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# Locating Secularism within the Hostile Environment Conjuncture

An analysis of the discursive formation of secularism in the  
launching of the ‘English language scheme’

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*'Strangers are not simply those we do not recognise but those we recognise as strangers'*

*Sara Ahmed 2017*

## Abstract

This thesis uses the lens of secularism to investigate the interrelation of processes that construct and reproduce ideas of sameness and difference. Advancing a critical understanding of secularism, I explore the ways secularism stipulates, recognises and controls religion in order to secure itself as the unquestioned indicator of modernity and progress. Throughout this essay, I question not only the imbrication of secularism and progress, but the very idea of progress. I argue that progress is primarily imagined in order to maintain unequal, colonially formed relations of power. With this in mind, I outline how the discourse of secularism functions to exacerbate difference within a conjuncture that is defined by displacement and immobility. This happens in three dialectical and dynamic ways. Firstly, through narratives and processes of integration, toleration and recognition that are overwhelmingly based on uneven balances of power and therefore, reinforce inequalities. Secondly, as a result of the extension and augmentation of the racialised other that is interchangeably signified by the Muslim/migrant and imbued with backwardness. Thirdly, imagined gender equality is expediently offered as proof of Western superiority, at the same time as sexual difference is reinforced and new ways of patriarchal domination are experienced. These themes are inherently interconnected, operate to propagate the entanglement of whiteness and are inseparable from capital accumulation and colonial dispossession. In essence, this project sheds light on a specific and, until now, under-theorised dimension of the imperial condition.

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## Introduction

*'Butterflies have always had wings; people have always had legs. While history is marked by the hybridity of human societies & the desire for movement, the reality of most of migration today reveals the unequal relations between rich & poor, between North and South, between whiteness and its others.'*

*Harsha Walia (2013)*

Speaking at a Harvard seminar, Angela Davis stated that immigrant rights are one of the most pressing global issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Crucially though, Davis continues, 'migrant' struggles have to be understood in a much broader context of global migration that maintains colonial relations (Quoted in Mineo 2018). In the quote that opens this essay, Harsha Walia conveys a similar notion that migration 'reveals' the perpetuation of colonial whiteness. Taking this assertion further, in her latest book *Border and Rule*, Walia expounds the fact that 'migration' is a 'central pillar in the maintenance of the colonial present' (2021: 5). Therefore, it must also be the case, I suggest, that not only is 'migration' central to maintaining colonial structures of oppression, but it is also the key to a world of compassion and equality. In other words, the emancipation of the 'migrant' ensures the creation of a better world for us all through the necessary elimination of oppressive structures. This project, then, unapologetically and sometimes emotionally, seeks to assist in the building of a better world. Principally, I am approaching this task through an illumination of the way the 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' asserts dominance, and the centrality of the 'migrant' within these assertions (bell hooks 1997: xxi). However, this project also insists on the continual acknowledgement of the dynamic workings of power that are not just asserted but resisted and reimaged.

The 'migrant' appears to occupy a complex, confounding place within global capitalism: the vilified, backwards intruder and the condition of possibility of the inherent and necessary exploitation of the 'other'. One of the ways that this positionality is continually reproduced is through the differential use of language. For instance, a quote that is commonly attributed to a folk hero of the British Left, Tony Benn, heeds a societal warning about the translation of the treatment of 'migrants' into the treatment of all citizens (Ribeiro-Addy 2020). This quote is relayed in various forms and refugee, 'migrant', alien and asylum seeker are used interchangeably and expediently, their clearly defined meanings are masked and continually reconstructed.<sup>1</sup> This set of words all ascribe and imprint difference before the subject is able to speak for themselves, loaded with 'sticky associations' and inherently dehumanising

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<sup>1</sup> Variations of this quote are also attributed to Neal Ascherson (2011) and Arthur Scargill.

(Ahmed 2014). These classifications do not represent unified or consistent groups, but rather they symbolize state-led, global systems of the regulation of difference (Walia 2021).

Asylum seeker, for example, describes a person who has requested sanctuary and yet, it is also used as a label to distinguish between the ‘good refugee’ that exists ‘over there’ and the ‘bad asylum seeker’ that exists ‘over here’ (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016: 209). Language is used as a spatial boundary that defines the acceptability of proximity. Furthermore, a refugee is clearly defined and protected by the International Refugee Convention of 1951 but embodies different connotations in different contexts (Loescher and Milner 2011). In post-migration ‘crisis’ Europe, the ‘migrant’ and the refugee became interchangeable, placed into categories dependent on their mode of arrival. The ‘irregular migrant’ arrives through unofficial channels, embodying danger, irrationality and disruption (Little and Vaughn-Williams 2017). The very idea that there is an acceptable way to seek refuge forms part of the same solipsistic narrative that dictates migration is undertaken to gain material wealth and experience superior forms of civilisation. By continually refuting this narrative and continuously centralising colonial dispossession, this essay aims to contribute to a shift away from help and humanitarianism to responsibility and restitution.

The legality of movement and the terms that are constructed within this discourse are fundamental to the construction of the nation-state (Kelley 2021). The ‘migrant other’ is constructed through policy and public discourse, encapsulating imaginations of empire, globalisation failures and catastrophe and often approached as a distinct category of analysis or policy (Anderson 2017b). With this in mind, and conscious of reifying the ‘migrant’, this project is approaching ‘migration’ as a set of interconnecting forms of governmentality that seeks to continually construct difference. In other words, I aim to demonstrate that policies that claim to control and produce the ‘migrant’ are in fact determining the privilege of the white citizen (Kelley 2021). Migration, in this conjuncture (see chapter 1), is the key discursive site for the reproduction of unequal power, material wealth and humanity. One of the ways this site is enabled, I contend, is through the discursive formation of secularism; a series of assumptions and stipulations that regulate the religious and the secular subject (Hurd 2013, Mahmood 2013).

Importantly, this is not to suggest that an oppositional binary exists between the religious and the secular, or that secularism only seeks to regulate or constrain religion, but that religion and secularism are co-constitutive and necessarily analysed in relation to each other (W. Brown 2013, Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2013). In fact, when religion and secularism are categorically counterposed, discriminations that exist in societies are masked by this opposition (Scott 2013, 2018). When I talk about religion and secularism, I am talking about inherently modern categories that are inextricably linked to colonial-modernity (B. Robinson 2019). Religion, as it has come to be constructed, exists as secular

modernity's constitutive other, bound up with accusations of irrationality and inferiority. It is diametrically opposed to agency, progress and freedom; three pillars of secular modernity. Clearly, this is not all that religion is or is able to be, but as Sylvia Wynter argues, it is the way religion has come to be portrayed in order for the Western construction of man, or man<sup>2</sup>, to continue to dominate (1995).

Secularism, then, as I understand and approach it throughout this paper, is much more than just a separation of church and state. Secularism is a set of ideas and practices that construct, govern and inform what it means to be religious, operating through constructed oppositions such as the political and the religious, the public and the private and the modern and traditional, just as it expediently disrupts and reinforces these oppositions (Asad 2003, Scott 2013). As both a global discourse and a context specific particularity, secularism has no single origin or stable historical formation but is inherently formed through imperial Christian relations of power (Asad 2003, Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2013). Therefore, an analysis of a specific form of secularism must engage in a negotiation between the universalising claims and local particularities. Through the expansion of secular considerations and the problematisation of nominal understandings, Mahmood argues, 'an inquiry into experiences, subjectivities, modes of governance and ethical commitments that comprise 'the secular' across disciplinary divides' is enabled and encouraged (2013: 47).

Since the turn of the century and Talal Asad's appeal for a 'genealogy of the secular' (2003: 49), scholars have begun to engage more with context specific discursive formations of secularism, but this landscape is dominated by investigations into French and US formations. In comparison, there has been relatively little attention paid to other Western European nations that are often considered to fall within attempts at constructing universal arrangements but differ in their approach (Modood 2015). Accordingly, this project is an attempt to locate formations of secularism in the UK, within the universalising discourse, through a focus on presentations of the secular within contemporary migration discourse. I am, therefore, asking: what is the significance of secularism within the 'hostile environment' conjuncture? As I will explain in chapter one, what this means is that I am attempting to understand secularism within the global regime of borders that structures the world along imperial lines and propagates narratives of progress and entitlement.

When I started thinking about precisely how to approach this task, I had quite an elementary idea of how I could theorise a critical understanding of secularism and then demonstrate its discursive impact through an analysis of a specific case. Whilst I think this is interesting and valuable in the way it scrutinises the often-overlooked impact of secularism, I soon came to realise that it was insufficient and reproduced linear notions that I am intent on problematising. Rather than investigating the role of secularism, I am locating secularism within the 'weave of differences' that form the 'hostile

environment' conjuncture (see chapter 1) (Hall 2017: 172). As Stuart Hall explains, the 'weave of differences' is a 'multi-dimensional structure of similarities and difference' that 'disrupts the settled contours of race, ethnos and nation' and 'generates the contemporary politics of identity and differences as a field of positionalities' (172). Secularism, therefore, is approached as always in motion, formed through incessant interactions with the multi-accentual differences that form the 'hostile environment' conjuncture, which, is in turn: always in the making. These differences, that I will chronicle in the first chapter, form the condition of possibility of the 'mythical norm' and the 'dominance of bonded whiteness, masculinity and rationality' (Lorde 1984: 116, Gilroy 1995: 46).<sup>2</sup> The current moment, I aim to demonstrate, is dominated by a specific form of racism that produces a specific construction of whiteness and, consequently, I am investigating how secular ideas contribute to this ordering of the world.

Whiteness, fundamentally, is about privilege and power. It operates as the normative cultural centre of Western society, proliferates numerous structures and incorporates competing, situational experiences and identities (Du Bois 1982). Whiteness is contingent on invisibility, neutrality, a sense of the natural; it represents the primary marker of Lorde's 'mythical norm' (1984). As Gilroy states, whiteness is 'bonded' with masculinity and rationality, and one could even go further and say that it incorporates them (1995). The way whiteness travels from the West and pervades various spaces transforms over time: from the dehumanisation of the black body to the extension of governed territory and the 'neocolonial travel of white cultural products' (Shome 1999: 108). It is also shaped by these interactions of travel, sometimes returning to the origin of dissemination and reformulating the conditions of whiteness in the West (Foucault 2003). It is a complex, dynamic force that is continually resisted and yet seems to maintain and extend its power.

Crucially, the centrality that is attributed to whiteness in this paper is not to diminish the roles of gender, sexuality, religion, nationality and ethnicity but to approach them as a vast entanglement that functions in conjunction with whiteness. In a similar way to secularism and religion (see chapter 2), the 'discourse of racism' that enables whiteness is formed through a series of Manichean divisions (Hall 2017: 71). In other words, whiteness needs the racialised other and therefore processes of purification are always necessarily incomplete (Trafford 2021). Whiteness, then, is a system of domination that presents a hegemonic conception of man as homo economicus, or man<sup>2</sup> (Wynter 2015). Thinking with this, this short thesis attempts to understand the role of secularism within this system. What does secularism, as a broad set of ideas, contribute to a capitalist system that is contingent on cultural and material domination? How does this play out in a United Kingdom that

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<sup>2</sup> The Mythical norm is defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure (see Lorde 1984)



operates within an increasingly intolerant global border regime? And, even when tolerance is displayed, what does this toleration require in return?

Thus, this essay amounts to a modest attempt to uncover the ways colonially inscribed inequalities are reproduced by employing the analytical lens of secularism. This quest will be split into three sections. In the first one, I will describe what I term as the ‘hostile environment’ conjuncture, formed historically through the interaction of competing, uneven social forces. Focusing on contestations of time and evolving configurations of space, I attempt to demonstrate that the ‘hostile environment’ exists beyond certain migration policies and conventional statist spatial limitations, encapsulating Western ideas of superiority. Subsequently, I offer an interpretation of the discursive formations of secularism that attempts to illuminate the various ways secular assumptions function to reproduce ‘imperial and unreflexive Western civilizational’ ideas (Brown 2013: 7). Through a host of contradictions, secularism continually constructs binary oppositions that reduce religion and the religious subject, simultaneously producing the secular subject through the ascription of difference. Therefore, I am calling into question the displacement of inequalities and ‘problems’ of difference onto ‘unacceptable other societies with other kinds of social organisation’ through a more nuanced approach to secularism (Scott 2013: 43). This approach continuously questions the religious-secular divide, ‘revealing its conceptual interdependence’ and provoking the establishment of different ways to think ‘about others and about ourselves’ by understanding both the relationship that exists and the alternatives that are possible (43).

In the third chapter, I outline the specific way I have chosen to employ Critical Discourse Studies and the reasons for this approach. Following this outline, I analyse the discourse that surrounds the announcement and implementation of a language fund that is promoted as a tool for the liberation and emancipation of female Muslim immigrants. To be more precise, I demonstrate how certain discursive techniques are utilised in order to construct and reinforce the divisions and assumptions that are central to secularism. At the same time, I attempt to continually show how the relational forces of the conjuncture I will describe in the next chapter, form the conditions that enable the implementation of a language fund that is laced with exclusionary rhetoric. And, more radically, how this policy exposes the structural disdain for racialised lives that is fundamental to global capitalism. Finally, I will summarise my key findings and offer a short contemplation of what an alternative future might look like.

## 1. The Making of the Hostile Environment

*'This book has a clumsy title, but it is one which meets its purpose. Making, because it is a study in an active process which owes as much to agency as conditioning. The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making'*

*E.P. Thompson, 1968*

To borrow from E.P. Thompson, the 'clumsy' wording of the title for this section is appropriate because it captures the 'active process' of the making of the 'hostile environment'. 'Making' challenges the temporal nature of a conjuncture that did not just come into being but is still being produced, reproduced and experienced. Within this continued production, the 'migrant' is certainly present and able to speak, but the discourse of migration often dominates and masks the realities of migrant emplacement (Caglar and Schiller 2018). The 'hostile environment' was coined by Theresa May in a 2012 interview with *The Daily Telegraph* in which she professed a governmental ambition to make the United Kingdom a 'really hostile environment' for immigrants that are deemed 'illegal' (Kirkup and Winnett 2012). Since that interview, the 'hostile environment' has been used as a term to describe a collection of policies and legislations that function to make it increasingly difficult for non-native people, to live, work and access public services (Goodfellow 2020, Grierson 2018). However, the 'hostile environment' contains more than a set of exclusionary policies; it represents the contemporary component of a consistent national narrative that reproduces whiteness.

In this component, the figure of the 'migrant' represents the embodiment of unevenly distributed differences. But, this embodiment is contingent on centuries of discrimination in the UK that have functioned to legitimise the uneven distribution of resources and power. What this means is that any discussion of the hostile environment must be rooted in an understanding of the legacies of structural oppression and continually connected to a broader regime of borders that maintain and reproduce these structures. This regime is global and all encompassing (Walia 2021). Therefore, when I speak about the hostile environment, I am referencing a set of interacting forces and conditions that extend much beyond the migrant to subjugate all people that have their bodies marked as different and inferior. To locate secularism within the hostile environment then, is to establish whether secular ideas and assumptions (see next chapter) function to reproduce difference and inequality. Before this can be attempted, it is imperative to describe and interpret the historically formed conditions that exist in the current conjuncture. It is this task that occupies this chapter: a conjunctural analysis of the 'multiplicity of forces' and 'accumulated antagonisms' of a reimagined hostile environment (Clarke 2014: 115).

A conjunctural analysis orientates attention to interaction, crossover and contradictions that come together as sites of the ‘condensation of forces’ (Hall 2011: 9). The conjuncture fundamentally challenges linear ideas of time through a focus on the articulation of forces in competing times and spaces (Clarke 2019). Numerous events, narratives and policies are intertwined at any given moment, dependent on the past and attempting to shape the future. This conjunctural analysis will describe various political, economic and social forces in order to provide an overview of the conditions that facilitated the implementation of the language fund that I will analyse in chapter 4. Migration is presented as the most pressing issue in the hostile environment conjuncture through arguments of incompatibility, insufficient resources and a lack of space (Goodfellow 2020). Not only does this dehumanise and abstract individual immigrants, but it also repackages a crisis that is increasing material and ideological inequalities and assumes that aside from migration, society is functioning acceptably (Anderson 2017b, Sirriyeh 2016). In this chapter I will argue that incompatibility and scarcity are synonymous with a racialised notion of entitlement. In other words, I aim to show that the hostile environment conjuncture is the contemporary configuration of racial-capitalist accumulation and colonial ordering.

