

Review – Eurowhiteness

Written by Sam Pryke

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SAM PRYKE, DEC 20 2023

Eurowhiteness: Culture, Empire and Race in the European Project

By Hans Kundnani

Hurst, 2023

This book has received significant attention since its publication in August 2023, much of it positive. *Eurowhiteness* has been reviewed in high-profile journals, magazines and newspapers. Simultaneously, forums have quickly been organised by universities to discuss Hans Kundnani's case. This is a reflection of the author's profile as an important figure within European policy think tanks and the provocative arguments he makes. He's currently director of the European Programme at Chatham House, having held previous positions at the German Marshall Fund and the European Council on Foreign Relations. But rather than produce another broadly pro-EU tract, couched in dull prose with frequent acronyms, he's written a sharp critique of its imperial and racial origins and conceptions. The very title, *Eurowhiteness*, a term taken from the Hungarian American sociologist, Jozsef Borocz, indicates this. Kundnani's signals at the outset that his biography – a Dutch mother and an Indian father, brought up in the UK – makes for greater detachment from his subject than most European analysts. But he is candid that his scepticism of the EU – he doesn't fit the mould of a Eurosceptic, he voted to remain in 2016 – has grown since the British referendum as he has become increasingly critical, not just of its current orientation, but, prompted by reflection on the result, its *raison d'être*.

The *Eurowhiteness* case

Eurowhiteness starts from the claim that the regional identity of the EU is best conceived as a nationalism. And not just any nationalism but one, contrary to the claims of "pro-Europeans" (written in this manner throughout) who extol its cosmopolitan credentials, at least as much an ethnic or cultural one as civic. Although this distinction continues to be used as clearly there are differing forms of nationalism, it disintegrates in attempts to assign particular manifestations – French v. German in the classic paradigm – as mutually exclusive. Kundnani himself indicates its limitations in discussion of how elicitation of a worldly cosmopolitanism can rest within vanities of a single, model identity – we Europeans/Americans are so much more sophisticated than others, just look at our embrace of diversity. This supports his claim that Europe's nationalism is, drawing on Benedict Anderson, a messianic force or a community of fate. Further, the response of the EU to Eurosceptic governments (Hungary) and parties (*Rassemblement National*), has been to ape their nationalist populism.

From this base, Kundnani examines the origins of European nationalism in a scan of the origination and development of the idea of Europe in chapter two. His premise is a rejection that the founders of the EU succeeded in drawing a line under all that was reprehensible in the continent's past in 'starting over' after the Second World War. To this end, he emphasizes the hostility to Islam as manifested in the crusades, 1095 to 1291, slavery from the early modern period, culminating in full-blown racism, sometimes within notions of a civilising mission, in the imperialism of some European states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Kundnani concedes that the eighteenth century Enlightenment shouldn't be seen as a uniform movement of white male European superiority, but identifies only figures who typify this understanding.

Chapter three seeks to demonstrate how this legacy was incorporated into the early formations of what became the

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EU. Here, Kundnani argues that there was an implicit recognition of ongoing colonial possessions, most graphically with the taken-for-granted inclusion of France's North African territories. Simultaneously, the union between the original six signatories of the Treaty of Rome cushioned the loss of French, Dutch and Belgian colonies, a bloody process that was underway by 1957. So, rather than it being 'anti-colonial', the EEC made for the 'European rescue of the imperial state' to amend Alan Milward's famous dictum. The internal reckoning with Europe's gruesome immediate past that took place in the post-war period was through a fixation on the Nazi Holocaust as a unique event never to be repeated, rather than an evaluation of empires. In this way, Holocaust remembrance has made for imperialist amnesia.

