element of the 'bundle' of territorial rights that enable a people to be fully self-governing: the Welsh will not be fully self-governing unless the package of devolved powers includes not only rulemaking with respect to education, transport, etc. but also with respect to immigration. And that will surely seem plausible to most people. Song makes a plausible case, then, for the second premise.

The first conclusion, C<sub>1</sub>, that political communities ought to protect their ability to control immigration, can be straightforwardly inferred from the two premises. Those communities are generally only able to exercise such control by wielding the apparatus of the state. C<sub>2</sub> can thus be inferred from C<sub>1</sub>, because there can be no collective discretion over immigration without state discretion over immigration.

### 3. Strengths of the CSG Argument

I'd like to now explain some further strengths of the CSG argument. I'll focus on its philosophical strengths but suggest that they might help to explain the political uses of the argument.

The easiest way to see these strengths is to contrast the CSG arguments with some other familiar arguments. These arguments focus primarily on the potential *effects* of immigration and argue that discretion over immigration is necessary so that the state will be able to prevent bad effects from coming about. One version of this argument says that it is essential to have control over immigration so that

the state can put limits on immigration, especially on the immigration of lower-skilled workers, when the wages of native workers (especially lower-skilled) start to become depressed. Another version says that immigration must be carefully monitored because it can have problematic effects on the national culture, making it difficult to sustain certain ways of life or damaging bonds of solidarity. A third version claims that immigration can have a negative environmental impact, and so the state must be ready to stop the flow of immigrants when the environment comes under threat.

There are some familiar difficulties with arguments of these kinds. They require a causal demonstration that immigration in fact has the effects that the theorist claims it has. And they also require a philosophical argument showing that those effects are in fact bad or, more precisely, are of a kind that the state ought to be preventing. Let me explain these empirical and normative problems in turn.

Consider again the economic impact of immigration. To argue for increased control on economic grounds one must show that immigration really does drive down wages. And that is often a complex matter, since although immigration can sometimes create competition for jobs it also typically expands the economy as a whole, which can ultimately create wage increases. Likewise in the case of cultural effects one must look at whether immigration really does change the culture of the receiving country in any of the ways claimed. For example, do higher levels of immigration really affect the major social mores of a country?

Those were empirical questions. Arguments for immigration control that rely on the effects of immigration also generate normative questions. For instance, it is not enough to say that immigration has some effect on the national culture—one must show that said effect is *bad* or, more precisely, something that the state (acting on behalf of the political community) has an important interest in avoiding. For example, suppose someone claims that immigration is changing the religious makeup of their society, moving it in a more Catholic direction. One question is whether this change is genuinely taking place. But another is whether controlling the religious direction of the country is something that the state can take a legitimate interest in. And liberal political thought has generally argued that the answer is no—the state ought to abstain from taking a religious stance.

Often these empirical and normative questions are somewhat intertwined. Suppose that immigration really does depress wages to a degree. We can still ask: Can workers who lose out be compensated? For it may well be that even if wage drops do occur, any losses to workers can ultimately be offset by redistributing economic gains that other members of society receive from immigration. Firms, for example, may gain in efficiency from the presence of immigrant labor, and they can be taxed to shift some of the benefits of that efficiency toward those

who experience wage losses. To evaluate a proposal like this fully, we need to look both at empirical questions about whether tax-and-transfer schemes like this are economically viable and at moral questions about whether redistribution is acceptable or even required.

A major attraction of the CSG argument is that its proponent can seemingly avoid these empirical and normative questions, for, according to that argument, being able to control immigration necessarily enhances self-governance irrespective of what effects immigration may have. Why? Because being able to control immigration is in itself one of the elements of full CSG. Song emphasizes this point as part of why she believes her own CSG argument is superior to other arguments for border controls: 'Political communities have a right to control immigration because it is a *component* of collective self-determination, regardless of the particular *effects* of immigration. Part of what it *means* for a political community to be self-determining is that it controls whom to admit as new members' (2018: 72, my emphases).

She illustrates this point with an example involving a large number of people moving from the United States to Cuba with the intention of settling there (73). Suppose that these people migrate furtively, 'without going through any process by which Cubans could reflect and decide on whether to allow their presence in the country'. One possible complaint about such migration would be its effects on Cuban society, and so on. But let's stipulate that the Americans are fully committed to learning the local language and culture and taking other measures needed to ensure that they will not substantially change the course of Cuban society. All the same, Song suggests, the Americans have still done something wrong because they have still violated the right of the Cuban people to govern life within its territory. The sheer fact of the Americans being present in defiance of the collective will of the Cuban people is itself a violation of the latter's right to CSG.