### 1.1 Imperial Flows

The complex history of the United Kingdom and the British Empire demonstrates the existence of specific mechanisms for generating inequalities and exclusion from nationality on the basis of class, race, gender and religion. For instance, Hannah Arendt argues that English society, through a sacred idea of inheritance, is built on the belief of a superior race and class (1951). As is well documented, this belief was not limited to the shores of the British Isles but travelled around much of the world. Hence, the UK is defined by its empire. Economic and military imperialism continue to shape Britain’s economic position, but also, shape the fabric of life itself (Hall et al 1978). It is not possible to think about immigration and the dominant hostility that pervades migration discourse without considering the past and present impact of British colonialism. Consequently, without the space to adequately capture the experience of the colonised, I want to draw further attention to the repercussions of empire at ‘home’. Aime Cesaire illustrates the inevitability of the transfer of colonial tools of repression from the colony to the native land, arguing that Nazism was a continuation of the Western barbarism practised abroad (1972). Foucault terms this the ‘boomerang effect’; ‘a whole series of colonial models was brought back to the West, and the result was that the West could practice something resembling colonization, or an internal colonialism, on itself’ (2003: 103). As the British empire territorially declined, it came ‘home’ through an influx of migrant labour, returning colonisers and mechanisms of population control (C. Hall 2006, Trafford 2021).

This process is incredibly complex, and its implementation varied over the post-war period, but Cesaire's thesis implies that its application was predestined (1972). Whilst I am in agreement with Cesaire, this argument should not diminish the deliberateness of the 'specific and concrete strategies... utilised in the reconstruction of coloniality at home' (Trafford 2021: 74). Immediately after the war, Britain adopted a reasonably open citizenship policy that created a singular status for residents of the UK and its colonies (Mantu 2015). Characteristically, this was due to necessity rather than altruism, but it did enable the migration of many from the Global South as citizens (Randall 2000). Almost unimaginable today. However, colonial 'compartments' were then formed within the UK, immigrants were segregated into deprived inner-city suburbs as the process of 'white flight' gained momentum (Fanon 1963, Trafford 2021, Sivanandan 1983).<sup>3</sup> Segregation extended to access to public services, work and leisure facilities as a specific ghettoization ensued and racial disparities and tensions increased to boiling point (Trafford 2021).

In 1981, Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government 'redesigned' citizenship into a container of whiteness that was no longer automatically acquired at birth (Tyler 2010: 63).<sup>4</sup> This formalised the hierarchisation of race and concretised the amalgamation of whiteness and Britishness. Subsequently, these hierarchies were further crystallized through policies such as the introduction of a respectability grading for social housing. Distinguishing suitability through 'culture' and 'existing conditions', this indiscriminate barrier reduced housing access just as public housing stock was being redistributed into private ownership (Trafford 2021: 40). Culture offers an acceptable form of discrimination and just as it had overwhelmingly in its colonies, the UK government was engaged in an ideological and material onslaught against racialised populations. This represents what Stuart Hall terms the 'cultural dialectic' (2021: 162). Culture is key to both domination and resistance, but acceptable levels are constructed by the state (Cabral 1973). One must be visibly different as cultural difference is simultaneously liquidated.

## 1.2 Proliferating Borders

The 1981 Nationality Act formally shifted the parameters of British citizenship and seemingly fortified the external border. In reality though, this Act forms part of a broader process of 're-bordering' where the border becomes ubiquitous and deterritorialized, extending both outwards and inwards (Andreas 2000: 2, Balibar 2002). For instance, as James Trafford has shown, colonial inspired policing methods that reinforced segregation deliberately enlarged social controls by extending the surveillance apparatus to include members of the public. These community policing

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<sup>3</sup> 'White flight' is the exodus of the white-middle class from the inner-city to leafy suburbs (see Trafford 2021)

<sup>4</sup> Salman Rushdie termed this 'The New Empire Within Britain' in his 1982 essay (see Rushdie 1992)

operations functioned through a racialised logic that conflated the immigrant and the criminal, performing a dual-purposed threat disposal that served the community and the nation (2021). The border acts as a mechanism that maintains racial disparity and ensures precarity (Walia 2021). Crucially, this interpretation resolves the apparent contradiction between the necessity of the exploited, informal worker to global capitalism and the obsession with national border reinforcement. They are in fact two sides of the same coin. The acceptability of exploitation is reproduced through the racialised global border regime. This is an uneven and dynamic process that produces a variety of experiences, and it is beyond this paper to trace these experiences, but I do want to offer examples that illustrate this point.

In 2018, the 'Windrush scandal' fleetingly dominated British politics. Arriving in the post-war period as British citizens, the Windrush generation had their rights effectively expunged because of arbitrarily modified bureaucratic procedure. Over 50,000 Windrush citizens were treated as 'illegal immigrants' and individuals were denied healthcare, lost their jobs and refused re-entry at the external border (Bhattacharyya et al 2021). However, through a concerted movement and with the support of a ubiquitous uproar that transcended political divides, the Windrush citizens forced a governmental U-turn. This may seem like a small victory for the many organisations and individuals that work to combat inequitable policies, but the pain and distress experienced epitomizes the contempt shown towards 'disposable' subjects in this conjuncture (Trafford 2021). Furthermore, the re-inclusion of the Windrush generation into the nation came at the expense of others. As Bhattacharyya and her colleagues show, the Windrush citizens were placed in opposition to dangerous 'black youths' (2021: 26). Presented as deserving, respectable and law-abiding, characteristics that were generally reserved for the white population, the Windrush generations inclusion was framed in a way that reproduced the undeserving, criminal 'migrant'. The system had made a mistake in this case and the 'wrong' migrant had been punished, but the environment itself remained intact and justified.

Furthermore, I want to point to a common narrative that accompanied, and perhaps supported, the depiction of the Windrush generation as acceptable. Typically expressed by those on the right, there is a frequently declared desire to return to a 'glorious past' that incorporates memories of colonial might and world war fortitude (Virdee and McGleaver 2018). Peter Mitchell describes this emotional attachment to the memory of Empire as 'imperial nostalgia', but I suggest that Anne Laura Stoler's conception of 'colonial aphasia' is a more provocative portrayal (2021). Stoler captures the active process that extends beyond just the collective forgetting to include the deliberate obstruction of knowledge and subsequent incapability of common comprehension (2011). This can be seen as a continuation of colonial knowledge production, a structure that is a vital cog in the wheel of whiteness. Ostensibly, the 'migrant' occupies a temporal confoundment within this arrangement. On the one hand, the 'migrant' can be seen to embody change, placed in opposition to tradition and the

‘left behind’, who are victims of processes of globalisation (Ford and Goodwin 2014). On the other, due to an innate backwardness that is continually (re)ascribed to the wretched, the racialised ‘migrant’ inhibits the inevitable Western march of progress (Fanon 1963). Again, rather than oppositional narratives, these temporalities form one of the conditions of being of modern capital: the working class are splintered and disempowered whilst the racialised other is dehumanised and devalued (Hall et al 1978).

### 1.3 Shifting Insecurities

In the final section of this chapter, I am going to briefly consider the parallel, dialectic process of the centralisation of the Muslim figure as the primary embodiment of racial, gendered otherness. In an increasingly well-documented ‘superimposition of otherness’, Islam is equated with terrorism and a visceral need to increase security (Casanova 2006: 76). As I will show in chapter 4, this constellation of threat is inclusive of the ‘migrant’ and further demonstrates the expansion of the border regime. Rather than being a means of mitigating or managing violent threats, the continually expanded security apparatus is an instrument of the distribution of colonial inspired violence towards dangerous populations (Mayblin and Turner 2021). In extension, security legitimises military style violence in order to create favourable conditions for capital, at home and abroad (Kelley 2021). In this specific case, the UK has engaged in the ‘global’ anti-Muslim discourse that construes Islamic difference as danger and employs a militant form of orientalism (Parashar 2018, Said 1978). As Said seminal shows, this discourse is contingent on colonial expropriation and portrayals of inferiority but is always specific in the way it is articulated (1978, 1981).

Rogers Brubaker traces the concretisation of the British Muslim identity to the cross-cultural reaction to the Rushdie Affair. The British Muslim became detached from the umbrella racial signifier of ‘Black British’ through a consolidated claim to be ‘recognised’ (2013). The Muslim signifier is fluid, contingent on colonial connections and bound up with physical and cultural markers that have become synonymous with the potential for ‘terroristic’ violence (Hage 2017). This potential functions as a ‘cultural pathology bound to the body’ which places the Muslim on the precipice of radicalisation and necessitates surveillance and control (Mayblin and Turner 2021: 142). Control is maintained through the proliferation of the border and security apparatus that seeks to fix identity to place and space (Sharma 2015). Therefore, on the one hand, Muslimness is a fixed identity that enables the ordering of bodies; an intersectional formation that is interlaced with the ‘migrant’ and other racialized, dangerous populations. In a perpetual state of insecurity, these populations are overwhelmingly destined for capitalist exploitation or the privatised carceral system. On the other hand, it is imperative to think beyond identity and intersection. The Muslim as a racial signifier is entrenched in a heteronormative system of whiteness that is inextricably linked to secularism. As Jasbir Puar

demonstrates, it is therefore vital to think about the ‘series of dispersed but mutually implicated and messy networks’ and the ‘interwoven forces that merge and dissipate’ in order to resist ideas of ‘linearity, coherency and permanency’ (2007: 211-12).

Up to this point, forms of racialisation have taken centre stage and gender and sexuality have been neglected. This is a conscious omission though, that reflects a movement within decolonial feminist scholarship. Decolonial feminists (see Lugones 2007, 2011 for instance) argue that because experiences of gender and sexuality vary so immensely between different racialised groups, there should be a prior attempt to illuminate the uneven structures that have been produced by colonialism, imperialism and slavery (Mayblin and Turner 2021). This project takes gender and sexuality seriously and as I will show in the forthcoming chapters, the implications of gender norms are fundamental to the continued weaving of differences that define this conjuncture. In fact, one can go further and suggest that race and sex are practically indistinguishable: gender and sexuality are bound to the ‘very material encounters and systems of knowledge through which race was made and organized’ (Puar 2007, Mayblin and Turner 2021: 175). As Jin Haritaworn states ‘all racialized people transgress dominant gender norms’ (2008: 5). Racial difference was, and still is, imprinted through the conformity to superior, heteropatriarchal social organizations. Nonconformity, therefore, reproduces designations of barbarity, deviancy and inferiority that justify regimes of colonial domination (Lugones 2007). The fundamental point I am trying to make is that gender and sexuality are central tenets of the messy network of relations that reproduce whiteness and cannot be understood separately. Thus, the struggle against heteropatriarchal domination is ‘at once the struggle against imperial racialized capitalism and colonial dispossession’ (Mayblin and Turner 2021: 168).

As I have reiterated in terms of race, gender norms and heterosexuality are not consistently, evenly or permanently applied, but they are always dependent on colonial formations. Systems of gender and sexuality were imposed on colonial populations, in some cases fracturing traditional social relations that were unconcerned with binary divisions (Lugones 2007). Resisting these systems was akin to resisting progress. Gender conformity represented the fast-forwarding of time from the past to the present, a gateway to respectability and civility (Mosse 1982, Said 1978). As the imposition of these systems took hold through coercive, legal and pedagogical means, a hierarchised system of ‘womanhood’ ensured that racialized subjects were never quite ‘woman’ enough (Weerawardhana 2018). As is typical of colonial regimes, systems of categorisation were imposed and then used to further expose difference. Examples of this process can be witnessed in contemporary Britain. For instance, as I will describe in more detail in chapter 4, Muslim women are frequently envisaged as victims of patriarchal domination that need ‘saving’ (Abu-Lughod 2013, Puar 2007). This reproduces imperial justifications of expansion and violence in the name of progress and liberation.

Characteristically and expediently, this narrative loses its appeal when Muslim women (such as Shamima Begum) resist controls through violence.

#### 1.4 Conclusion

This short chapter is an attempt to reimagine the idea of the hostile environment, bringing to the fore the centrality of colonialism and racialized capitalism in this conjuncture. I have endeavoured to make it clear that mobility restrictions continually reproduce and deepen the ‘asymmetries between different categories of humanity’ (Mbembe 2019: 11). These different categories of humanity flow from colonial domination and are imprinted through the formation, conflation and experiences of the migrant, the Muslim, the terrorist and the criminal. These subject formations that Zygmunt Bauman terms the ‘New Poor’, are a racialized, gendered, disposable and necessary underclass that enable the permanence of whiteness (1987). This conjunctural analysis has illustrated the dynamic nature of interacting social forces that combine and then recombine to consistently uphold disparities between native and non-native subjects. In the following chapter, I will attempt to describe the characteristics of secularism and locate it within these interacting social forces, in effect arguing that secularism forms a key, and yet undertheorized, component of the categorisation of humanity. Just as Fanon demonstrates in the ‘colonial world’, the secular world functions through a set of Manichean divisions that ensure the claims of progress, modernity and civility are solely reserved for the dominant power (1963). As I will demonstrate, uneven relations of power that were crystallized through colonialism, are fundamental to the way secularism recognises, stipulates and categorises religion.



## 2. Towards a ‘Secular Discourse’

*‘When I wrote *The Meaning and End [of Religion]* I knew that “religion” was a Western and modern notion. I had not yet seen, but now I do see clearly, that “religion” in its modern form is a secular idea. Secularism is an ideology, and “religion” is one of its basic categories. . . . The secular *Weltanschauung* postulates, and then presupposes, a particular—indeed an odd—view of the human, and of the world: namely the secularist view. It sees the universe, and human nature, as essentially secular, and sees “the religions” as addenda that human beings have tacked on here and there in various shapes and for various interesting, powerful or fatuous reasons.’*

(Cantwell-Smith, 1992: 16)

Wilfred Cantwell-Smith’s reflection on his ‘modern classic’, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, is noteworthy because it highlights several of the topics or intricacies that I will attempt to grapple with in this section.<sup>5</sup> For instance, Cantwell-Smith forthrightly presents the complex relationship between secularism and religion that is so often, and so importantly, reduced to an oppositional binary. Cantwell-Smith then goes on to describe secularism as an ideology that essentially encompasses and relies on religion. This depiction begins to make sense when ideology is approached using Stuart Hall’s employment of Antonio Gramsci. Hall states that ‘ideology is always contradictory’ and finds its effectiveness ‘by suturing together contradictory lines of argument and emotional investments’ (Hall 2011: 18). An historically effective (or Gramscian organic) ideology constructs a ‘unity’ out of difference through configuring different subjects, identities, projects and aspirations that root themselves in the ‘necessarily fragmentary contradictory nature of common sense’ (Hall 1988: 167). As Mayanthi Fernando argues, it is through the ‘disunity and contradiction’ that a ‘continual process of reiteration, rearticulation and regeneration’ enables secularism to maintain its power and implement material processes of regulation (2014: 12). Whether understood as an ideology, or as I will suggest a discourse, contradiction is central to secular formations.

The use of ‘secular discourse’ is an attempt to offer nuance to a discussion that has been criticised for approaching the secular as a constructed ‘thing’, misrepresenting the formational operations of ‘the selective making of practices, habits and life forms’ (Scheer, Johansen and Fadil 2019: 4). For instance, in the above guide-quote, Cantwell-Smith alludes to the constructed nature of religion, at least from what he terms the ‘secularist view’. Although this position can be presented as a critical approach to the study of religion, it also threatens to reduce the complexity of religious experience.