The fourth chapter of *Eurowhiteness* deals with the period of economic and monetary union, and EU expansion after the end of the Cold War. Kundnani notes a turn away from a social democratic vision of Europe to a more neoliberal one. Simultaneously, the EU as it had become was held aloft by its advocates as the culmination of liberal cosmopolitan ambition. However, the protracted process of Eastern enlargement created problems for this conceit. On the one hand, Central European countries were aware of the harm wrought by imperialism. But their imperialist experience had been from a great power to the East, Russia, rather than one of their own making. On the other, everyday racism existed, epitomised by the booing of Black English and French footballers, of a type that Western societies had largely succeeded in airbrushing from sight. These states have emphasized the Christian legacy of Europe and have been open that they will not accept significant numbers of non-white immigrants. It is in this context the term Eurowhiteness signifies a revamped liberal civilising mission of the new Millennium, i.e. a quest to make the 'dirty whites' of the East, 'proper whites' like the citizens of Old Europe.

Chapter five deals with the recent troubles of the Eurozone after 2008. Rather than seeing the EU as reeling from one crisis to another, Kundnani identifies straight policy lines of austerity, a preoccupation with Europe as a geoeconomic competitor vis-à-vis China and the US and an increasingly protectionist cultural outlook. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has strengthened the perception of Europe as a generalised force for good.

The final chapter covers BREXIT. Kundnani argues that, yes, there was imperialist nostalgia and anti-immigrant sentiment, fuelled by the misery of austerity, in the British 2016 referendum vote to leave the EU. However, he argues that this dominant narrative overlooks the significance that a third of leave voters were non-white. His inference is that this reflected a Black British perception of the unfairness of free movement for EU nationals, but not those from outside the continent. Further, he says the UK has gone further in challenging racism than elsewhere in the EU and has at least begun a conversation about the crimes of empire. BREXIT thus enables Britain to become a less Eurocentric country in a way that is less likely *sur le continent*.

A valid case on flawed grounds

Some commentators have said that, as is often the case with polemics based on little or no evidence, *Eurowhiteness* does make some valid points. My view is almost the opposite. I can't think of another book I've read where I largely agree with its conclusion, but so strongly disagree with most of its components. That Kundnani is right about the implicit white imperialist assumptions of the EU is surely demonstrated by its response to the current Israeli siege, slaughter and razing of Gaza. The double standards of, in particular, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in her reaction to the latest and most lethal phase of the Israel-Palestine conflict, hardly modified as genocide has ensued, compared to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, would be comic if the situation wasn't so tragic. However, this, as much as historic assumptions about the 'natural' integration of French colonies into its early formations, is perfectly explicable within the geopolitical spheres, interests and resulting prejudices of the EU – an organisation that, contrary to the naivety of some left-liberals, has always been primarily one of elites for elites. This said, let me outline some of the more serious weaknesses of the book.

The first is that there is no European nationalism as propounded by the EU. As with other contentions in *Eurowhiteness*, Kundnani doesn't acknowledge the readily available evidence from the EU archive (from summits, treaties, etc) or the academic debates on the subject. If he had, he would have had to have at least noted that the principal original progenitor of European unity, Jean Monet, was explicit that the last thing he wanted was to bequeath an alternative macro nationalism besides those of member states. Now there was talk of European

Review – Eurowhiteness

Written by Sam Pryke

nationalism in the post-war period. Prominent intellectuals like Hannah Arendt, referenced by Kundnani, thought it sufficiently dangerous to warn against it. And there have been recent investigations into how some figures with shady wartime pasts involved in the formation of the European Court of Justice were influenced by pre-war ideas of a rolling European unity. However, the express call for European nationalism as a bulwark of Caucasian civilisation between the communism of the USSR and the capitalism of the USA came from a rather different source: the remnants of European fascist parties. Notably Oswald Mosley, former leader of the British Union of Fascists, unsuccessfully championed this cause in the 1950s.

Attempts to build a common European identity (through education, anthems, flags, etc, the stuff of nations and nationalism) only took place as the EEC struggled to invigorate itself in the mid-1970s. They reached a high point in the late 1980s as an accompaniment to moves towards economic and monetary union – though even then they were contentious and contested. And far from being expressed in subsequent legislation, the 1992 Maastricht Treaty established the primacy of the identities of individual nation-states over a pan-European one. Subsequent treaties cemented this hierarchy, whilst EU events like the Capital of Culture programme have sought to highlight diversity. Economic union may have deepened post-millennium, but, as Kundnani hints, this has taken place with the justification of good governance to further economic responsibility, rather than an ideology of unity based on a shared past imparting a common destiny.