The philosophical advantage of the CSG argument, then, is that it allows a theorist to avoid taking on various empirical and normative commitments that can be hard to defend. I suggest that this has also translated at times into a political advantage. The Brexit debate did often touch on, for example, economic issues about how migrants contribute to productivity, draw on public finances, and so on. But when backed into a corner it was always possible for a defender of Brexit to say, 'Yes, there are all of those questions about exactly which immigration rules are best for the economy, but set that aside: what matters most is simply that the rules be *our* rules'. Likewise, while people arguing for increased enforcement in the United States have often claimed that immigration has a deleterious effect on security or the economy, they are also able to rely on CSG considerations. The claim that enforcement is needed to 'restore the rule of law' (as the Trump administration put it) has been a way of sidestepping the impact



of immigration by insisting that control needs to be reasserted for its own sake.<sup>7</sup> CSG can be deployed by political actors who would like to insulate themselves from having to back up their claims about the economy and so forth.

#### 4. Challenging CSG Arguments: Some Existing Considerations

Can CSG arguments be resisted? Let's start with some existing considerations in the philosophical literature.

One possible response is to point out that there are considerations other than CSG at stake when it comes to border control. Song (2018) and Christopher Wellman (2008) both emphasize that any reasons for action (or policies) generated by CSG are merely *pro tanto*. This means that alternative considerations can potentially be brought in and weighed against CSG in determining what should be done overall (Fine 2013). For example, in the case of the southern border of the United States, someone might say that various parts of the US economy are dependent on the labor of undocumented migrants and both migrants and businesses would be harmed by increased enforcement. Or in the case of Brexit, one might point to the important interests that various EU citizens who are not UK nationals have in visiting and living in Britain. More generally, even though the CSG argument might ultimately rest on certain individual interests in self-governance, there may also be self-governance interests that weigh in favor of more open borders, such as people's interests in choosing career paths only available in certain countries (Oberman 2016).

For this response to succeed, one must not only point to alternative considerations but also claim that they *override* the importance of CSG in this context, making it the case that overall, the state ought not take steps to shore up its discretion over immigration. And that can be a difficult case to make since, as we saw earlier, CSG is a value that is often given considerable weight. Sure, there are EU citizens who would benefit from a job in Britain, defenders of Brexit might say, but how does that compare to one's country having 'colony status'?<sup>8</sup>

Of course, another option is simply to discount the moral importance of CSG, but this is a highly revisionary move, so it would be good to see if the CSG argument can be resisted without requiring such a major shift in many people's moral views.<sup>9</sup> Certainly for political purposes it would be troubling if the only way to resist the CSG argument is to say, 'Yes, the community has lost control of its common destiny, but this is no big deal'.

What I would like to explore in the remainder of this essay is whether there is a way to respond to the CSG argument on its own terms, granting that CSG is in fact an important value, but questioning whether it always tells in favor of policy outcomes like Brexit and increased border enforcement. More

specifically, I will question the connection between state discretion over immigration and CSG. I will suggest that there are two promising strategies. First, I will show that we need a more fine-grained understanding of CSG. Only certain kinds of limitation on state discretion over immigration-making actually pose a significant threat to CSG. Once we see this, CSG arguments lose the advantages that I explained earlier. Second, I will argue that political movements that seek to increase state discretion over the border can sometimes actually *thwart* CSG.

## 5. Unpacking CSG

In this section I would like to explore more carefully what exactly is involved in self-governance and use my findings to demonstrate some limitations of CSG arguments. To see the points I wish to make about CSG, it helps to first consider individual self-governance (as we might call it): the ability of a particular person to determine the course of their own life. This form of self-governance is also generally thought to have considerable value, and indeed the value of CSG likely ultimately derives from the individual form, as mentioned earlier.

Here is a familiar liberal point about individual self-governance. Respecting individual capacities for self-governance involves respecting people's *choices* about how to lead their lives. Limits on individual choice, we might say, place limits on individual self-governance, just as limits on state choices place limits on CSG.<sup>10</sup> But some kinds of choice are treated as more central to individual self-governance than others. Compare, for example, decisions about whether to drink Mountain Dew with decisions about whether to keep kosher. Restricting the latter choice would have a much greater impact on an individual's ability to be self-governing. And we correspondingly give that choice much greater protection: in liberal democracies, the burden of justification we expect the government to meet is much higher for a tax aimed at kosher foods than for a tax on soda. And liberal constitutions often contain protections for religious choice but not for choice of beverage. We similarly give greater protection to someone's choices about which political view to express than their choices about which time of day to play their music. Why? Because the former choices are more basic to individual self-government.

There is, of course, much to be said about what exactly makes one choice more central to individual self-government than another, and there is much existing debate about this topic. Very roughly, we can say that such choices affect the fundamental direction of a person's life, something that plausibly includes their spiritual and emotional development, the major relationships they form, their creative projects, their political role in the society, and so on.



Apart from individual self-governance, I think we should acknowledge a parallel point about CSG. We need to recognize that some collective choices are more fundamental than others, more closely connected to CSG.