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Modern classic’ is the term Talal Asad uses to describe the book in the review he authored (see Asad 2001)

Turning back to the work of Stuart Hall, in his approach to race, Hall cautions against the reduction of race to a purely constructed phenomenon because of the way this can diminish the subjects experience of the discrimination that race can engender (2017). Instead, Hall suggests that race can be viewed as a discourse. Discourse, according to Hall, is not reduced to language but breaks down the distinction between ‘pure ideas’ and ‘brute practice’: ‘understanding that all human, social and cultural practices are always both’ (46). Therefore, when race is viewed as a discourse, the culturally produced meanings are intertwined with the real effects and experiences, unable to be separated or abstracted. Translating this into religion and secularism, in outlining a secular discourse, I am attempting to construe the co-constitutive systems of meaning that are continually produced and the experiences these meanings generate. Or, in other words, how is secularism, as a system of differentiation, made meaningful?

Within this exploration of the ‘materiality of discourse’, there exists the need to balance the universal and the particular formations of secularism (Hirschkind and Scott 2006: 7). Secularism is universal in the sense that there is a ‘broad trans-Atlantic genealogy of its formation’ and particular in the specific ways it is presented and contested in certain spaces (Fernando 2014: 23). Secularism can be pluralized in order to recognize the multiple contexts that form particular secularisms, but these secularisms are still entrenched in relations of power that are inherently imperial. Therefore, particular secularisms are shaped by both the local, specific conditions and a universal idea of secularism that is dominated by Western discourses linked to Christianity, capitalism and racialisation (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2013). Secularism is experienced differently in France, in the US and in Egypt, but these experiences are shaped by forces that are historically intertwined.<sup>6</sup> In the UK, there is an interaction between what Tariq Modood terms ‘Moderate secularism’- an accommodation of organised religion within the state- and the universal ideological forces of secularism (2019: 137). As I will outline, this interaction is historically complex and often veiled, requiring an investigation that looks ‘through the shadows’ (Asad 2003: 16). Thus, this chapter will entail three interconnecting parts: an account of the ways secularism continuously recognises and stipulates religion; how these processes materialize in the context of the UK and Islam and the structural significance of sexual difference. Crucially, the impact of race and colonialism will act as a connecting thread throughout this chapter.

## 2.1 Recognising Religion

In the opening quote from Cantwell-Smith, religion is said to be modern, Western and secular. On the one hand, it is interesting to note the almost taken-for-granted association of these three terms that

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<sup>6</sup> For more on this see Scott (2013, 2018), Fernando (2014) on France, Jakobsen and Pellegrini (2013) on US, Mahmood (2011), Badran (2013) on Egypt.

suggests a certain interchangeability. To this secular association, one can also add ‘religiously tolerant, humanist, Christian’ and unreligious, an association that renders any attempt to settle on a definition practically hopeless (Brown 2013: 4). What can be said with certainty, however, is that religion and secularism are co-constitutive. They are always formed and reformed in interaction, ‘indelibly intertwined’ and ‘inextricably bound together’ (Butler, Brown and Mahmood 2013, Casanova 2006: 21). In a paradoxical process, secularism simultaneously functions through the production of its opposition to religion and transcends this opposition through continual stipulations and disseminations of what constitutes religion. Secularism claims neutrality but extracts its ideas of acceptable religion from Christianity. This partiality and ‘hypocrisy’ are fundamental to secular formations (Butler, Brown and Mahmood 2013). In the UK, partiality is exemplified by the presence of 26 Anglican Bishops that sit in the upper house of the UK legislature (Modood 2019:). Discursively, the partiality of Christianity is displayed through the construction of complex cultural systems into ‘world religions’ that can be compared to Christianity and then reduced to systems of belief (Masuzawa 2005, King 2011: 41). In *Genealogies of Religion*, Asad demonstrates how both of these processes, that are contingent on a ‘specific Christian history’, abstract and universalize religion through the prescription of generic features and symbolic meanings which are embroiled in relations of power and knowledge (1993: 42-43). It is in Asad’s next major work, *Formations of the Secular*, that these processes are located within the discursive formation of secularism (2003).

The abstraction of religion is a ‘secularized conception of religiosity’ that assumes a ‘set of beliefs are expressed through a set of propositions to which an individual gives assent’ (Mahmood 2011: xiv). Hence, religion is located within the mind of the believer, associated solely with the private sphere and dislocated from the public realm of politics and economics (Asad 1993). This idea is crucial to what Webb Keane calls the ‘moral narrative of modernity’. The moral narrative of modernity associate’s non-belief centred practices with backwardness and encourages private acts of faith. The force of this narrative is exhibited by the suggestion that acts of a backwards nature are contagious and threaten the freedom of others (2012). This notion of backwardness as a pathogen that pervades the body of the other is inherently colonial and inextricably linked to the idea that radicalisation lays dormant in the body of the Muslim (see chapter 1 and 4) (Trafford 2020). The fetishization of private, individual faith continually reproduces an unequal set of power relations that has a Protestant Christian genealogy and is played out across a number of binary oppositions that include (but are not limited to): private/public, religious/political, sex/reason and Islam/West (Mahmood 2011, Scott 2013). These oppositions that, as I will come back to, are inherently gendered, are crucial to the discursive formation of secularism and yet are transgressed with expedience by the secular state (Scott 2013, Asad 2003).

In universalizing the centrality of belief and articulating the essence of what constitutes religion, the secularised formations of religion are both shielded from public criticism and excluded from debates within the public domain (Asad 1993, King 2011). This process is not always consistent, as is exhibited by public debates on the headscarf and blasphemy, but these inconsistencies are often evoked through the perceived transgression of religion into the public sphere (Mahmood 2011). These transgressions antagonize the moral narrative of modernity through the supposed infringement of agency and freedom (see chapter 4) (Keane 2012). Therefore, although secularism claims to protect the right to freedom of religion, this freedom is a secularized, liberal notion of freedom that is based on thought and can only be ‘irrationally’ expressed in private (Mahmood 2011). According to this understanding, the regulation of public practices does not affect the religious subject too severely because what is truly important remains untouched: that of thought and belief (Keane 2012). At the same time, in order for the secular state to establish whether a certain belief is religious, it must be recognisable within a doctrine that has been ascribed central importance in the secularizing process of religion (Asad 2013).

One of the key functions of secularism, then, is to be able to recognise religion. This process of recognition, which includes abstraction and universalisation, is made up of multiple interactions that change and extend over time (Asad 2013). To be recognised, as Mayanthi Fernando contends, is contingent on the establishment of both sameness and difference (2014). Correspondingly, Charles Taylor seminally argues that the key to struggles of recognition is a ‘regime of reciprocal recognition’ (1994: 50). However, reciprocity is practically impossible in a relationship such as that of a state and a subject where power is inherently uneven. In fact, the very idea of recognition secures and reproduces the position of power of the recognising structure. Patchen Markell asserts that although secular, liberal states insist on equal recognition as a core value, recognition is overwhelmingly used to establish the conformity of minorities (2003). Going a step further, in claiming to be recognised, religious groups are forced to disclose their difference from the constructed majority, reinforcing their otherness (Fernando 2014). I will outline how this plays out in practice in the UK shortly but first, I want to underline the centrality of recognition to the disciplining power of secularism and the continuing relation to colonialism.

First turning to Fanon, one of the central contentions of *Black Skin, White Masks* is that in any exchange of recognition the underlying relations of power are overwhelmingly perpetuated and extended. As Fanon explains, this is achieved through the terms of accommodation being framed by the dominant partner and, over time, through the development of attachments to these terms by the subordinate partner (1952). Building on this thesis, Glen Coulthard demonstrates how in the case of Canada the structures of domination shifted from unconcealed violence to a system of accommodation and recognition. Indigenous people were enticed into this system and eventually, in concise terms,

became proprietors of their own oppression (2014). I suggest that because of the structures of power that propagate secularism, any process of recognition will function in much of the same way. The secular state professes to actively accommodate different forms of religion but is permanently engaged in a colonially influenced system of domination that shapes religion and then persuades religious subjects to undertake this task themselves. Recognition, therefore, is another tool in the colonial chest that expressly dispossesses the othered subject, whether of land, of culture or of bread.

In the context of the UK, this process of recognition can be traced through discrimination and equality Acts that have unevenly protected certain ethnic and religious groups. For instance, it was not until 2003 that protection against discrimination was extended to Muslims (having been granted to Jews and Sikhs on separate occasions decades before).<sup>7</sup> This inconsistent extension of legal protection was justified through differential categorisations; Sikhs and Jews were judged to be ethnic minorities whereas Muslims were distinctively religious (Modood 2019). The state, through acts of inclusion, determine what constitutes religion, culture and ethnicity and hierarchise different aspects of identity. The Muslim subject, in claims of discrimination, is forced to dislocate their religious identity from their cultural identity and in doing so, accommodates the states pursuit of acceptable and readily defined religion. This process is then framed as an attempt to integrate or assimilate the subject into the inclusive, and yet privileged, nation-state formation. Wendy Brown, in offering an account of ‘the Jewish question’ in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, demonstrates how this is neither restricted to Muslims or historically unique. In order to be ‘brought into the nation’, Jews had to be ‘made to fit’ through ‘recognition, remaking and marking’. Consequently, Brown continues, ‘assimilation, the thinking went, would make Jews more modern, more European and more free’; a discourse that is practically identical to contemporary precedents (2006: 53).

## 2.2 ‘Islam and the West’

In her ethnographic account- *Politics of Piety*- Saba Mahmood illustrates that ‘secularization’ and ‘westernization’ are understood as interchangeable. According to members of the Egyptian piety movement, ‘secularization’ and ‘westernization’ describe the historical process of the reduction of Islamic knowledge into the status of ‘custom and folklore’ (2011: 44). This process is intertwined with the period of economic liberalisation that was led by the Sadat government, amidst the development of more intimate relations with Western nations. ‘Secularization’, in this context, has an inherent coloniality. ‘Custom and folklore’ provoke connotations of tradition and backwardness that are automatically positioned against modernity and civility. Interestingly, the women of the piety movement refute this idea by reclaiming the idea of civility. Islam practices, the women argue,

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<sup>7</sup> At this stage it was just in the workplace but would be extended in 2010 to other areas (see Modood 2019).

achieve civility by increasing their proximity to God. Understandably, Mahmood explains, members of the movement perceive little difference between the secular, modernity and Christianity; they all misunderstand the Islamic knowledge system (2011: 45). This example portrays the complex relationship between 'Islam' and the 'West'. As Said explains, 'the world of Islam' and the 'Islam' in common use in the West do not correspond 'in any significant way' (Said 1981: x). The very fact that it is the West, and not Christianity, that is pitted against Islam reflects the self-congratulatory idea that the West has in fact moved past Christianity (Said 1978).<sup>8</sup> This discursive process of recognition feeds into further specific processes, some of which I will attempt to illustrate.

Attempts to recognise Islam and the Muslim subject are contingent on a contradictory understanding of the relationship between religion and culture. Religion is dislocated from cultural practice and concomitantly combined with it. Mayanthi Fernando demonstrates how in France this process operates through state regulatory projects such as the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM). The CFCM act as an interlocutor between Islam and the state. As well as homogenising and universalizing Islam, Fernando explains, the CFCM are able to assist the state in determining whether practices are cultural or religious (2014). The expedient nature of this process matters because the state is able to regulate cultural practices or confine religious ones to the private sphere, ensuring that all religio-cultural practices are restricted and controlled. In the UK, this plays out quite differently because there is an open preference for Christianity (Modood 2019). This means that the relationship between the state and Islamic representatives is largely unofficial and dependent on the will of the governing party (Khan, Hassan and Ahmed 2020). The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) is the most prominent Islamic organisation but, since their inception in 1997, they have endured quite a tumultuous liaison with the British state. During periods when the MCB were viewed less favourably, the government considered organisations with less 'political' inclination, such as the British Muslim Council and the Sufi Muslim Council, to represent more 'suitable collaboration partners' (Nielsen and Otterbeck 2016: 53). As I have outlined above, this so called 'collaboration' ensures the state can legitimately control and regulate Islam, choosing the most willing 'partner' on each occasion.

The MCB defines itself as a non-theological association (Khan, Hassan and Ahmed 2020). Turning again to Mahmood's research in Egypt, members of the Piety movement claim that the separation of morality, acts of worship and doctrine, into distinct aspects of Islam, is a fundamental part of the secularization of Egyptian society. Islam is accused of irrationality and dogma because of a dependency on traditional doctrines, a dependency, according to Piety movement members, that is itself formed during the process of secularization (Mahmood 2011). In promoting a non-theological approach to Islam, the MCB is reinforcing a secular conception of religiosity. This exemplifies the

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<sup>8</sup> For extensive discussions on this see Said (1978, 1981)

effects of the process of recognition. The uneven power relations ensure pandering, and compromise are exhibited by the subordinate power. In this case, the desire for recognition enables the perpetuation of conflicting narratives that depict an irrational, doctrine-centric religion and a separate, excessively visible culture (Gole 2011, Mahmood 2011). It is through this ambiguity that secularism produces and maintains its power as an ideological force. The MCB was created to provide Muslims a voice, but in an effort to be recognised, it has to navigate a series of secular stipulations that reduce and homogenise the complex constitution of Islam (Fernando 2014).

The interaction between the British State and Islamic organisations is complex, dynamic and historically contingent. Formed through the interplay of several different social forces, unequal relations of power surge current-like through the relationship. For instance, the MCB have been most willingly engaged with on policies that relate to extreme forms of Islam and securitisation (Khan, Hassan and Ahmed 2020). This expedient engagement is consistent with the synonymy between Islam and terrorism that I outlined in the previous chapter. Often referred to as the ‘securitisation of Islam’, the continual conveyance of the Muslim subject as a threat simultaneously secures the citizenship of the secular subject (Mavelli 2013). In this case, as Fanon and Coulthard described, the homogenous Muslim is offered a seat at the table of their own trial, seduced into legitimising securitisation policies. This process is interlaced with colonial forms of dispossession and inseparable from the capitalist border regime.

Secularism produces otherness through a paradoxical presentation of visibility and invisibility (Göle 2011). The ‘Islamic revival’, that forms part of the ‘return of the religious’ discourse, is one example of the increased visibility of Islam (Balibar 2017).<sup>9</sup> The so-called revival would come to be dominated by a narrative of social conservatism and fundamentalism. Said demonstrates how this narrative is produced through the ‘covering’ of Islam and particularly the coverage of the Iranian revolution (1981). In the UK, this increased visibility has been experienced and presented through events such as the Rushdie Affair, the ‘war on terror’ and the Arab Spring. These events are ‘given’ to us as spatial transgressions of freedom and progress (always inconsistently). Islam is made more visible but, simultaneously, Muslims are increasingly required to be visibly less religious, compelled to integrate and assimilate (Mahmood 2011). Additionally, although religious practice is increasingly confined to the private sphere, too much privacy is likely to increase the already extreme suspicion advanced by the state (Fernando 2014). This is emblematic of the way sameness and difference are imposed and experienced in this conjuncture. Whether the subject is labelled as the ‘migrant’ or the Muslim, the negotiation of visibility ensures the other is always too different.