The principal given agency of European nationalism, especially in relation to its supposed cosmopolitanism, are “pro-Europeans”. Much hinges on this constituency but it is one that Kundnani never defines, although there is a literature on the making of this possible transnational class. The supporting references are generally to the 94-year-old Jürgen Habermas and the late Ulrich Beck. Their writings quoted were indeed flawed, but, significantly, they were made over twenty years ago when, as indicated, the star of European unity burned more brightly than now.

If there has been an attempt to build a European nationalism by the EU it has been spectacularly unsuccessful. Polling from the Commission sponsored Eurobarometer has consistently revealed that the number of people who attach as much or more importance to being European as their native nationality is minuscule. But, again, Kundnani doesn't refer to the empirical evidence.

These points reflect a wider criticism: there is no mention of the organisational architecture of the EU and how this conditions policy making. Reading *Eurowhiteness* one wouldn't know that the EU is composed of five principal institutions: the European Commission, the European Court of Justice, the European Parliament, the European Council and the European Central Bank. The one most important to his case, the Commission, isn't mentioned until page 143. It is one thing to eschew the jargon-ridden technical deliberations that have characterised so much coverage of the EU, for a bold engagement with 'big picture' issues. Quite another to ignore its internal complexity altogether. This has meant that the sometime supranational ambitions of, in particular, the Commission have been constrained by the wider intergovernmentalism of the EU as expressed by representatives of nation-states in the European Parliament and, more importantly, the European Council. For that reason, whatever ambition there may have been for a European nationalism by the Commission – actually a more prosaic integration based on an identity complementary to that of nation-states – has never been possible. The more important narrative, if one can call it that, has been a 'common sense' pursuit of economic prosperity through a union of parliamentary democracies. Attempts to square the measures involved with grandiose evocations of European unity have been occasional sidebar conceptions of Brussels officials that no one much cares about.

A third criticism relates to Kundnani's understanding of BREXIT. He's right that it was too easily explained as due to the racism of the ignorant. However, his case that the sizable Black British leave vote reflected noble anti-racist sentiments does need to be modified by recognition of the role of Commonwealth immigrant pre-eminence. I teach at a university in a deindustrialised, heavily leave voting part of England where about a third of the students are Asian. In the run-up to the EU referendum, several students told me that all their grandparents talked about at home, half in Punjabi, half in English, was how Poles and other Eastern Europeans had no right to be in Britain compared to British Indians – and should go home.

Final thoughts

Review – Eurowhiteness

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So, my feeling on finishing *Eurowhiteness* was the important case Kundnani makes now requires a convincing evidential base. Simultaneously, it was that its publication in English (no doubt translations are underway) has come a little late in the political cycle. During the referendum 2016 campaign, remain supporters focused solely on the economic negatives of leaving the EU. After the referendum through to the 'get BREXIT done' Conservative general election victory of Boris Johnson in December 2019, something novel arose in Britain: a 'pro-European' political constituency who campaigned for a second referendum. This book would have been a useful corrective to the pro-referendum supporters' assumptions that the EU is a bastion of anti-racism. As it is, this argument and constituency has now almost completely disappeared from British politics. The opposition Labour Party, likely to become the next government, isn't even committed to rejoining the single market or customs union. In this context, *Eurowhiteness* appears as an echo from a debate that has passed. However, BREXIT certainly hasn't drawn a line under anti-immigrant sentiment. For the ruling Conservative Party, now under the leadership of Rishi Sunak, the enemy is now the European Convention on Human Rights of the European Council because its clauses have thus far prevented the deportation of asylum seekers to Rwanda.

About the author:

Sam Pryke is a senior lecturer in Sociology at Wolverhampton University. He has been researching and writing about different aspects of nationalism for 30 years, most recently on European and national identity. He is currently writing a book on deglobalisation for Palgrave MacMillan and researching war memory in Croatian tourism.