For example, compare decisions about

- a. the precise width of the roads, and
- b. which day of the week people should put out their trash (rubbish) bags, with decisions about
- c. which language(s) students will be required to learn in public schools, and
- d. whether to have publicly funded health insurance.

I hope the reader will agree that decisions c and d are much more fundamental than a and b. They concern, respectively, the central language (and thus culture) of the society and the conception of social justice enacted in that society. These decisions affect the fundamental direction of the country in a way that a and b do not. One way to see this is to notice that it seems much less objectionable to, out of a concern for efficiency, delegate the a and b decisions to agencies rather than have them made by bodies that are more directly accountable to the people. It is much more important that the people retain their ability to control the c and d decisions because to delegate those decisions would be to relinquish CSG to a much more significant degree.

Though I think it is clear that there are some such differences of degree, there is going to be disagreement about exactly which decisions are more essential to CSG. For example, people with different views about what political association is *for* will end up with different views about CSG. Those who think that the primary point of political institutions is to establish fair terms of cooperation will think that the most fundamental decisions are those that affect the distribution of life chances and so on, while those who think political association is at least in part a vehicle for embodying the spirit of the nation will think that the most fundamental decisions concern, for example, the survival of the national language. And some areas, as we saw earlier, are not properly within the purview of collective decision-making. For example, it is not a proper question for collective decision-making which religion the state should endorse: the state should not endorse any religious outlook.

Now, someone might object here that it should be *itself* a matter of self-government for countries to be able to decide for themselves which decisions should count as fundamental and which shouldn't. Let me make two observations in response. First, if we take seriously the analogy with individual self-governance, note that we do not leave it entirely up to individuals to determine which decisions count as fundamental. A particular person might decide that picking the color of their car is of the most vital importance. Yet that is not the sort of choice

that is given constitutional protections in the way that, say, freedom of political speech or religious practice is. In this sense, fundamentality is not a purely subjective matter, and we should expect the same to apply in the realm of CSG. Second, if we look directly at CSG we again see that states are treated as if fundamentality is theirs to determine. For example, in the context of trade, countries are taken to have a fundamental interest in determining their own standards for food safety and, more generally, determining what counts as sufficiently healthy for their population to consume. They are not taken to have a fundamental interest in determining for themselves the appropriate shape of fruit.

With these observations in mind, let us return to questions of immigration. Suppose that someone makes a CSG argument for increasing discretion over immigration. We saw earlier in the paper that CSG arguments are apparently attractive because they seemingly allow the proponent to sidestep difficult empirical and normative questions of the kind that arise when people make arguments based on the effects of immigration. Since (on their view) increasing discretion over immigration necessarily enhances CSG, a crucial value, the proponent of a CSG argument can play it as a kind of trump card, avoiding any further empirical or normative questions about the effects of immigration. The analysis I have just given of CSG suggests that in fact we should not allow it to be played as such a card. Even if CSG is an important value, that value is not necessarily threatened in any significant way simply because a state's discretion over immigration is subject to some degree of restriction (any more than individual autonomy is necessarily threatened in any significant way simply because an individual's choices are subject to some degree of restriction).

To make a strong case, the proponent of a CSG argument must show that limitations on discretion over immigration are genuinely limiting the people's ability to determine the *fundamental* direction of society. Working out whether any particular policy choice does in fact affect that direction will require further empirical and normative claims. Compare, for example, trade decisions. Are these fundamental decisions? We need to settle what exactly counts as affecting the fundamental direction of the country. And then we need to ask whether trade decisions in fact affect that direction. Probably it depends on which trade decisions exactly we're talking about. Trade negotiations that determine the import of foreign movies in a territory, for example, may well affect the language and culture of the place, while trade negotiations that try to create a standardized set of rules around the length of screws and nails are less unlikely to affect the fundamental direction of the society.

What about immigration? Do decisions about whom (if anyone) to admit affect the fundamental direction of the society? To answer this, we again need to touch on empirical and normative questions, such as the following: When (if ever) does immigration in fact affect wage inequality? Can this inequality be

offset through redistribution? When and how does immigration affect the cultural life of the nation? Which of those effects are properly concerns of the state? Can those effects be easily offset through integration policies? As with different kinds of trade regulation, the answer will likely vary for different kinds of immigration and immigration decisions. Foreign students, for example, are much less likely to alter the fundamental direction of the society than permanent residents, for example.

In sum, while, on the face of things, as we saw in section 3, the proponent of a CSG argument can make a strong case for immigration discretion while avoiding difficult empirical and normative questions about the effects of immigration, this is in fact an illusion: the proponent of a CSG argument must in fact face many such questions if they are to make a strong case for discretion over immigration. They will have to show that increased discretion over immigration really is needed to have proper control over, for example, overall inequality in society. We should not permit the CSG argument to be played as a simple trump card.