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<sup>9</sup> Balibar is extremely critical of the possibility of the ‘return of the religious’, questioning whether ‘religion’ ever went anywhere and exactly what it is that might be returning (for more see Balibar 2017)

### 2.3 The Gendering of Spheres

When Islam is discursively positioned as ‘fundamentally at odds’ with modernity, unable to exist and abide by the inherently emancipatory nature of secular societies, the often-unquestioned standard of judgement is the issue of gender equality (Scott 2013: 25). It is assumed that Western secular nations are fundamentally more equal than Islamic societies- on an ‘inevitable emancipatory march’- but this narrative is at least exaggerated, if not totally inaccurate (27). As Scott explains, at its moments of inception, western secularism, in its various forms, rarely considered women as men’s political equals and, in fact, sex was a ‘legitimate ground for inequality’ (29). There have been forms of progress, most notably in voting and legal rights that women have secured, but overwhelmingly substantive rights are unequally afforded. Going further, Scott states that ‘processes of secularization have, historically, served to intensify rather than relieve the dilemmas that attend sexual difference’ (30). Despite this, Scott herself and scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod, have demonstrated the various ways that secular narratives of gender equality are employed to produce and reinforce ideas of secular superiority (2013, 2013). Consequently, both highlight the inescapable coloniality of these narratives that have historically been used for imperial conquest and are based on violent inequalities of power (Scott 2013, Abu-Lughod 2013). In this marking of bodies as other, there is an inherent and crucial intertwining of secular and racial formations, an intertwining that is fundamental to the Western weave of differences (Scheer, Johansen and Fadil 2019, Hall 2017).

To say secularism employs narratives of gender equality/inequality is to underdetermine the mutual imbrication of secularism and sexuality, or as Joan Scott conceived: sexualism (2018). Sexual difference structures the meaning of secularism through an unambiguous division of male/female that forms the basis for multiple binary oppositions (Scott 2013). The feminised private sphere is irrational, religious and intimate, placed in opposition to the innately masculine occupations of rationale and politics (Scott 2018). In other words, ‘when reason becomes the defining attribute of the citizen and when abstraction enables the interchangeability of one individual citizen for another, passion gets assigned not just to the marital bed..., but to the sexualized body of the woman. So it is that domestic harmony and public disorder are figured in female form’ (Scott 2013: 27). The female body is repeatedly the space where discursive formations and material implications of secularism meet, whether through the politics of the veil, marriage or cultural assimilation (see chapter 4). In a series of contradictions, the woman is confined to the private sphere as the regulation of her body is made increasingly more public. At the same time, her imagined freedom is presented as a beacon of Western progress (Badran 2013, Scott 2018).

The contemporaneous confinement and regulation of religion and women, inherently contradictory and uneven, functions to protect the power of those that constitute the public sphere (Badran 2013).



The masculine public sphere is dynamic in its continued construction, a negotiation of visibility that produces and illuminates difference and yet seeks to universalize the acceptable subject (Gole 2011). In expressing religion and femininity overtly, the universal is threatened and then reproduced through the recognition of difference (Fernando 2014). As I have described above, this process is contingent on the uneven distribution of power that is intrinsic to claims made from outside of the universal, from a space of subordination, difference and particularity. This space is continually reproduced by secularisms dependence on the production of sexual difference that constitutes the gendering of the public/private. But, as Scott explains in her call for a genealogy of secularism, the exposition of secularisms reliance on sexual difference must be advanced in conjunction with an awareness of other influential forces and histories (Mahmood 2013, Scott 2013).

For instance, in a colonially entangled Egypt, secularism came to be associated with the upper class. But, crucially, the acceptability of this association was unevenly distributed according to sex. The upper-class man could exhibit western influences publicly without violating his religious authenticity, able to exist as both religious and secular (Badran 2013). In contrast, the upper-class Egyptian woman, who exhibited similar influences, was labelled as ‘too modern’ and inauthentically religious. The ‘authentic’, ‘traditional’ middle class woman, on the other hand, did adhere to the parameters of acceptability and was celebrated for her rejection of Westernisation (108). Again, the woman’s body is the site of confounding expectations of religion and secularism. In the UK, these dynamics between religion, class and gender often play out quite differently. As I will show in chapter 4, working class Muslim and immigrant women are presented as religious because they have not had the opportunity to ‘enter modernity’, confined by their patriarchal partner. It is the man who is held responsible, as the women are simultaneously stripped of agency. In this example, the patriarchal structure is reorganised and reinforced into a modern form. In what Hisham Sharabi term’s the ‘neopatriarchy’, the female subject is subjugated in new ways in order to maintain colonial relations of power (Sharabi 1988: 4).

#### 2.4 Secular Discourse...?

In this chapter, I have attempted to synchronise a general theory of secularism and context specific examples of secular forces. I have challenged several ‘common-sense assumptions’ of the characteristics and functions of secularism, bringing to light the various and specific ways both the religious and non-religious subject are constituted. Throughout this chapter, I have illuminated the contradictions that are inherent to the discursive formations of secularism and located these contradictions within a network of other continuously interacting relations. With this in mind, it is not possible, or particularly desirable, to construct a fixed set of characteristics that form a secular discourse, to separate and abstract secularism from other social forces, but in describing a number of the characteristics, the formations and connections become more accessible.

Secularism functions through the recognition of religion and difference, abstracting certain aspects of diverse cultural systems, such as the centrality of belief, and universalizing these abstractions that are central to the 'world religions' (Asad 1993). In doing so, it both separates and then stipulates what is 'real' religion and then what is cultural, constantly reimagining this separation at the expedience of the state. The secular West constructs the otherness of Islam in order to secure its own self certainty, utilising hyperbole to continually reinforce an unequal set of power relations, at home and abroad (Mavelli 2013, Scott 2013). These constructions that present simple oppositions obscure the historically complex relationship between forms of Islam and Western states (Scott 2013). Essential to these functions is the production and reproduction of the masculine public sphere and the feminised private sphere. A separation and gendering that is fundamental to the various binary oppositions that cultivate secularism. Crucially, as William Connolly points out, although these 'Asadian themes' have been identified clearly by a number of scholars, their force is established through their consanguinity and interdependence (2006: 76). In what follows then, I will investigate whether the characteristics of secular discourse that I have described, can be uncovered and analysed in the discourse that surrounds the launching of a language policy that perpetuates the discriminatory conditions of the hostile environment conjuncture.

### 3. Methodology

In the remainder of this essay, I am attempting to bring together the previous two chapters through a Critical Discourse Analysis of David Cameron and the Conservative government's introduction of a 2016 language fund that would 'help Muslim women' learn English (Mason and Sherwood 2016). This policy, the justification and the criticism, as I will demonstrate, exemplify the intersections of the 'hostile environment' conjuncture and secularism. In a dialectical relationship, the language fund is embedded within common-sense assumptions, social structures and other discursive events. Using a Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) approach, I aim to illustrate how these assumptions, structures and events enable the implementation and shape the justification of the language fund. How does this policy fit within the conjuncture that I have described? And how does secularism function discursively in the justification and criticism of the policy? But it should become abundantly clearer as I outline and apply the method of CDS I have chosen as, fundamentally, CDS exists to challenge normalised social inequalities (Wodak and Meyer 2016). Crucially, this means that it is necessary to illuminate inequalities and suggest how they can be counteracted. In order to accomplish this, I am using a Discourse Historical Approach that, as I will explain below, is designed to investigate the different structural levels of discourse within a frame that is continually contextualised.

The hostile environment conjuncture contains several events that achieved a greater level of publicity and attention than the implementation of the language fund. For instance, the attempted deprivation of Shamima Begum's citizenship demonstrated the intertwining of terrorism and Islam, the synonymy of Britishness and whiteness and contradictory notions of the agency of Muslim women (Abbas 2020). The Windrush scandal, as I touched on in chapter 1, illustrates the dynamic nature of the acceptable citizen and the colonially cultivated disdain for racialized lives. Both of these cases captured public attention and remain widely discussed, but it is this perceived exceptionality that I find slightly problematic. The implementation of the language fund is such a pertinent case because it is so normal within this conjuncture. It occupies a transient space in the media because it reproduces narratives that are widely accepted and it is, therefore, quite unexceptional. At the same time, it is emblematic of the interconnections of discourses of religion, migration and gender. As I will show, the language fund discourse is in many ways representative of this conjuncture that openly discriminates against undesirable subjects. But significantly, it also offers examples of exclusionary narratives that are somewhat humanitarian, narratives that claim to 'save' subjects from themselves and those they associate with (Fassin 2012).

### 3.1 Discourse, Dominance and Difference

Initiated following a meeting of scholars in Amsterdam in 1991, Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) was born from a shared interest in the production and unequal effects of power and ideology. It consists of a collection of different approaches that are connected through a desire to critically analyse the expression, constitution and legitimisation of discourse (Catalano and Waugh 2020). Since its inception, CDS has grown and evolved to remain relevant and effective, its popularity testament to its capacity to challenge the privileges of power. ‘Interdisciplinary and eclectic’, CDS is an approach that enables the researcher to formulate a framework that is tailored to the specifics of the project and encompasses a combination of different methods (Wodak and Meyer 2016: 4). The variety of approaches and components that fall within the broad arena of CDS can be viewed as both a strength and a weakness, offering the researcher diversity and yet exposing them to possible cherry-picking accusations. I suggest, however, that the drive to criticise power abuse, inequality and social discrimination and to shed light on exclusion and hypocrisy, is impossible to achieve within a framework of academic neutrality that seeks to maintain structures of power (Reisigl 2017). Consequently, the key attraction of CDS is that it is designed to critique the status quo and offer an alternative to systems that preserve material and social inequalities. Therefore, to expect an analysis to be removed from political ideals is to expect the ‘master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house’ (Lorde 2018). In being unashamedly political, CDS endeavours to offer solidarity with those who need it most (van Dijk 1993).

CDS is primarily focused on the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of dominance, signifying a predilection to the analysis of top-down dissemination. Whilst this suggests a linear view of the workings of dominance as social power, CDS does not diminish the importance of resistance and agency in formations of domination but recognises the complex and interdependent relations between the bottom and the top. Therefore, although openly better equipped to analyse power and power abuses of ‘elites’, these abuses are always understood to be in relation to resistance, compliance and acceptance (van Dijk 1993: 250). It is through the illumination of discourses and structures of domination, understandings of patterns and techniques within these structures, that CDS endeavours to give the subjected a voice. CDS is motivated by pressing social issues, attempting ‘change through critical understanding’, and therefore must go beyond the seemingly obvious acts of exclusion to investigate the way dominance is also exerted through claims of inclusion (252). This point is key to this analysis: secularism acts as a force of domination through both claims of exclusion and inclusion, employing narratives, such as gender equality, that are seemingly progressive but can function to exacerbate difference. Thus, in this discourse analysis, I aim not only to deal with pressing social issues but to reimagine the constitution of such issues.

In order to do this, I will integrate the analysis from the previous chapter- that illustrates the ways difference is produced through ideas of secularism- into a CDS framework which facilitates a case specific analysis of secularisms discursive impact. Difference is taken as central to the assertion of dominance following Hall's extension of Foucault's power-knowledge dialectic that places difference as the 'silent third-term' (2017: 48). Dominance, then, is contingent not only on the exertion of knowledge/power, but on the continuous framing of otherness in these exertions. The structuring of differences and similarities, through the representation and organisation of practices, are made meaningful when transferred from the material into language, constructing a discursive system. Secularism and religion, as con-constitutive, are classificatory systems and as such, always discursive systems. This, therefore, means that the interplay between secularism and religion is made meaningful through the production of similarity and difference. As I have argued, secularism continually reproduces the discursive differences of religion, securing itself as a 'regime of truth' that utilises the triangular power-knowledge-difference and seeks to ascertain recognition as common-sense (45). The simple binaries that are intrinsic to secularism help to mask the interpenetration of identities, or as Hall puts it, the polarization attempts to 'fix the differences between 'inside' and the constitutive 'outside', which keep sliding into each other' (72). Consequently, this discourse analysis seeks to illustrate how, in this particular case, the discursive system of secularism asserts domination through the construction of difference?

### 3.2 Constructing a Framework

CDS offers an abundance of different tools for this exercise but as I mentioned above, I am employing a Discourse Historical Approach. Paramount to this approach is the historical embedding and contextualisation of discourse (Wodak and Richardson 2013). This is crucial because context enables the analysis of change or continuation across time and space. I have already made clear that the history of colonialism and racialization are absolutely central to the formation of the hostile environment conjuncture and consequently, the establishment of the language fund cannot be separated from this history. In what follows I aim to further uncover and expose the connections between the discourse that surrounds the fund and discourses of colonialism and secularism. DHA provides a method that draws out themes such as these through the establishment of interacting discursive micro and macro structures (Catalano and Waugh 2020). In other words, DHA recognises three levels of analysis (thematic content, macro strategies, micro techniques) and the overall objective is to identify and consider the strategies and techniques in order to ascertain the significant themes (Amer 2012). With this objective in mind, Ruth Wodak and Theo van Leeuwen outline four dialectical macro-strategies that are employed by social actors (1999):

- i. Constructive strategies: Invariably linguistic events, constructive strategies build and establish particular groups and identities through acts of reference. In doing so, they invite and promote identification with ‘we’ groups ‘over here’ and seek to distance or marginalise the ‘they’, ‘over there’.
- ii. Strategies of perpetuation and justification: In maintaining the status quo, constructed identities are supported, reinforced and justified through strategies that present external threats and objective morals, frequently transporting narratives from the past that are seen as intrinsically legitimising.
- iii. Strategies of transformation: Attempt to transform well-established ideas of what is and is not acceptable. Reconstructing and reimagining narratives that are no longer useful or persuasive.
- iv. Strategies of destruction: Oppositional and disruptive, destructive strategies seek to demolish the status quo.

These strategies are intertwined in a continual process of construction; enabled, supported and undermined through different employments. As a process, it is neither linear nor completely satisfiable, always overlapping and interchangeable, inconsistent and contested (Wodak 2017). Nevertheless, I hope the value of this ordering mechanism will become apparent as it is applied and expanded through the various techniques of realization.

In all discourses of difference, there is a desire to make meaningful distinctions that are articulated within operations of power (Hall 2017). The construction and consolidation of these differences, through the four strategies above, is partly, but never fully, realized through certain techniques of ‘othering’. Ruth Wodak, in her recent notable analysis of the rise of ‘right-wing populism’, demonstrates many of these different techniques, or micro strategies (2015). I want to suggest, before engaging analytically, that techniques of othering which function to construct difference can be placed within the broader strategy of ‘frontier effects’. Frontier effects, as framed by Laclau and Mouffe, are the emergences of antagonistic identities which are ‘subject to constant displacements’ (1984: 134). Interpreted and condensed, Hall states that frontier effects constitute the production of the white Western identity through the ‘discursive inscription of otherness’. Hall, in this case, is predominantly concerned with productions of race and asserts that race is a historically specific, ‘virulent manifestation’ of the formation of cultural difference, or the production of Western-centrism (2017: 82). Secularism, as another project of colonial modernity, immutably intertwined with race, is similarly discursively produced through frontier effects and specific techniques.

Accordingly, there are a multitude of micro strategies that are employed to construct, perpetuate and reconstruct difference, strategies that function interactively to support and reinforce frontiers. These

strategies function in two distinct and interconnecting ways. On the one hand, they create a world of Manichean divisions: ‘them and us, primitive and civilised, light and dark’. As I have shown, these divisions are central to secular discourses- as well as discourses of racism and colonialism- and create a ‘seductive black and white symbolic universe’ (Hall 2017: 71). On the other hand, micro strategies function to legitimise discourse through the reconstruction of ideas of authority (authorization), the glorification of rationale (rationalization), the reinscription of certain morals (moral evaluation) and the portrayal of national imaginaries through stories (mythopoesis, invention of tradition) (Wodak and van Leeuwen 1999). In the following chapter, I will outline and illustrate the various techniques of realization that are discursively employed by David Cameron and his interlocutors, demonstrating how the concerted adoption of these techniques facilitate and legitimise the macro strategies that inform a continual process of alterity.

I have chosen to focus primarily on an article written by David Cameron, published in *The Times* newspaper. As I explain further in the next chapter, I have selected this article, as opposed to a policy document, because it is significant in and of itself that the prime minister has access to a major publication. Cameron, in writing this article, is speaking to a certain section of the British public: an affluent, elderly *Times* readership that are overwhelmingly conservative (Thurman and Fletcher 2019). In other words, in choosing to write for *The Times*, Cameron addresses an audience that he knows are unlikely to be directly affected by this policy but are supportive of the concept and it is therefore assumed, if difficult to prove, that he speaks in a certain way. In reading this article then, I have endeavoured to bear this in mind, thinking about the positionality and interests of the reader. This is important because all writing is an initiation of dialogue and functions to actively produce specific thoughts and reactions from the reader; it is a performance. On the surface, then, this article outlines the reasons and benefits of the implementation of the language fund. Beneath the surface, as I will show, it functions to perpetuate feelings of hostility that are built on a common-sense understanding of secular superiority. It is this Janus-faced undertaking that makes the article such a productive object of analysis.