## 6. When Enhancing Discretion Undermines CSG

In the previous section I tried to show some significant limitations of CSG arguments and some ways in which CSG arguments can be resisted by showing that limitations on discretion over immigration do not necessarily entail any significant impact on CSG. In this section I would like to defend a stronger claim that, in fact, sometimes taking steps to enhance state discretion over immigration creates a threat to CSG. In particular, we need to consider the role of race in relation to immigration.

Let me first draw out some connections between race and immigration, especially in the context of Brexit and the southern border of the United States, and then I will explain its bearing on CSG.

CSG involves a familiar complexity that does not arise in the case of individual self-governance: the collective is composed of different people, with different viewpoints, interests, and so on. This makes it a matter for debate exactly when a decision can be said to represent a *collective* decision—the ‘will of the people’—rather than just the will of some subset of the collective whose voice prevailed over the dissenters. Solving this problem has of course been one of the great questions of political philosophy, and this is not the place to present a full theory. But for present purposes I will rely on some relatively minimal theses about collective willing that I hope will be plausible to the reader.

In democratic societies, it is assumed that for the people’s will to be expressed there needs to be a process that respects each member of society as an equal

(Waldron 1999, Cohen 2009). It will not do if, for instance, political decisions represent only the views or interests of an aristocracy. What exactly equal respect requires is more controversial, but some basic requirements are clear. For example, it violates equal respect if the votes of property owners are more heavily weighted or if rights to speak on political matters are denied to members of a minority ethnic group. It also plausibly matters how exactly individuals and groups conduct themselves when they participate in the political process. For example, it would be a violation of equal respect if every time members of a minority religious group attempt to raise their political voice in a public space members of the majority step in to shout them down. It is also plausibly a violation of equal respect if when members of the minority group try to raise their political voice their perspectives and interests are simply ignored by a majority that stereotypes them as universally stupid, degraded, and so on.<sup>11</sup> In these latter cases, members of the minority group have formal opportunities to speak, vote, run for office, and so on but are still being deprived of the ability to participate as equals: they are still being shut out from the political process and shut out specifically because of a denial that they are equal members of society. That is surely incompatible with saying that they are shown equal respect in the political process or that the laws are being made on their behalf. We have a failure of democratic CSG.

Now, philosophers of immigration have recognized some ways in which immigration policies made out of negative racial attitudes can be in tension with ideals of equality. In particular, they have focused on cases where an immigration policy was openly made with the aim of excluding people of a disfavored race: the 'White Australia' policy, for example, whose aim was primarily to exclude people of Asian descent. The most familiar explanation in the literature for why such policies are unacceptable focuses on the message that that they send to people who are *already* members of the relevant society. 'White Australia', for instance, expressed to non-White Australians that they were considered lesser members of Australian society. And that message, in addition to perhaps being wrong in itself, made it harder for non-Whites to interact as equals with their fellow Australians (Blake 2002).<sup>12</sup>

The point I wish to make here is that in addition to being a general harm to equality, such policies can also damage CSG.<sup>13</sup> For, as we have seen, democratic CSG requires that each member of a society be able to participate in the political process as an equal. And living under a government that is acting out of open hostility to a particular racial group prevents members of that group from doing this. One way that can happen is that it can create barriers to participation by making it psychologically harder. For example, when the government is openly hostile toward a person or particular group, that person or group could credibly fear that raising their political voice will be met with punishments, whether

through formal legal methods or from informal groups. It can also reinforce the kind of dynamic I described earlier, where members of a minority group have their perspectives and interests downgraded in the political process as part of an understanding that they are lesser members of society.

Let me now attempt to apply some of these lessons to the policies that are my central concern in this paper. There is no question that some of the motivations behind Brexit and movements for border controls in the United States involve open racial hatred and negative stereotyping. For example, Nigel Farage's famous 'Breaking Point' poster was clearly intended to stoke fears of a brown-skinned other, while President Trump continually drew on racist stereotypes about Latinx persons in making his case for securing the southern border, people he described as rapists and criminals. The political success of these figures has likely helped to normalize racism in ways that make it harder for members of the targeted groups to participate as equals in the political process. British Muslims, for example, have faced increased hate crimes since Brexit, making it harder for them to participate in the public sphere and in some cases have even felt compelled to leave the country due to credible fears of discrimination and violence.<sup>14</sup> These forms of exclusion are, again, not a cost to be weighed against CSG but undermine CSG itself.

But the situation is more complicated than in the case of White Australia, where racial hostility was the more or less universal motivation for the policy. In the case of Brexit especially, there was a sizeable contingent of left-wing 'Lexit' supporters who were at least willing to acquiesce in the end of freedom of movement but who would strongly reject any commitment to negative racial stereotypes about immigrants if asked. And many subsequent commentators have argued that Brexit should be seen in significant part as a revolt of the working majority over political elites who have ignored their voice and interests: a triumph of democratic inclusion rather than exclusion.<sup>15</sup> Political theorist Alex Gourevitch, for example, celebrated Brexit as a 'product of longstanding popular frustration at the sense that politics is out of the electorate's control'.<sup>16</sup> Christopher Bickerton and Richard Tuck said that the core case for Brexit was the need to return power to the populace, especially the 'poor and less educated'.<sup>17</sup> Similar analyses have at times been offered of the United States, with desires for controlled immigration treated as a response to popular disenfranchisement. Writing in the *New York Times*, Jerry Kramer described himself as a 'liberal restrictionist'. He claimed to be standing for the 'working people' of America who are appalled by President Trump's 'manic nastiness' but are attracted to 'his willingness to wage what they see as a patriotic battle to defend common people'.<sup>18</sup>

Many defenders of Brexit will say that they were not and are not motivated by racial considerations and that they strongly disavow the racial stereotypes



that some right-wing Brexiters endorsed. They will say that their concerns and advocacy center instead around economic and political powerlessness. We saw earlier that the philosophy of immigration has been primarily concerned with ruling out immigration policies that are motivated solely and openly by racial animus, so on the face of it these left-wing Brexit supporters are morally in the clear. What I will argue now, drawing on recent sociological analyses, is that there has been an important role for race even in these apparently class-based movements for Brexit and that this role too undermines democratic CSG.

Brexit was often argued for, and ultimately seen as a victory for, a long-ignored populace, ‘the left-behinds’, understood to be members of the working class who had suffered from the effects of globalization, including immigration, without due attention from political elites. So far, no mention of race. Where race comes in is that the supposedly socioeconomic roots of Brexit are in fact often a stand-in for Whiteness. This is not an empirical paper, so I will be relying heavily on existing political sociology rather than making this case in full. Here are two important initial data points. First, if we look at the overall proportion of Leave voters, only twenty-four percent were in the lowest two social classes, while fifty-nine percent were middle class (using NRS social grades that define class by occupation).<sup>19</sup> The description of Brexit as a working-class movement obscures the fact that these middle-class supporters were the core of the vote. Second, the focus purely on class leaves out racial distinctions within the working class. Black and Asian Britons earn less than Whites, have higher nonemployment rates, suffer worse health outcomes, and so on, yet they voted clearly in favor of Remain.<sup>20</sup> Black and Asian Britons voted seventy-three percent and sixty-seven percent, respectively, in favor of Remain while White Britons voted fifty-three percent in favor of Leave.<sup>21</sup>

These facts should give us immediate reason for skepticism when left-wing Brexiters claim to be putting their weight behind a purely class-based movement. In fact, they are putting their weight behind a movement that is at best heterogeneous with respect to class and is very disproportionately White. In addition to these sheer demographic facts, a historical perspective shows that this notion of the left-behinds has been substantially racialized. At times defenders of Brexit and apologists for the Trump vote have in fact openly drawn the link between class-based rhetoric and race in this context, openly taking themselves to be advocating on behalf of a specifically White disadvantaged population. Joan Williams’s book, for example, is called *White Working Class* (2017). And, as we’ll now see, even when race isn’t explicitly referred to, references to ‘left-behinds’ can still invoke a deep history of racial resentment.

The idea that class and race can be entwined in this way is a familiar one. In the United States, for instance, it has long been seen that when right-wing politicians claim to be defending ‘hardworking’, ‘lower-class’ Americans from



'takers' who seek to exploit the welfare state, they are in fact evoking a distinction between White and Black. For the stereotype of the 'taker' is Black while the hardworking masses are assumed to be White: the superficially economic category of the 'welfare queen', for example, is nearly always applied to Black women.<sup>22</sup> As historian Premilla Nadasen has shown, welfare cuts under Clinton's presidency were backed by 'racially coded language of dependency and people taking advantage of the system'.<sup>23</sup>

Robbie Shilliam (2018) traces the relevant political history and argues that the notion of the 'left-behinds' in the context of Brexit evokes a similarly strong set of racialized cultural associations. In Britain, too, he argues, there has been a historical distinction between hardworking, deserving Whites, and scrounging, undeserving others. He writes that we must understand 'the sentiment of being "left behind" within a defence of the national compact that at one point granted white workers an institutionally advantaged position' (156). In other words, the resentment that the notion invokes is crucially tied to the loss of *relative* position on the part of (supposedly) more deserving White workers who have, over time, lost some of their economic advantages to undeserving people of color (Bhambra 2017). The associated backlash against 'elites' is a complaint about the role that government has played in, for example, introducing antidiscrimination laws that facilitated these economic changes. Enoch Powell, for example, deployed the idea of the 'left behind' White working class: an 'ordinary', decent majority not given proper attention by government (Shilliam 2018: 100). One aspect of that lack of attention was the passing of the Race Relations Act, which sought to elevate undeserving racial groups while ignoring the morally weighty interests of Whites in deciding whom to associate with. Another aspect was immigration, which raised the specter of increased power and influence within the country for Black and Asian people—the threat that 'in fifteen or twenty years' time the Black man will have the whip hand over the White man'—as well as the cultural contagion of people unable to conform to English standards of responsible behavior.