To provide context, I will highlight two previous speeches performed by Cameron that demonstrate the lineage and the evolution of his views. These speeches are articulated in differing circumstances and to different audiences but, as I will show, illustrate common narratives. Additionally, I will utilise several articles written in reaction to Cameron’s announcement, critical articles that are published in traditionally liberal press outlets and must be read as such. Together these pieces of discourse are representative of the mainstream, political centre and illustrate the frames of conventional opinion. Alternatively, I could have included commentary from more controversial publications such as *The*

*Daily Mail* or *The Spectator*.<sup>10</sup> However, in this spatially limited project I want to focus on slightly more subtle invocations of secular discourse, uncovering the specific ways secularism is utilised in seemingly progressive narratives that proclaim to include minorities. David Cameron, if somewhat superficially, is claiming a desire to liberate subjects he feels are oppressed. And, even in critical response to Cameron's superficial claims, I argue that the critique that is offered is ensconced in secular assumptions.

One of the limitations of the chosen material, however, is that newspaper readership in the UK is concentrated amongst the older sections of the population (Thurman and Fletcher 2019). In only analysing articles that are published in mainstream media outlets, I somewhat neglect younger groups that are renowned for more progressive views. Therefore, in a more extensive study it would have been interesting to include discourse that reaches a more diverse audience and see if the discursive themes I identify in the following chapter remain as consistent. On the other hand, the mainstream British media epitomise the domination of whiteness and it remains necessary to interrogate and analyse the contours of this domination (Martinson 2018). A further limitation of this study, it can be argued, is the method of choosing the quotes from within the material. It was neither systematic nor scientific but based on the employment of certain discursive techniques of realization that I had already identified (see next chapter). This can lead to accusations of cherry-picking but, as I have already stated and will reiterate, in employing a CDS approach I am being explicitly and necessarily political. With this in mind, in this next chapter I will illustrate the discursive techniques David Cameron and his interlocutors use to construct and perpetuate a master narrative of secular superiority.

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<sup>10</sup> These publications are controversial for several reasons, most notably in their portrayal of Muslims (for instance see Greenslade 2014).



#### 4. Discourse Analysis

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 2016, David Cameron announced a new policy that would liberate ‘migrants’ through increased access to English lessons. Muslim women in particular, Cameron suggests, would be the targets of a new language fund that would both help and force ‘migrants’ to learn English. In a *Times* article that was titled ‘We won’t let women be second-class citizens’, Cameron explains that a poor comprehension of English is one of the major barriers to immigrant integration and needs to be tackled if the UK is to become ‘one nation’ (2016). On the corresponding day, David Cameron was interviewed on BBC Radio 4, projecting a similar message, calling for an end to the segregation of Muslim women (Gov.uk 2016). As I alluded to above, this is presented as an inclusive policy, a policy that is determined to establish a greater national cohesion. But immediately it is apparent that the policy is a tool to deepen cultural divides, transmit ideas that are saturated in colonial logic and deflect attention away from draconian government policies that are intensifying inequalities. As I will show, the focus on Muslim women acts to reinforce the ‘brown man’ as a threat and underline the imagination of a homogenous, backwards Islam (Abu-Lughod 2002). In extension, these narratives contribute to a wider discourse that portrays religion as inherently confining and proposes that the only way to confront this confinement is through the reinforcement and spread of secularism. Throughout this chapter, I will expose and challenge these ideas.

It is worth pausing for a moment, before discussing the content of the discourse, to consider the extreme privilege of thought afforded to David Cameron. Now, this may seem like an odd observation. David Cameron, as prime minister, is expected to be afforded a considerable amount of discursive space. Whilst this may be true, access to this space is fundamental to domination (van Dijk 1993). Through preferential access, dominance can be maintained and extended, continually constructing the interests it represents (Cutler et al 1977). Therefore, this form of widely accepted privilege is exactly what CDS is designed to criticise. The very fact that David Cameron is able to publish an article in one of the UK’s leading newspapers and be interviewed on national radio on the same day is evidence of a structure of domination. It is, I suggest, indicative of a British society that values political theatre over disposable lives and illustrates that the modern media exists primarily as a vehicle to maintain existing social and economic class power (Parenti 1986). David Cameron embodies a level of authority that imbues his words with power, it is imperative that this power is challenged unceasingly.

#### 4.1 Language, Migration and Empire

In the sub-heading of his article in *The Times*, David Cameron discloses that the allocation of funding for English lessons forms part of a broader expectation of ‘migrant’ integration. According to Cameron, there is an urgent need to ‘force migrants’ to learn English in order to create ‘One Nation’ (2016). This statement is, however, replete with problematic assertions. There is an assumption that language is central to national unity and therefore that, if a ‘migrant’ reaches an ‘adequate’ level of English they increase their chances of acceptance into the imagined nation. Consequently, there is a perpetuation of the narrative that a ‘migrant’ must prove their worth through acts of integration. This either wilfully misremembers the historical and contemporary reasons for migration or demonstrates an incapability of understanding the devastation caused by capital accumulation and colonial dispossession. Either way, this narrative informs the process of ‘colonial aphasia’ (Stoler 2011). Therefore, the idea that the ‘migrant’ is obligated to show they are willing to indulge in cultural practices is a direct continuation of colonial relations of power and logic.

Intertwined in these colonial relations, the sacrosanct positioning of English hierarchises immigrants not just on their ability to learn English, but on their previous access to English. In a perpetuation of policy that can be traced back to at least the 1981 Nationality Act, the ‘migrant’ is welcomed depending on their proximity to whiteness (Trafford 2021). For instance, Immigrants from English-speaking, settler-colonial states are offered a clear advantage. Former colonial territories are also favoured in a historically formed hierarchisation that is contingent on class, gender and westernisation. This amounts to a sliding scale that rewards wealth, progress and sex. In one contemporary instance of favourability, following the protests for the protection of ‘democracy’ in Hong Kong, reports claimed that the UK would be willing to accept a large number of ‘threatened’ ‘Hong Kongers’ (Hale 2021).<sup>11</sup> In contrast, there has been a consistent reluctance to accept any significant number of displaced Syrians.<sup>12</sup> This suggests that ‘migrants’ from Hong Kong are more acceptable to the UK establishment because of their conditions of access to English. Whether these conditions are perceived or real, they stem from ideas of ‘westernisation’, wealth and gender equality. The point I am trying to make is that the idea of English proficiency facilitates discrimination through many interconnecting factors. Access to language functions within the discursive inscription of otherness, forming a ‘frontier’ for the white Western identity.

However, as I aim to make clear throughout this chapter, the processes that ascribes otherness are neither fixed, consistent or linear. Acceptability changes over time. It is dependent on constructed

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<sup>11</sup> It is unclear exactly what is meant by ‘democracy’, but it is certainly linked to Westernisation.

<sup>12</sup> See also a concerted effort to restrict displaced, former colonial East Africans (see Trafford 2021, Goodfellow 2020)

popular discursive ‘folk devils’ and as I outlined in chapter 1, shifting acceptance can be used to further produce otherness (Bhattacharyya et al 2021: 13). On the other hand, acceptability also shifts because of the way it is resisted. I will explain this in more detail in section 4.2, but this understanding of the malleability of power is fundamental to this essay. Hence, language is not just a tool of oppression but is continually used as a vehicle of resistance. For example, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o in *Decolonising the Mind* demonstrates the necessity of indigenous language in maintaining culture and resisting colonial impositions (1986). From an alternative but connected standpoint, Salman Rushdie argues that the language of the coloniser can be remade and repurposed by the colonised. In fact, Rushdie continues, ‘to conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free’ (1992: 17). Language, therefore, is a key site of the negotiation and contestation of sameness and difference.

The narrative of the centrality of language for ‘successful’ integration is by no means new. In 2007, David Cameron gave a speech at a conference entitled ‘Islam and Muslims Place in the World’, in which he claimed lessons on ‘being British’ and language lessons would help to tackle the ‘cultural separation’ of Muslims.<sup>13</sup> What it means to be ‘British’ here, is fixed and incontestable and the burden of change is indelibly inscribed onto the Muslim body that must integrate into the system of whiteness. Cameron continues by suggesting that there are a set of common British values that are based on law, democracy and freedom, values that are best expressed and shared in English (ukpol 2015). This is an example of a moral evaluation, a technique of legitimisation that imposes and reinforces a set of values through constant disseminations (van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999). This speech functions discursively in several ways that are consistent with the justification of the language fund almost ten years later. Cameron homogenises the nation that he claims shares a set of values that are liberal and common-sensical. The implication being that the possibility of inclusion and acceptability rests on a universal set of rational morals that, as I have shown, are intrinsically linked to secularism.

Four years later, at the Munich Security Conference, David Cameron gave a further speech that focused on the integration of Muslims across Europe. Speaking as prime minister and to an altered audience, Cameron delivered what appeared a more nuanced sketch of the encounter between Islam and Europe that simultaneously dislocated and conflated Islam and extremism (Gov.uk 2011). In a seemingly progressive stance, Cameron offers the ‘Arab Spring’ as an example of the compatibility between Islam and ‘democracy’ and dismisses the ‘clash of civilisations’ narrative as reductive. Islam is described as a religion that is ‘observed peacefully’ and must be separated from the political

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<sup>13</sup> A conference that was also addressed by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, showing the cross-party political attention on integration and security.

ideology of ‘Islamist extremism’. However, embedded within this speech are an array of strategies that perpetuate and construct difference, strategies that are redeployed in 2016 and offer a consistent narrative across Cameron’s speeches. For example, Cameron says:

*‘But I believe a genuinely liberal country does much more; it believes in certain values and actively promotes them. Freedom of speech, freedom of worship, democracy, the rule of law, equal rights regardless of race, sex or sexuality. It says to its citizens, this is what defines us as a society: to belong here is to believe in these things.’* (Gov.uk, 2011) *Quote 1*

Deploying a Manichean division, Cameron suggests that ‘we’ already hold these values. Simultaneously homogenising the ‘us’ and the ‘them’, Cameron asserts that the ‘other’ is embodied by their opposition to liberal values and cannot belong to this society. Additionally, worship is abstracted from religion. In a typically secular assertion, acceptable religion is reduced to the idea of belief and prayer. The religious subject is free to perform a version of religion that is framed by secular assumptions.

David Cameron’s address is initiated with a declaration of the importance the British government places on military capability and security, outlining terrorism as the ‘biggest threat’ facing the Union. To construct an ‘us’, one that is equally threatened, Cameron uses a victim-perpetrator reversal that remembers a certain uncontextualized history, equating the ‘threat’ posed by the ‘Irish Republicans’ with that of the ‘Red Army Faction’ (Wodak 2015). This technique functions to invent a shared tradition of victimhood and to legitimise the further securitisation of Islam (Hall 2017). Hence, the narrative continues, terrorism must be defeated through the reimagining of the border as a frontier of whiteness (see chapter 1). David Cameron repeatedly differentiates between Islam and extremism, before continuing to form a ‘sticky association’ that weaves a consistent thread through his speech acts (Ahmed 2014). In fact, it is stated that Muslim organisations are themselves ‘part of the problem’, not doing ‘enough’ to prevent extremism (Gov.co.uk 2011). As I described in chapter 2, through a process of recognition, the government are able to shape the functions of these organisations and continually misunderstand the complexities of different Islamic cultures.

#### 4.2 Desire, Choice and Agency

One of the emerging factors of Cameron’s monologues is the desire to emancipate and liberate oppressed women. First alluded to in 2011 with his condemnation of the ‘bullying’ of young Muslims into forced marriage, in 2016 the liberation of women becomes a central argument. Forced marriage has occupied a contentious position in Western society for a protracted period, often perceived as an attack on many of the most revered values, including the freedom to choose who you love (Wilson

2007). It offers the quintessential pseudo-emancipatory gender narrative, a technique of realization that uses gender equality to condemn the difference of others (Wodak 2015). In the rarest of collective mobilisations, forced marriage debates unite the right and the left and are emblematic of the use of the sexualized female body as the site of discursive formations of secularism (Scott 2013). Accordingly, Cameron writes:

*'In this country, women and girls are free to choose how they live, how they dress and who they love.'*  
(Times, 2016) *Quote 2*

Here, Cameron constructs a reductive binary that celebrates freedom 'over here' and condemns non-freedom 'over there'. Firstly, this binary misrepresents the collective struggle that women have endured to secure these 'freedoms' and dismisses the vast gender inequalities that still exist in the UK and elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> This, as I explained in Chapter 2, is fundamental to the way secularism functions. Progress is presented as inevitable, and through its imbrication with modernity, opposed to traditional values. Secondly, the responsibility that the UK has in the formation of conditions 'over there' is completely overlooked. And, thirdly, choice is taken as the principal characteristic or enabler of liberation and agency. It follows that to display agency one must be seen to be pursuing their innate desires (Mahmood 2011). This association, which is presented as rationalized common-sense, is problematic for a multitude of reasons.

In depicting desire as natural, Joan Scott argues, it is depoliticised and removed from public debate (2018). This natural depiction is central to the neoliberal political project that operates through the premise that everyone can pursue their individual desires without obstruction (Harvey 2007). For the abstracted individual, freedom is synonymous with the ability to undertake self-fulfilling choices and therefore, emancipation is signalled through the performance of this ability (Scott 2018). Freedom, in this negative liberal sense, is based on a conception of the neoliberal state that removes obstacles to the pursuit of desire but interferes or supports no further. However, as Saba Mahmood discernibly shows, the idea of positive freedom, that is so often offered as the natural alternative to negative freedom, is similarly contingent on desire and choice. Mahmood challenges these liberal, secular freedoms in *Politics of Piety*, arguing that pious women within the mosque movement exhibit a form of agency in their education of other women and commitment to Islam, emphatically rejecting reductive arguments of false consciousness (2011). As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, the power of secularism is apparent in the way it discursively functions in the background of both presented options, unquestioned in its existence. The key point here though is that words such as

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<sup>14</sup> For instance, the Equality and Human Rights Commission note prevailing disparities in working conditions, types of employment, likelihood to be victims of violence (2015)

emancipation, agency and freedom, words that are incredibly persuasive and powerful, are saturated in assumptions of Western progress.

In *quote 2*, David Cameron makes use of several binary oppositions in referring to the transnational controversy of the veil and other religious dress. In a commonly presented argument, the veil is an imposition that suppresses identity and agency. However, as Joan Scott, and many scholars subsequently have demonstrated, religious dress cannot be reduced to choice and belief, embodying different meanings in specific times and spaces (2009). Nevertheless, the veil acts as a symbol of repression and backwardness, a key aspect of the narrative that demands the saving of brown women. This pseudo-emancipatory narrative has a long colonial history, used to repeatedly justify intervention, and, for instance, formed a significant part of the discourse that attempted to legitimise the American invasion of Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod 2013). The Muslim man is further demonized through the portrayal of the veil as a tool of patriarchal oppression, as the veiled woman is simultaneously deprived of agency. In addition, the veil acts a visible marker of difference that challenges the secular abstraction of belief as the central tenet of religion (Mahmood 2011). Symbolically and materially, it transcends the division between the private and the public sphere.