Subsequent left- and right-wing Euroscepticism, Shilliam shows, has also drawn on tropes of an Indigenous White, English national character at risk of foreign contamination. On the left, Labour's Euroscepticism was 'congenitally racialized' (136). It was born in a political system where the interests of Black and Asian workers were undefended by the organized labor movement, and one-third of London dockers had participated in a strike in support of Powell (102). Left-wing Eurosceptic agitation in the 1970s, Shilliam argues, drew heavily on the idea of protecting the 'common people' in a context where 'common' and 'ordinary' were heavily racialized (as White). Even after the union movement began to address the issue of racial prejudice, union leaders and Labour politicians continued to endorse a narrative around immigration that represented immigrants primarily as scrounging users of public goods. As far as right-wing

Euroscepticism goes, the Bruges Group, for example, carried forward a rhetoric of the need to protect the national character from undesirable foreign influence. And while UK Independence Party (UKIP) founder Alan Sked was eventually to express repugnance at Nigel Farage's overt racism and say that the party had lost its way, it is all the same true that in the party's earlier days, Sked directly sought out Powell to stand as a candidate.<sup>24</sup>

In sum, just like the notion of the 'welfare queen', the seemingly race-neutral notion of the 'left-behinds' in fact evokes a strong set of associations with race, including the idea that especially deserving Whites are being sacrificed by a political class that pays too much attention to undeserving people of color. Thus, even when people defending Brexit have not been explicitly referring to the 'White working class', the common advocacy on the part of the 'left-behinds' has still been implicitly racial. And note that those associations hold whether or not a speaker intends to draw on them: someone using the phrase 'welfare queen', for example, would trigger its racial associations even if they believed strongly in racial equality.

Is it problematic if people are advocating, whether explicitly or implicitly, on behalf of the White working class? As we have seen, defenders of Brexit and the Trump vote sometimes openly accept a role for race and say that the 'left-behinds' they are concerned for are really members of 'the White working class'. They might defend this as follows. In their view, the White working class is a legitimate interest group—just like interest groups defined by occupation or religion or minority racial status—and entitled to use the political process to protect itself from the vagaries of globalization, including immigration. Brexit apologist David Goodhart, for example, insinuates that it may be fine to agitate on behalf of a racial majority if its interests are not receiving due attention. He sympathizes with 'feeling[s] of abandonment by political and economic elites who seem to be more concerned with minorities than the white working class' (2017: 68).

Let me respond to this idea that agitation on behalf of 'the White working' class need not be problematic. It is again worth being clear that references to 'the White working class' are often deceptive, since typically people are actually referring to a group that is more heterogeneous with respect to class status. But even if we were to confine our attention to the White working class *per se*, I would argue that advocacy on behalf of a specifically White group is extremely problematic. To view Whites, even some economic subset of Whites, as simply an interest group like any another is to ignore the deep history of colonialism and racial hierarchy. Historically, to be racialized as White, in the United States or in the United Kingdom, has been to be marked as someone who, according to the dominant ideology and within the dominant social structures, is entitled to special privileges and power. For example, as Irish American people came to be understood as White, they were thereby no longer placed in subordinate

positions along with Blacks ('No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish' signs began to be removed from bars, for instance) and instead came to have access to political and economic advantages that were denied to Blacks. The distinctive group interests of Whites qua Whites are inherently tied to their ability to maintain a superior position in society. Members of the White working class have benefitted from racial privilege even as they occupy a relatively disadvantaged position in society as a whole. To advocate specifically on behalf of a White group, then, is to advocate on behalf of such privilege.<sup>25</sup>

Let me now tie these observations back to my broader questions about CSG. We saw earlier how immigration policies that are explicitly justified by a demand to keep out disfavored races can damage CSG, specifically by making it harder for racial minorities to participate as equals in the political process. What I have just been exploring is how even when race is not explicitly evoked it can still play an implicit role. And I would like to suggest that in these cases, too damage can be done to CSG. Appeals on behalf of the 'left-behinds', for instance, may not make any explicit mention of disfavored race. Yet, like advocacy for people exploited by 'welfare queens', they still ultimately invoke an outlook according to which there are especially deserving White members of society whose proper position in society is not being maintained. Thus, if political discourse is structured around addressing the grievances of the 'left-behinds' the voices and interests of non-Whites, understood to be less deserving, will not be given equal consideration. The political debates we have been looking at illustrate this dynamic, since they have allowed political focus to drift away from the policies that would benefit the actually least well-off—such as the health-care, education, and housing policies needed to support poorer Black people—toward policies advocated by Whites and intended to shore up their interests as a racial group, such as immigration restrictions. In such situations there is damage to CSG since non-Whites are not treated as equals within the political process.

Let me address some remaining questions before concluding. The immigration concerns connected to Brexit prominently featured concerns about Muslim immigrants clearly understood to be non-White. Another major concern was immigration from Eastern Europe and, it might be said, surely *that* has nothing to do with race, given that those migrants are understood to be Whites. The first response to this claim is that at times references to Eastern European migration were simply cover for an underlying focus on Muslim migration. Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever (2017), for example, point out that UKIP frequently presented a public face that made apparently race-neutral reference to economic migration from Eastern Europe while it was clear 'to many within that formation itself that breaking with the EU [. . .] represented an important opportunity to limit the number of Muslims entering Britain, Muslims whose culture many of them believed was incompatible with being British' (6). The second

response is that the racial politics of migration is more complicated than the objection assumes. As the example of Irish Americans mentioned earlier shows, racial categorizations fluctuate over time, and just as a group can become newly racialized as White, it can also become newly racialized as something other than White, or indeed as *less* White. John Fox, Laura Moroşanu, and Eszter Szilassy (2012) demonstrated that Eastern Europeans in the United Kingdom have been subject to just this sort of tendency, with their cultural traits being used as evidence that despite their skin tone they were a step removed from paradigm (and maximally desirable) cases of Whiteness. Analyzing cohorts of Hungarian and Romanian immigrants (post-2004 and 2007, respectively), they found that ‘nominally shared whiteness between migrant and majority has not exempted these current cohorts of migrants from the sorts of racialization found in other migrations’ (681). Romanians, for example, have often been represented in the tabloid press as inherently disposed to criminal activity and thus essentially unable to achieve the ‘civilized’ qualities expected of genuinely White people (687). The Brexit campaign saw still further distancing of Eastern Europeans from White British people, the former coming to be seen as carrying traits more traditionally associated with Black persons, South Asian persons, and other undesirables. And that drift from their counting as paradigmatic cases of White made it easier to see them as also undeserving and less entitled to consideration.

Does this mean that immigration policies, and the broader package of policies associated with Brexit, can only be justified by reference to race privilege? It does not. What we have seen is that certain ways of advocating for those positions do either explicitly or implicitly appeal to a need to shore up racial privilege. Since that can happen even when the advocates of the policy do not themselves have racist attitudes, whether in the form of racial prejudice or beliefs in racial hierarchy, it is not enough for, say, Brexit defenders simply to assert that they have no racist attitudes. More care has to be taken to ensure that they are not, even unwittingly, contributing to a political process in which the interests and voices of White persons are given preeminence. As Shilliam points out, Labour politicians have continued to uncritically refer to the threat of immigrant labor without taking extensive steps to disassociate themselves fully from the long history of racialized antiimmigrant rhetoric in Britain, including in their own party.<sup>26</sup> Brexit continues to be often celebrated as a revolt of the most downtrodden. At a minimum, then, someone who wishes to advocate for increased discretion over immigration but wants to respect the importance of equal political participation must take steps to avoid reinforcing the racial dynamics that I have pointed to and be aware of the role that rhetoric of the ‘left-behinds’ has played in those dynamics. And that requires a much more thorough reexamination of history and institutions than simply expressing distaste for Nigel Farage and others who use overtly racist language and stereotypes.

## 7. Conclusion

In recent years, we have seen in the United States and United Kingdom strong political movements for increased state discretion over immigration, whether by increasing border enforcement capacity or exiting the free movement arrangements with the European Union. In this essay, I have explored one potent argument for such discretion—namely, that it is essential to protecting CSG. The arguments, we saw, appear to be especially strong since they seemingly allow the speaker to avoid various strong normative and empirical assumptions that other arguments must appeal to. On the face of it, they need not show, for instance, that immigration has a deleterious impact on a country—it's just very important *in itself* to have discretion over immigration, irrespective of such effects.

What I hope to have demonstrated is, first, that these apparent advantages dry up substantially when we really examine what is involved in exercising CSG. What matters for CSG is not simply making collective *choices* but making collective choices that affect the *fundamental* direction of the country, and so the question arises once again of whether immigration has much impact on that fundamental direction. I also hope to have demonstrated, second, that sometimes pushes for increased border controls can actually *damage* CSG, for CSG requires that all members of a society be able to participate as equals in the political process. And pushes for discretion over immigration can sometimes create exclusion of racial minorities from equal participation. This is true not only when movements for discretion over immigration are based on overt racial hostility but also when they reinforce a political discourse that downgrades the voices and interests of people of color to a subordinate status.