In his corresponding interview for Radio 4, David Cameron made it clear that his government were not looking to take ‘extreme’ measures against the veil, such as in France and more recently Switzerland, through the implementation of a nationwide ban (Gov.uk 2016). However, Cameron claimed he would support ‘proper and sensible rules’, especially in the case of contact between the subject and revered institutions, such as the school, the courts and the border (Sims 2016). In an article in the left-leaning online newspaper, *The Independent*, that was published in response to Cameron’s comments, Sir Michael Wilshaw, is quoted regurgitating a now familiar narrative when commenting on the ‘issues’ caused by headscarves:

*‘We have come a long way in our society to ensure that we have equality for women and that they are treated fairly, we mustn’t go backwards’* (Quoted in Sims, 2016) *Quote 3*

In this case, the veil not only represents the oppression of the other but threatens the inevitable, exaggerated progress of society, intent on dragging it backwards. The imagined subject is unsettled by the visibility and proximity of the continually constructed other, threatened by the possibility of their ‘backwards’ values penetrating the undoubted progress. It is therefore not only the ‘backwardness’ that is the issue but the idea that the other is intent on remaining backwards and transmitting regressive tendencies, in a static opposition between modernity and tradition (Hall 2017, Bhattacharyya et al 2021). As Fanon explains, it is not only the absence of values but the negation of values which form the ‘quintessence of evil’ and strip the wretched of all beauty and morality (1963).

Freedom of religion is granted to the subject on the condition that it does not threaten other sanctified values, encouraged to be as invisible as possible. But, the veil, as a ‘custom of the colonised’ has been semiotically imbued with difference, connotating subjugation, regression and violence and therefore acts a representation of ‘the poverty of spirit’ and ‘constitutional depravity’ of the other (Fernando 2014, Fanon 1963: 32). Consequently, the control of the headscarves use is justified through the language of securitisation and the school is (re)produced as a site of the border regime. As I outlined in the first chapter, the border has no spatial limitations, it regulates the behaviour of the immigrant and continuously reproduces difference.

The assertion of dominance through interconnecting state apparatuses is a vital part of the discursive production of difference, but, importantly, difference is not only produced from the top down. Difference is also claimed by those that are marginalised, reconstituted by the acceptance and ownership of an imagined past that has been thrust upon them, bringing it into the present and forming a site of cultural contestation (Hall 2017).<sup>15</sup> In *Dying Colonialism*, Fanon famously exemplifies this process in his illumination of the way the veil was reclaimed in Algeria during the war of independence as a symbol of colonial resistance (1967). In her book *The Woman in the Muslim Mask*, Daphne Grace provides numerous further examples of how the veil forms part of resistance movements. Furthermore, Grace shows the diversity of these movements that transcend Islam and are not confined to women. This resistance not only challenges assumptions of the backwardness of Islam and embodied victimhood of Muslim women, but, in some cases, the veil is reimagined as a symbol of progress (2004). The key point is that the assertion of difference is not a linear process. People are not ‘preconditioned receptacles’ as Herbert Marcuse once described, but active in the process of their making, to return to E.P Thompson (1964: 10, 1968). Meanings that are constantly fixed by domination are in fact, always sliding (Hall 2017). However, in section 4.4 I will show how through acts of resistance to the attempted fixation of power, meanings can also become reinforced rather than challenged.

### 4.3 Perpetuating Threats

In the article featured in *The Independent* mentioned above (see appendix 3), both the ‘issue’ of the headscarf and the push to increase ‘migrants’ English proficiency are framed within a wider counter-terrorism strategy (Sims 2016). Exclusionary policies are legitimised through an appeal for national security (Wodak 2015). And, this framing exemplifies the conjoining of migration and terrorism discourse, connected in this case through the Muslim subject. David Cameron explicitly makes this

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<sup>15</sup> Stuart Hall calls this the re-ethnicisation of cultural difference (see Hall 2017)

connection in his article in *The Times*, flagrantly associating a perceived lack of integration with extremism:

*‘There is also an important connection to extremism. I am not saying separate development or conservative religious practices directly cause extremism. That would be insulting to many who are devout and peace-loving. But they can help a young person’s slide towards radicalisation. Think about the young boy growing up in Bradford. His parents came from a village in Pakistan. His mum can’t speak English and rarely leaves the home, so he finds it hard to communicate with her, and she doesn’t understand what is happening in his life. At the same time, as a teenager he is struggling to identify with western culture. Separate development and accepting practices that go against our values only emphasise differences and can help prompt the search of something to belong to. When that happens, the extremist narrative gives him something — however ridiculous — to believe in.’*  
(Times 2016) *Quote 4*

The first part of this statement appears deliberately ambiguous. Cameron states he is not asserting that ‘separate development’ and ‘conservative religious practices’ are linked to extremism but in doing so, he discursively forms a sticky association that leads the reader to believe that these are key factors in ‘radicalisation’. As I explained in chapter 1, radicalisation is portrayed as a ‘cultural pathology’ of the Muslim body (Mayblin and Turner 2021). Perpetually on the precipice of radicalisation, the Muslim subject who engages in religious practices slides down the inevitable path of radicalisation. This exceptionalises the radical thought of a Muslim vis-à-vis other subjects that are deemed radical and is bound up in colonial narratives of contagion (Trafford 2021). Furthermore, the realm of acceptable religion is occupied solely by the ‘devout and peace-loving’, an orientalist, reductive view of the complexities of Islam (Said 1978).

Legitimising these notions through mythopoesis, Cameron constructs a story that outlines several stereotypical conservative behaviours (van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999). For instance, the religious mother is confined to the home and her traditional values. According to Cameron, this traps her son, alienates him from Western culture and deprives him of its progressive values. Consequently, alienated and searching for belonging, the son moves perilously towards extremism. This narrative reinforces the binary between modern, British values and traditional, non-British values. The parochiality of the ‘village in Pakistan’ produces people who are incompatible and unable to understand. A different, unfamiliar space is assumed to exist in a previous temporality, one that we in the West have inevitably marched beyond. In a reversal of colonial arrangements, this parochial, threatening space is forming in Bradford. In order to propel this family into the present and reduce the threat of takeover, the mother must be forced to learn English and, in the process, liberate her son from confinement. Otherwise, quite rationally, they are too dangerous to accommodate. As a story, it



utilises several techniques of realization in order to reinforce a binary opposition between secularism and religion, the West and Islam. Cameron reduces a complex form of social exclusion to the backwards, confining nature of religion. Thus, religion, even if privately practised, is dangerous, regressive and incompatible with British values.

Cameron follows this story by outlining what must be done: Britain must be more assertive in standing up for its values and ‘muscular liberalism’ must replace ‘passive tolerance’ (Times 2016). This forms part of a strategy of transformation in which notions of multiculturalism and the toleration of difference are replaced by the reassertion of superior liberal values. The UK has a moral obligation to help those that are not able to help themselves. Again, this violent imposition of values is inherently colonial, akin to ideas of a white saviour. Subsequently, Cameron continues:

*‘In Britain, men are not frightened of women’s success; it is celebrated proudly. So we must take on the minority of men who perpetuate these backward attitudes and exert such damaging control over their wives, sisters and daughters. And we must never again allow passive tolerance to prevent us from telling the hard truths.’* (Times 2016) *Quote 5*

Cameron continues to depict Muslim men as the barrier to immigrant assimilation, a consistent vilification that shifts societal shortcomings onto the scapegoated Muslim man. ‘Wives, sisters and daughters’ have their agency eradicated, assumed to be confined by an indefatigable combination of patriarchy and religious compulsion. ‘We’ are implored to fight against those with ‘backwards attitudes’ and liberate women into a process of integration. These assertions are demeaning, dangerous and drenched in language that is more suited to a colonial voyage than an article that expresses a desire to help women. Accordingly, Cameron goes on to state that:

*‘So we will review the role of religious councils, including Sharia councils. We’re teaching British values in our schools because I want every young boy and girl growing up here to feel proud of our country and properly connected to it. And we’ll end the forced gender segregation, as we issue clear guidance to local authorities to stamp out this practice.’* (Times 2016) *Quote 6*

Islam is again presented as the problem religion, singled out for its cultural incompatibility, homogenised and placed against the idealised version of the UK. In a seemingly complimentary proposition, ‘British values’ must be taught in schools and children must learn to be ‘proud’ of their country. Gender segregation, so obviously inherent to an Islam that functions to form the opposition to the imagined UK, will be stamped out with the help of local authorities and, ‘at the heart of solving this’, progress needs to be made on the English language.

Language becomes the entry point to modernity for Muslim women, the first step on the road to emancipation, a road in which, according to Cameron's figures, 190,000 women need help navigating.<sup>16</sup> Considering these statistics, Cameron continues:

*'It's no surprise that 60 percent of women of Pakistani or Bangladeshi heritage are economically inactive'* (Times 2016) *Quote 7*

Integration into the workforce is considered key to the transition into modernity and accordingly, the modern woman is defined by her liberation from the household. This pseudo-emancipatory gender narrative is strikingly, and yet consistently, misrepresentative of conditions. Again, former British colonies, with distinct cultures, are subsumed by the Muslim signifier, located in the past and through an inverse of the invention of tradition, disconnected from the nation. 'Brown women' still need saving from 'Brown men' and the success of their saviour can be calculated through their economic activity (Abu-Lughod 2013). The past is misremembered, and gender inequalities remain masked. There is no appreciation for the ongoing struggle for gender equality, no room for the agency that might exist in raising a family and no regard for historical 'underdevelopment'. A trifecta of secular modern distortions that are used to exacerbate the difference between the West and Islam. In a typically neoliberal narrative, the confined religious female subject is reproduced as different and forcibly encouraged into the exploitative regime of precarious employment.

#### 4.4 Negotiating and Reproducing Difference

Considering the reductive themes of Cameron's article, the criticism offered in response was foreseeable. One point repeatedly highlighted was the consistent curtailment of funding for language courses by successive governments, cuts that dwarfed the size of this new language fund (Mason and Sherwood 2016). These cuts form part of a consistent austerity drive that was championed by both major political parties (Dorling 2017). Indicative of the cross-party adherence to neoliberal logic, cuts to public services were presented as the common-sensical solution to a post-crisis recession (Panitch and Leys 2020). Viewed within this wider narrative of reduction, it becomes apparent that the implementation of the language fund is not a project for education and liberation but a redistribution of funds that endeavours to further increase the precarity of the Muslim/migrant subject. The Muslim/migrant is simultaneously forced to integrate and faced with deportation. In other words, capitalist modernity functions through the production and negotiation of both difference and

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<sup>16</sup> These figures are disputed (see Mason and Sherwood 2016)

sameness; integration (from markets to ‘migrants’) and assimilation are demanded, as gender, race, religion, class, ethnicity are all reproduced as markers of identity (Hall 2017).

In an instance of how this process is performed, Deborah Orr, writing in the Guardian, criticises David Cameron for alienating Muslim women and accuses the prime minister of a general tone that is ‘anti-women’ (2016). Orr here acts to include Muslim and ‘migrant’ women, demonstrating that Cameron seems only to care about ‘misogyny’ when it is ‘Islamic misogyny’. Going further, Orr repudiates the idea that ‘economic inactivity’ and agency are intertwined, indicating the ‘value’ in ‘choosing’ to invest time in care, instead of profit-making. This is a progressive subversion of the conventional understanding of agency as resistance to perceived subjugation, determining that agency also exists in conformity. However, even in a progressive critique of the discriminatory tendencies of the narrative presented by Cameron, Orr still relies on secularism as the unquestionable system of civility. For instance, following an opening paragraph that appeals for sameness, Orr states:

*‘Just to be clear, it is not controversial to declare that Islamic misogyny is a particular and large problem. Islam is a highly patriarchal belief system. Muslim feminists argue that their religion does not have to be practised in a way that oppresses women. But the fact is that Islam is used again and again, by nations, cultures and individuals, to justify the negation of the rights and freedoms of women.’ (Orr 2016) Quote 8*

Uncontroversially, Islam is synonymous with the oppression of women. Thus, emancipation and Islam are inherently incompatible, and women’s rights cannot be advanced within this ‘highly patriarchal belief system’. In contrast, secularism has already secured the possibility of equality. It is reproduced discursively by not being ‘Islam’ or, in other words, Islam forms secularisms ‘symbolic other’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1984, Hall 2017). In not being a ‘highly patriarchal belief system’, secularism is a fair, equitable and rational system that functions without the need for explicit reference. Accordingly, the implication is that, unlike Islam, secularism is not used by ‘nations, cultures and individuals’ to negate the rights and freedoms of women. However, it is through this discursive construction of inclusion, as Scott and Mahmood have illustrated, that other specific forms of discrimination are enabled (2013, 2013). In this case, one discriminatory narrative is replaced by another and difference is accentuated rather than accepted.

A further high-profile criticism of the language fund was presented by former Conservative party co-chairwoman Sayeeda Warsi. Questioning the connection between language proficiency and counterterrorism, Warsi suggested there were much more significant factors that caused ‘radicalisation’:

*'Evidence suggests gang culture, Islamophobia, [and] responses to foreign policy are greater drivers of radicalisation'* (Quoted in Mason and Sherwood 2016) *Quote 9*

However, in making this challenge, Warsi legitimises the framing of radicalisation as a problem for Muslims. Difference is again reinforced through a claim for inclusion. To further press this point, Warsi had previously stepped down from her position as party co-chair in protest at the government's 'morally indefensible' policy on Palestine. Subsequently, she produced a 'blistering critique' in *The Observer* that included the reignition of a long-standing dissatisfaction at the lack of an annual meeting between 'Muslim leaders' and the government. This meeting, according to Warsi, should resemble the meeting between the government and the Jewish Leadership Council (Townsend 2015). However, as I argued in chapter 2, this request for recognition is a double-edged sword that requires a specific idea of Islam to be agreed upon and offers the state a chance to define what does and does not constitute religion. This process of recognition is inherently uneven in its distribution of power; the state effectively holds all the cards and can shape the engagement to suit its agenda. In attempting to occupy more public space, actors who claim to represent Islam enter into a negotiation that overwhelmingly homogenizes and universalizes, simultaneously perpetuating difference.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

In these two examples, the far-reaching discourse of secularism starts to become apparent. It is somewhat familiar to suggest that the Conservative government have discriminated against racialised minorities since coming to power in 2010. However, it is less often claimed that secularism functions in the background to support and legitimise these discriminations. This is what I have endeavoured to demonstrate in this critical analysis of discourse performed by, and in reaction to, David Cameron. Firstly, and emblematic of this conjuncture, Cameron openly conflates the Muslim and the 'migrant'. This amalgamated subject is simultaneously presented as dangerous, vulnerable and backwards and portrayed as the symbol of otherness that informs the superiority of whiteness. Secondly, in attempts to combat and repudiate racialised and gendered discourse, secular assumptions are reinforced, and difference/sameness are reproduced and perpetuated. Returning to the question posed earlier then, the discursive system of secularism asserts its dominance, across the political spectrum, through a range of common-sensical notions that promote secularism as the sole proprietor of progress. The arena of acceptable debate is completely enclosed by secular assumptions which ensures that mainstream criticism will reinforce the superiority of secularism. Therefore, I hope to have shown, secularism operates within the global border regime that continually reproduces the political and material divisions of humanity. In other words, it functions as a vital cog within the wheel of whiteness that maintains colonial relations and voraciously recreates conditions that are optimal for modern capital.

In the final chapter of this thesis, I will rearticulate the themes that pervade this project and establish the significance of the conclusions that can be drawn.

## Conclusion

*‘The left must also stop conflating concerns about immigration with racism. While it is vital to challenge the language of hate from UKIP and others, the majority of people who worry about immigration are not intolerant’*

*Olivia Bailey, 2016*

Olivia Bailey, a research director of the Fabian Society, demonstrates the *raison d'être* for this project in one discursive movement.<sup>17</sup> Bailey insinuates that the majority of the British public are tolerant and have legitimate concerns about immigration that are unconnected to ideas of race. Yes, admits Bailey, the extreme right are racist bigots, but the centre and those on the left are justified in claiming for a system that manages immigration more effectively. The spectrum of acceptable thinking is configured and limited to those that are willing to sensibly discuss ‘migration’, whilst any discussion must be based on several common-sense assumptions. Firstly, immigration is presented as a legitimate, universal concern that must be managed based on the national interests, rather than a process of displacement and emplacement that is intrinsically intertwined with the rapacious history of the UK. In addition, it is assumed that immigration and racism can be disconnected, when in fact they are co-constitutive and continually reproduce the material and ideological conditions of each other. Finally, there is a presumed binary between tolerance and intolerance that asserts tolerance as a positive, progressive attribute.