## Notes

- 1 For comments on the paper, I'm very grateful to Alex Sager and two very generous anonymous reviewers. Many thanks also to Duncan Bell, Tiffany Joseph, and Meghan Tinsley for help locating the sociological literature.
- 2 From Vote Leave, 'Why Vote Leave', [http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/why\\_vote\\_leave.html](http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/why_vote_leave.html) [accessed 4 March 2022].
- 3 See, for example, Kobach 2008 for such an appeal to the rule of law.
- 4 The version presented here relies especially on the closely related CSG argument presented by Sarah Song (2018). The main difference is that her argument is for a people's *right* to control its border rather than the claim that a people ought to take steps to *maintain* that control. Another influential argument that relies on CSG can be found in Wellman (2008). Fine (2013) provides a helpful overview of CSG arguments in general.
- 5 Article 1, for example, refers to the 'self-determination of peoples' as a core goal for the UN.

Quoted in Song (2018).



- 6 Song writes that ‘to exercise self-determination on behalf of the people it represents, the state requires territorial rights, the right to make and enforce laws throughout the territory’ (61).
- 7 See, for example, Jeff Sessions, 2018, ‘Attorney General Sessions Statement on President Trump’s Immigration Priorities Announcement’, US Department of Justice, 8 October, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/attorney-general-sessions-statement-president-trumps-immigration-priorities-announcement>.
- 8 The phrase is, of course, Boris Johnson’s. He did not use it during a discussion of immigration, but it was clearly a reference to importance of CSG in the context of Brexit. See Reuters, 2018, ‘Boris Johnson Says Brexit Deal Will Make Britain an EU Colony’, 13 November, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-eu-johnson/boris-johnson-says-brexit-deal-will-make-britain-an-eu-colony-idUSKCN1NI16D>.
- 9 There are also more sophisticated attempts to undermine CSG that claim the ‘self’ in ‘collective self-governance’ either cannot be nonarbitrarily defined or must be extended to include people well beyond the boundaries of the state. Both moves are again highly revisionary and so I set them too aside in the text. For discussion, see, for instance, Fine (2013).
- 10 More precisely, for reasons that I will explain later, limits on collective choice place limits on CSG *to some degree and in some respect*, since there are cases where such limits still enhance CSG *overall*.
- 11 See, for example, Ely (1980) for the view that prejudice among political actors can create denials of equal respect.
- 12 This example invites the following concern: What if Australia had genuinely been all White to begin with—would it then have been permissible to pursue racial exclusion in immigration policy? I discuss this issue and what to say about hypothetical racially homogenous societies in chapter 4 of my 2019 book, *The Ethics of Migration: An Introduction*.
- 13 Bertram (2019) also draws a connection between immigration policy and the drawing lines around membership in the polity, although I don’t share the speech-act approach that he relies on.
- 14 Shayma Bakht, 2020, ‘An Exodus of British Muslims Is Happening Right Under Our Noses—and Still We’re Asking Whether Islamophobia Exists’, *Independent*, 25 February, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/islamophobia-british-muslims-brexit-hate-crimes-boris-johnson-a9356531.html>.
- 15 Bhambra (2017) provides an overview of these commentators.
- 16 Alex Gourevitch, ‘Leave the EU Already’, *Jacobin*, <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/01/brexit-european-union-populism-democracy> [accessed 4 March 2022].
- 17 Christopher Bickerton and Richard Tuck, 2017, “A Brexit Proposal”.
- 18 Jerry Kammer, 2020, ‘I’m a Liberal Who Thinks Immigration Must Be Restricted’, *New York Times*, 16 January, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/16/opinion/immigration-democrats.html>.
- 19 Dorling and Tomlinson (2019: 36): ‘Of all those who voted Leave, 59 per cent were middle class (often labelled as A, B or C1), and only 41 per cent were working class (labelled as C2, D or E). The proportion of Leave voters who were of the lowest two social classes (D and E) was just 24 per cent’.
- 20 I have capitalized racial terms for racial groups to emphasize that they are historically contingent products of racialization. For a full explanation, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, 2020, ‘The Case for Capitalizing the B in Black’, *Atlantic*, 18 June, <https://>



- www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-blackand-white/613159.
- 21 Michael Ashcroft, 2019, 'A Reminder of How Britain Voted in the EU Referendum — and Why', *Lord Ashcroft Polls*, 15 March, <https://lordashcroftpolls.com/2019/03/a-reminder-of-how-britain-voted-in-the-eu-referendum-and-why>.
  - 22 See Nadasen (2007), cited in Stern (2020).
  - 23 Premilla Nadasen, 'How a Democrat Killed Welfare', *Jacobin*, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/02/welfare-reform-bill-hillary-clinton-tanf-poverty-dlc> [accessed 4 March 2022].
  - 24 Pavan Amara, 2014, 'UKIP Founder Alan Sked and Nigel Farage "Begged Enoch Powell to Stand as a Candidate"', *Independent*, 12 December, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/ukip-founder-alan-sked-begged-enoch-powell-to-stand-as-a-candidate-9922502.html>.
  - 25 Bhambra (2017) makes a similar point.
  - 26 See Shilliam's book (2018) for a full recounting of that history.

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