As Wendy Brown demonstrates, tolerance ‘involves neither neutrality toward nor respect for’ the tolerated and ‘signifies the limits on what foreign, erroneous, objectionable or dangerous element can be allowed to cohabit with the host without destroying the host’ (2006: 27). Tolerance, then, is inherently subjugating. In tolerating a subject, one automatically assumes that their right to exist is less deserving and less secure. The tolerated never realise full citizenship, placed in a permanent state of integration that reproduces a linear idea of progress (Choudhury 2017). They appear to challenge the inside/outside binary but crucially function to maintain the ‘integrity’ of the dominant term (Brown 2006: 27). Tolerance, just as I have argued with recognition, upholds unequal relations of power, giving with one hand and taking with the other. To be tolerated or to be recognised is to be placed at the behest of the secular, modern, Western nation that determines what is acceptable and what is valuable. This liberal language is emblematic of the discursive functioning of secularism and ‘migration’ and thematically pervades this project.

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<sup>17</sup> The Fabian society is a self-described left-leaning think tank that has a long, intertwined history with the Labour party (see <https://fabians.org.uk/> for more detail)

I demonstrated in the previous chapter that the arena of acceptable debate, that is produced and reproduced by the mainstream media, ensconces the values that are contained within secularism. Secular, liberal, modern values are overwhelmingly presented as a neutral platform for public discussions on topics of ‘migration’ and religion. This limits the spectrum of public opinion, encouraging debate within a set of parameters that appear to allow ‘free thinking’ but in actuality restrict available thought and maintain passivity (Chomsky 1998). This means that when criticism is levelled at exclusionary projects or policies, such as those contained within the ‘hostile environment’, it is frequently done within the parameters that have already been established. This criticism is often framed within inclusionary rhetoric that assumes it is sufficient to challenge discriminatory narratives but do so through the employment of language that reproduces exclusion. This is exemplified by the desire to recognise religion, to tolerate minorities and in efforts to integrate and assimilate.

A further theme that reticulates through this thesis is the concept and accusatory imposition of backwardness. Backwardness, as a static oppositional, essentialised discourse, functions in a set of diverse and specific ways that ascribe both difference and sameness (Hall 2017). For instance, as I have described, nations or societies that experience sexuality through alternative parameters- parameters that through Western eyes are subjugating- are overwhelmingly, and yet inconsistently, ascribed backwardness. This ascription reidentifies alterity but it does this using a set of judgements that are Western, modern and secular. Societies are judged on the conditions of ‘equality’ that are imposed on them from above and in their reaction to these conditions. Houria Bouteldja offers feminist movements as a further example of this; societies with little or no feminist activism are ascribed ‘civilizational backwardness’ (2017: 82). Crucially though, as I outlined in the previous chapter, it is not just the supposed lack of values that are embodied by the other, but the ‘negation of these values’ (Fanon 1963: 32). The colonised subject represents a social contagion of threatening backwards behaviour.

The ascription of backwardness not only perpetuates difference but functions to discourage and dismiss the need for movements that claim the need for equality. Progress is exaggerated at ‘home’ through comparisons ‘abroad’. As I have attempted to illustrate throughout, gender equality is coupled with secularism in order to highlight the backwardness of other religions and races. Through this narrative, whiteness is reinforced in several interconnecting ways: the vilification of the ‘brown man’; the victimisation of the ‘brown woman’ and the maintenance of false premises of equality for the ‘white woman’. Racialised, gendered positionalities are maintained and enclosed within a trojan horse of progress. In a further example of the exaggeration of Western progress, as I noted in the previous chapter, David Cameron extended his support to ‘pro-democracy’ uprisings in ‘Cairo and Tunis’ (Gov.uk 2011). In one foul swoop, Cameron is able ascribe backwardness to the Arab governments

that are facing protests, accuse societies that do not rise up of maintaining backwardness, mask or reduce the complexity of the reasons why certain conditions may exist and misrepresent the extent of democracy in the UK. The production of backwardness encapsulates the articulation of race, gender, nation and secularism, which is then embodied and brought into being by the ‘migrant’.

In the UK, this story is complicated by the persistent longing for a glorious, imagined previous temporality. On the surface, there seems a contradiction between inevitable Western progress and a desire to return to an imperial past, but they occupy two sides of the same coin. The Western hegemonic conception of time is contingent on the continual reproduction of a pre-modern temporality that is intertwined with colonial legacies (Butler 2008). Narratives of linear progress function through the maintenance of imperial structures that offer a rose-tinted reflection on economic and social improvements, an ‘uninterrupted flow of a long, unbroken, organic evolution’ (Hall 2017: 139). In fact, the very idea of an imperial past masks the continued existence of imperial structures through a perennial reference point of differentiation. As Kwame Nkrumah for instance shows, there was no end to colonial governmentality, there was just a shift in the way it functions and is presented (1965). Secularism and ‘migration’, in distinct but interconnecting ways, exist in a ‘rearticulation of the discursive system’ that transforms and reproduces the binary of the ‘West vs the rest’ (Hall 2017: 132).

What I have attempted to show is that secularism is fundamental to the Western construction of the self, but more than that, it cannot be separated from the modern, capitalist system that is itself dependent on the exploitation of the other. Therefore, the discursive formation of secularism in the UK and the global border regime that continually reproduces a colonially assembled underclass are, I suggest, practically inseparable. The focus on secularism, as a structural discourse, enables a look beyond singular events or instances of Islamophobia and racism, and demonstrates the discursive, institutional forces that are continually creating a ‘hostile environment’. These forces, as I have endeavoured to highlight throughout this essay, can be broadly described as: a liberal politics of accommodation and recognition; the colonially informed racialised, relational categories of migration and Islam and an idea of progress that functions to reinscribe binary oppositions, particularly that of sexual difference. The lens of secularism offers a way to rethink the way these forces are formed, maintained and connected, and in turn, how they can be challenged and counteracted. In other words, this thesis is a modest attempt to displace and unsettle stories that ‘are at the foundation of empire’, stories that construct a ‘reference point for what a human is supposed to be’; an effort to contribute to projects that seek to make space for a ‘new foundation’ (Wynter quoted in Rodriguez 2018).

Central to this new foundation, as Harsha Walia argues, is a world of no borders (2021). This means, firstly, a future that looks beyond an inherently unethical system of nation-states. It is, therefore, not



about opening borders and allowing unrestricted movement between states that are built on historically formed uneven distributions of wealth and power. But it is about the abolishment of the ‘organization of difference’ through the reassembly of international solidarity that is built on the reimagination of land and care (215). This is not an abstract imaginary but a vision of the world that is built on the amplification of indigenous communities, workers movements, feminist collectives and decolonial processes. It is necessarily international and must incorporate and learn from the struggles and successes of Rojava, the Zapatistas, the daily, uncompromising Palestinian resistance and everyday resistance to capitalist exploitation. A politics of no borders is ‘a politics of refusal, a politics of revolution, and a politics of repair’ (214). No borders is based on an ecology of non-dominant difference that must be created by forces of change (Lorde 2018). Therefore, if this essay has, in any way, displaced the inevitability of colonially formed whiteness and dismantled common-sense assumptions of secularism, it can be considered part of the forcing of change, in its own small way.

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## Appendix(s)

1. Quote 1: Gov.uk. "PM's Speech at Munich Security Conference", 5<sup>th</sup> February 2011, available at- <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference>

Prime Minister:

Today I want to focus my remarks on terrorism, but first let me address one point. Some have suggested that by holding a strategic defence and security review, Britain is somehow retreating from an activist role in the world. That is the opposite of the truth. Yes, we are dealing with our budget deficit, but we are also making sure our defences are strong. Britain will continue to meet the NATO 2% target for defence spending. We will still have the fourth largest military defence budget in the world. At the same time, we are putting that money to better use, focusing on conflict prevention and building a much more flexible army. That is not retreat; it is hardheaded.

Every decision we take has three aims in mind. First, to continue to support the NATO mission in Afghanistan. Second, to reinforce our actual military capability. As Chancellor Merkel's government is showing right here in Germany, what matters is not bureaucracy, which frankly Europe needs a lot less of, but the political will to build military capability that we need as nations and allies, that we can deliver in the field. Third, we want to make sure that Britain is protected from the new and various threats that we face. That is why we are investing in a national cyber security programme that I know William Hague talked about yesterday, and we are sharpening our readiness to act on counter-proliferation.

But the biggest threat that we face comes from terrorist attacks, some of which are, sadly, carried out by our own citizens. It is important to stress that terrorism is not linked exclusively to any one religion or ethnic group. My country, the United Kingdom, still faces threats from dissident republicans in Northern Ireland. Anarchist attacks have occurred recently in Greece and in Italy, and of course, yourselves in Germany were long scarred by terrorism from the Red Army Faction. Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that this threat comes in Europe overwhelmingly from young men who follow a completely perverse, warped interpretation of Islam, and who are prepared to blow themselves up and kill their fellow citizens. Last week at Davos I rang the alarm bell for the urgent need for Europe to recover its economic dynamism, and today, though the subject is complex, my message on security is equally stark. We will not defeat terrorism simply by the action we take outside our borders. Europe needs to wake up to what is happening in our own countries. Of course,

that means strengthening, as Angela has said, the security aspects of our response, on tracing plots, on stopping them, on counter-surveillance and intelligence gathering.

But this is just part of the answer. We have got to get to the root of the problem, and we need to be absolutely clear on where the origins of where these terrorist attacks lie. That is the existence of an ideology, Islamist extremism. We should be equally clear what we mean by this term, and we must distinguish it from Islam. Islam is a religion observed peacefully and devoutly by over a billion people. Islamist extremism is a political ideology supported by a minority. At the furthest end are those who back terrorism to promote their ultimate goal: an entire Islamist realm, governed by an interpretation of Sharia. Move along the spectrum, and you find people who may reject violence, but who accept various parts of the extremist worldview, including real hostility towards Western democracy and liberal values. It is vital that we make this distinction between religion on the one hand, and political ideology on the other. Time and again, people equate the two. They think whether someone is an extremist is dependent on how much they observe their religion. So, they talk about moderate Muslims as if all devout Muslims must be extremist. This is profoundly wrong. Someone can be a devout Muslim and not be an extremist. We need to be clear: Islamist extremism and Islam are not the same thing.

This highlights, I think, a significant problem when discussing the terrorist threat that we face. There is so much muddled thinking about this whole issue. On the one hand, those on the hard right ignore this distinction between Islam and Islamist extremism, and just say that Islam and the West are irreconcilable - that there is a clash of civilizations. So, it follows we should cut ourselves off from this religion, whether that is through forced repatriation, favoured by some fascists, or the banning of new mosques, as is suggested in some parts of Europe. These people fuel Islamophobia, and I completely reject their argument. If they want an example of how Western values and Islam can be entirely compatible, they should look at what's happened in the past few weeks on the streets of Tunis and Cairo: hundreds of thousands of people demanding the universal right to free elections and democracy.

The point is this: the ideology of extremism is the problem; Islam emphatically is not. Picking a fight with the latter will do nothing to help us to confront the former. On the other hand, there are those on the soft left who also ignore this distinction. They lump all Muslims together, compiling a list of grievances, and argue that if only governments addressed these grievances, the terrorism would stop. So, they point to the poverty that so many Muslims live in and say, 'Get rid of this injustice and the terrorism will end.' But this ignores the fact that many of those found guilty of terrorist offences in the UK and elsewhere have been graduates and often middle class. They point to grievances about Western foreign policy and say, 'Stop riding roughshod over Muslim countries and the terrorism will

end.’ But there are many people, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, who are angry about Western foreign policy, but who don’t resort to acts of terrorism. They also point to the profusion of unelected leaders across the Middle East and say, ‘Stop propping these people up and you will stop creating the conditions for extremism to flourish.’ But this raises the question: if it’s the lack of democracy that is the problem, why are there so many extremists in free and open societies?

Now, I’m not saying that these issues of poverty and grievance about foreign policy are not important. Yes, of course we must tackle them. Of course we must tackle poverty. Yes, we must resolve the sources of tension, not least in Palestine, and yes, we should be on the side of openness and political reform in the Middle East. On Egypt, our position should be clear. We want to see the transition to a more broadly-based government, with the proper building blocks of a free and democratic society. I simply don’t accept that there is somehow a dead end choice between a security state on the one hand, and an Islamist one on the other. But let us not fool ourselves. These are just contributory factors. Even if we sorted out all of the problems that I have mentioned, there would still be this terrorism. I believe the root lies in the existence of this extremist ideology. I would argue an important reason so many young Muslims are drawn to it comes down to a question of identity.

What I am about to say is drawn from the British experience, but I believe there are general lessons for us all. In the UK, some young men find it hard to identify with the traditional Islam practiced at home by their parents, whose customs can seem staid when transplanted to modern Western countries. But these young men also find it hard to identify with Britain too, because we have allowed the weakening of our collective identity. Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream. We’ve failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong. We’ve even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values.

So, when a white person holds objectionable views, racist views for instance, we rightly condemn them. But when equally unacceptable views or practices come from someone who isn’t white, we’ve been too cautious frankly - frankly, even fearful - to stand up to them. The failure, for instance, of some to confront the horrors of forced marriage, the practice where some young girls are bullied and sometimes taken abroad to marry someone when they don’t want to, is a case in point. This hands-off tolerance has only served to reinforce the sense that not enough is shared. And this all leaves some young Muslims feeling rootless. And the search for something to belong to and something to believe in can lead them to this extremist ideology. Now for sure, they don’t turn into terrorists overnight, but what we see - and what we see in so many European countries - is a process of radicalisation.

Internet chatrooms are virtual meeting places where attitudes are shared, strengthened and validated. In some mosques, preachers of hate can sow misinformation about the plight of Muslims elsewhere. In our communities, groups and organisations led by young, dynamic leaders promote separatism by encouraging Muslims to define themselves solely in terms of their religion. All these interactions can engender a sense of community, a substitute for what the wider society has failed to supply. Now, you might say, as long as they're not hurting anyone, what is the problem with all this?

Well, I'll tell you why. As evidence emerges about the backgrounds of those convicted of terrorist offences, it is clear that many of them were initially influenced by what some have called 'non-violent extremists', and they then took those radical beliefs to the next level by embracing violence. And I say this is an indictment of our approach to these issues in the past. And if we are to defeat this threat, I believe it is time to turn the page on the failed policies of the past. So first, instead of ignoring this extremist ideology, we - as governments and as societies - have got to confront it, in all its forms. And second, instead of encouraging people to live apart, we need a clear sense of shared national identity that is open to everyone.

Let me briefly take each in turn. First, confronting and undermining this ideology. Whether they are violent in their means or not, we must make it impossible for the extremists to succeed. Now, for governments, there are some obvious ways we can do this. We must ban preachers of hate from coming to our countries. We must also proscribe organisations that incite terrorism against people at home and abroad. Governments must also be shrewder in dealing with those that, while not violent, are in some cases part of the problem. We need to think much harder about who it's in the public interest to work with. Some organisations that seek to present themselves as a gateway to the Muslim community are showered with public money despite doing little to combat extremism. As others have observed, this is like turning to a right-wing fascist party to fight a violent white supremacist movement. So we should properly judge these organisations: do they believe in universal human rights - including for women and people of other faiths? Do they believe in equality of all before the law? Do they believe in democracy and the right of people to elect their own government? Do they encourage integration or separation? These are the sorts of questions we need to ask. Fail these tests and the presumption should be not to engage with organisations - so, no public money, no sharing of platforms with ministers at home.

At the same time, we must stop these groups from reaching people in publicly-funded institutions like universities or even, in the British case, prisons. Now, some say, this is not compatible with free speech and intellectual inquiry. Well, I say, would you take the same view if these were right-wing extremists recruiting on our campuses? Would you advocate inaction if Christian fundamentalists who believed that Muslims are the enemy were leading prayer groups in our prisons? And to those

who say these non-violent extremists are actually helping to keep young, vulnerable men away from violence, I say nonsense.

Would you allow the far right groups a share of public funds if they promise to help you lure young white men away from fascist terrorism? Of course not. But, at root, challenging this ideology means exposing its ideas for what they are, and that is completely unjustifiable. We need to argue that terrorism is wrong in all circumstances. We need to argue that prophecies of a global war of religion pitting Muslims against the rest of the world are nonsense.

Now, governments cannot do this alone. The extremism we face is a distortion of Islam, so these arguments, in part, must be made by those within Islam. So let us give voice to those followers of Islam in our own countries - the vast, often unheard majority - who despise the extremists and their worldview. Let us engage groups that share our aspirations.

Now, second, we must build stronger societies and stronger identities at home. Frankly, we need a lot less of the passive tolerance of recent years and a much more active, muscular liberalism. A passively tolerant society says to its citizens, as long as you obey the law we will just leave you alone. It stands neutral between different values. But I believe a genuinely liberal country does much more; it believes in certain values and actively promotes them. Freedom of speech, freedom of worship, democracy, the rule of law, equal rights regardless of race, sex or sexuality. It says to its citizens, this is what defines us as a society: to belong here is to believe in these things. Now, each of us in our own countries, I believe, must be unambiguous and hard-nosed about this defence of our liberty.

There are practical things that we can do as well. That includes making sure that immigrants speak the language of their new home and ensuring that people are educated in the elements of a common culture and curriculum. Back home, we're introducing National Citizen Service: a two-month programme for sixteen-year-olds from different backgrounds to live and work together. I also believe we should encourage meaningful and active participation in society, by shifting the balance of power away from the state and towards the people. That way, common purpose can be formed as people come together and work together in their neighbourhoods. It will also help build stronger pride in local identity, so people feel free to say, 'Yes, I am a Muslim, I am a Hindu, I am Christian, but I am also a Londoner or a Berliner too'. It's that identity, that feeling of belonging in our countries, that I believe is the key to achieving true cohesion.

So, let me end with this. This terrorism is completely indiscriminate and has been thrust upon us. It cannot be ignored or contained; we have to confront it with confidence - confront the ideology that drives it by defeating the ideas that warp so many young minds at their root, and confront the issues of identity that sustain it by standing for a much broader and generous vision of citizenship in our

countries. Now, none of this will be easy. We will need stamina, patience and endurance, and it won't happen at all if we act alone. This ideology crosses not just our continent but all continents, and we are all in this together. At stake are not just lives, it is our way of life. That is why this is a challenge we cannot avoid; it is one we must rise to and overcome. Thank you.

2. Quote 2, 4, 5, 6 and 7: Cameron, David. "We Won't Let Muslim Women be Second Class Citizens", *The Times*, 18<sup>th</sup> January 2016, available at- <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/we-wont-let-women-be-second-class-citizens-brh0716jttb>

Title: We Won't Let Muslim Women be Second Class Citizens

Where in the world do you think the following things are happening? School governors' meetings where male governors sit in the meeting room and the women have to sit out of sight in the corridor. Young women only allowed to leave their house in the company of a male relative. Religious councils that openly discriminate against women and prevent them from leaving abusive marriages.

The answer, I'm sorry to say, is Britain. Last week, I chaired a meeting of a group of brilliant Muslim women role models. And while I heard great examples of so many women who are flourishing in our country, some painted an alarming picture of forced gender segregation, discrimination and social isolation from mainstream British life.

Of course, this does not describe the life of every British Muslim woman. Nor are these problems unique to Muslim communities. And it cannot be said often enough that the fear of Islamophobic hate crime — for instance, the disgraceful pulling of women's headscarves in the street — is widespread and incredibly threatening, as well as being completely disempowering for women. But these problems are being consistently brought to our attention by Muslim women, and we have a duty to them to speak out — and to act. That must begin by understanding the root causes. Some are, of course, cultural. But the standing rebuke to our society is that we have allowed this to continue. All too often, because of what I would call "passive tolerance", people subscribe to the flawed idea of separate development. Ed Husain put it brilliantly last week when he said that our political correctness stops us from identifying this separatist mentality — terming it "the racism of low expectations". It helps explain why, for instance, some so-called progressive politicians see fit to host gender-segregated political meetings.

It is time to change our approach. We will never truly build One Nation unless we are more assertive about our liberal values, clearer about the expectations we place on those who come to live here and build our country together, and more creative and generous in the work we do to break down barriers.

And this is a challenge that government cannot meet on its own. I do want every part of government to play its part — health visitors, jobcentres, nurseries, schools — but we all have a shared responsibility to tackle prejudice and bigotry, and help integration.

Why does this matter so much? Because we don't just need a strong economy to thrive, we have to build a strong society. Segregation drives us apart, not together. And tolerating the development of parallel communities can also mean failing to get to grips with appalling practices such as FGM and forced marriage.

There is also an important connection to extremism. I am not saying separate development or conservative religious practices directly cause extremism. That would be insulting to many who are devout and peace-loving. But they can help a young person's slide towards radicalisation. Think about the young boy growing up in Bradford. His parents came from a village in Pakistan. His mum can't speak English and rarely leaves the home, so he finds it hard to communicate with her, and she doesn't understand what is happening in his life. At the same time, as a teenager he is struggling to identify with western culture. Separate development and accepting practices that go against our values only emphasise differences and can help prompt the search of something to belong to. When that happens, the extremist narrative gives him something — however ridiculous — to believe in.

So what can we do about this? First, we need some clear thinking. This is Britain. In this country, women and girls are free to choose how they live, how they dress and who they love. It's our values that make this country what it is, and it's only by standing up for them assertively that they will endure. In Britain, men are not frightened of women's success; it is celebrated proudly. So we must take on the minority of men who perpetuate these backward attitudes and exert such damaging control over their wives, sisters and daughters. And we must never again allow passive tolerance to prevent us from telling the hard truths.

We also need a clear and positive policy agenda. So we will review the role of religious councils, including Sharia councils. We're teaching British values in our schools because I want every young boy and girl growing up here to feel proud of our country and properly connected to it. And we'll end the forced gender segregation, as we issue clear guidance to local authorities to stamp out this practice.

We must also make more progress on English language. It is at the heart of solving this. Consider this: new figures show that some 190,000 British Muslim women — or 22 per cent — speak little or no English despite many having lived here for decades. 40,000 of these women speak no English at all.

So it's no surprise that 60 per cent of women of a Pakistani or Bangladeshi heritage are economically inactive.

This has to be tackled head on. We've already introduced a language test for new migrants, but I believe it's time to be much more demanding. Yes, we have responsibilities to migrants, but they have responsibilities too. At the moment, someone can move here with very basic English and there's no requirement to improve it over time. We will change that. We will now say: if you don't improve your fluency, that could affect your ability to stay in the UK. This will help make it clear to those men who stop their partners from integrating that there are consequences.

We'll also fund a dramatic improvement in the way we provide English language services for women. With a new £20 million programme, we'll make sure every woman from isolated communities with no English at all has access to classes, whether through community groups or further education colleges.

Britain has a claim to be the most successful multi-faith, multi-racial democracy on the planet. We got here because we fought and won those long struggles for liberty, equality and mutual tolerance. But the job of building a more cohesive country is never complete. With English language and women's empowerment as our next frontier, I believe we can bring Britain together and build the stronger society that is within reach.

3. Quote 3: Sims, Alexandra. "David Cameron Supports removal of Muslim Veils in Schools", The Independent, 19<sup>th</sup> January 2016, available at- <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/cameron-will-back-uk-muslim-veil-bans-he-announces-new-measures-tackle-segregation-a6820491.html>

Title: David Cameron Supports Removal of Muslim Veils in Schools

David Cameron has said he backs the right for UK schools to prevent Muslim girls from wearing veils in the classroom.

The Prime Minister said he would support "proper and sensible rules", which may require people to show their faces in some circumstances, but did not advocate a nation-wide ban on full-face coverings.

Mr Cameron made the comments as he announced a number of new measures aiming to tackle radicalisation and segregation in British Muslim communities.



Speaking to BBC Radio 4 on Monday, the Prime Minister said: “I think in our country people should be free to wear what they like and, within limits, live how they like and all the rest of it.

“What does matter, if for instance a school has a particular uniform policy, sensitively put in place and all the rest of it, and people want to flout that uniform policy, often for reasons that aren’t really connected with religion, I think you should always come down on the side of the school.”

Mr Cameron said he would also support the principle when applied in courts or at border controls, but would not back a French-style burqa ban.

“When coming into contact with an institution or you’re in court, or if you need to be able to see someone’s face at the border, then I will always back the authority and institution that have put in place proper and sensible rules.”

“Going for the French approach of banning an item of clothing, I do not think that’s the way we do things in this country and I do not think that would help.”

4. Quote 8: Orr, Deborah. “Cameron Has Alienated the Very People He Must Ally With: Muslim Women”, The Guardian, 18<sup>th</sup> January 2016, available at- <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jan/18/david-cameron-muslim-women-anti-women>

Title: Cameron Has Alienated the Very People He Must Ally With: Muslim Women

You’d think, from the way politicians tend to frame the issue, that there were legions of misguided voters passionately intent on protecting the right of controlling men to isolate their wives from all influence but theirs. David Cameron, in 2016, sounds no different to David Blunkett in 2002, when he insists that immigrant women must be empowered to learn English, or else. Except that they don’t say “migrant women”. They say “Muslim women” when speaking of the “alarming picture of forced gender segregation, discrimination and social isolation”. Misogyny, it seems, is only a problem when it’s Islamic misogyny.

just to be clear, it is not controversial to declare that Islamic misogyny is a particular and large problem. Islam is a highly patriarchal belief system. Muslim feminists argue that their religion does not have to be practised in a way that oppresses women. But the fact is that Islam is used again and again, by nations, cultures and individuals, to justify the negation of the rights and freedoms of

women. This is not unsayable, and authorities from Cologne to Rochdale who believe that such assertions should not be encouraged or confronted are part of the problem.

Yet, 15 years apart, both Cameron and Blunkett chose to give the impression that they were saying the unsayable. Their problem is not, of course, what they are saying but the way that they say it. They claim to be trying to help individual women when what they are actually doing is placing individual women at the centre of vast geopolitical problems.

What's more, the people this type of rhetoric alienates most are the Muslim women who understand what is being said. Who are the people in the best position to provide solutions to this problem? Other Muslim women. What is the point of highlighting a problem in a way that upsets the people who are your best allies? What's more, Cameron's rhetoric doesn't just upset Muslim women. It's a bit anti-woman in general. It's annoying, hearing women declared "economically inactive" because they run homes and bring up children. Working at bringing up a family, rather than earning money, is a valid choice, whether you can speak English or not. This too makes it sound like a problem with women rather than a problem with misogyny.

Politicians actually make these sorts of declarations quite often. The great fight over migrants and English is one that theoretically, at least, was over long ago. Generally, we're in favour. We just wish politicians would put their money where their mouths are. When Cameron was interviewed on the BBC's Today programme this morning, it was quickly pointed out to him that his own government had cut funding for adult education in general and English classes in particular. Cameron has changed his mind, and now has found £20m to spend on this programme. According to him, there are 190,000 Muslim women in Britain who speak little or no English. So that's roughly £100 per woman. Talk is cheap. Education, of course, is considerably more expensive.

5. Quote 9: Mason, Rowena and Harriet Sherwood. "Cameron 'Stigmatising Muslim Women' With Language Policy", *The Guardian*, 18<sup>th</sup> January 2016, available at- <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jan/18/david-cameron-stigmatising-muslim-women-learn-english-language-policy>

Title: Cameron 'Stigmatising Muslim Women' With English Language Policy

David Cameron has been accused of stigmatising Muslim women after he announced plans to help them learn English and warned that migrant spouses who fail language tests may have to leave the UK.

Announcing the plans on Monday, the prime minister suggested the language classes for Muslim women could help stop radicalisation.

Cameron said a £20m fund would provide classes for all women struggling with English, but he highlighted 38,000 Muslim women who could not speak the language and 190,000 with limited skills in it.

Separately, there would be a new regime meaning those on a five-year spousal visa would have to pass language tests after two and a half years in the country or face having to leave.

“After two and half years they should be improving their English and we will be testing them,” the prime minister said. “We will bring this in in October and it will apply to people who have come in on a spousal visa recently and they will be tested.”

Cameron stressed that he was not blaming those who could not speak English because “some of these people have come from quite patriarchal societies and perhaps the menfolk haven’t wanted them to speak English”.

He said there was no causal link between radicalisation and language skills but non-English speakers could be “more susceptible” to extremism. “If you’re not able to speak English, not able to integrate, you may find therefore you have challenges understanding what your identity is and therefore you could be more susceptible to the extremist message coming from Daesh,” he told BBC Radio 4’s Today programme.

However, he was quickly criticised for singling out Muslim women as the main group that needed help. Andy Burnham, the shadow home secretary, said Cameron risked “doing more harm than good” in a desire to grab headlines.

“His clumsy and simplistic approach to challenging extremism is unfairly stigmatising a whole community. There is a real danger that it could end up driving further radicalisation, rather than tackling it,” he said.

Meanwhile, Tim Farron, the Liberal Democrat leader, said the announcement was “dog-whistle politics at its best”.

“Linking women in the Muslim community who struggle with the English language to homegrown extremism only serves to isolate the very people Cameron says he is trying to help,” he said. “Liberal Democrats support English language classes for anyone regardless of race, religion or gender and blocked these plans to cut funding for them in coalition.”

Cameron was also criticised by Sayeeda Warsi, the Tory peer and former party co-chairman, who said it was a good policy to encourage language skills to help people get a job, help with homework, manage finances, and get a driving licence, but questioned the link to counter-terrorism.

She said “evidence suggests gang culture, Islamophobia, [and] responses to foreign policy are greater drivers of radicalisation” than failure to learn English.

This was echoed by Shaista Gohir, chair of the Muslim Women’s Network, who said “it should be directed at all communities, not just Muslims – and it shouldn’t be linked to radicalisation”.

“People learning English is a good thing, so they know their rights and can participate in society. Cameron says he wants to empower Muslim women. But what about Muslim women who already speak English and still face barriers to participation?” she asked.

Ed Kessler, director of the Woolf Institute, which convened the recent commission on religion and belief in public life, said: “It is extremely unfortunate that the prime minister has chosen to focus solely on Muslim women to make an important point about the integration of immigrants.

“The commission explicitly called on the government to use sensitive and inclusive language when dealing with matters of faith, yet once again points that apply equally to immigrants from a wide variety of nationalities, backgrounds and religions – Iraqi Christians for example – have been used to associate all Muslims with difficulties associated with integration.

“As a result, rather than empowering women, the Muslim communities can be further alienated, making it harder rather than easier for Muslim women to seek help from public authorities.”

Sufia Alam, the women’s project manager of the east London Maryam centre, pointed out a wide discrepancy between Cameron’s suggestion that 22% of Muslim women had limited or no English, and the 2011 census, which said just 6% struggled significantly with the language.

She also highlighted the deep cuts made to funding for the teaching of English for speakers of other languages (Esol) by the last parliament. “My issue is that community facilities – especially those aimed at women – have faced significant cuts.”

Others also questioned Cameron’s logic in announcing the plans for language classes when the government cut £40m last year from funding for migrants wanting to learn English.

Martin Doel, chief executive of the Association of Colleges, said the extra £20m for language classes targeted at migrant women did not make up for the £160m reduction in funds available for teaching English to migrants made between 2008 and 2015.

“Recent spending cuts have had an impact on the number of people learning English in our further education colleges, with approximately 2,000 fewer women attending Esol courses in the last year,” he said.