Critically evaluate the relationship between race and ethnicity and the state’s approach to immigration policy. How might the management of immigrants both at the border and within the United Kingdom represent a racialised form of social control?

This essay will argue that UK immigration policy discriminates against Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) immigrants, in addition, this state sanctioned prejudice also encourages the public to behave in a similar fashion. This argument will be supported by a contemporary application of the Theory of Moral Disengagement (Bandura et al., 2001) to demonstrate how the public become normalized to the inhumane treatment of immigrants – using the examples of Immigration Removal Centres and invasive surveillance techniques. Secondly, it will be argued that the multi-organisational approach to managing immigrants creates diffused responsibility towards immigration regulation, resulting in public engaging in illegitimate forms of control, such as hate crime. Lastly, the prevalent argument that immigration policy is unracialized will be refuted using the theory of Border Imperialism (Walia, 2021), concluding that the government methods of immigration control invite the public to engage in these same discriminatory practises.

The umbrella term of ‘immigrant’ represents many groups: asylum seekers, international students, spouses of British citizens, white and BAME people. Whilst public perception of immigrants remains focused on BAME refugees (Blinder, 2015), this essay will examine the intersectional nature of the problems faced by these populations.

Racialized UK immigration policy is by no means a recent development. Before World War II, East European Jews were denied entry to the UK based on racialized grounds (Kushner, 2005). In the late 1940s, displaced Eastern Europeans were permitted access to the European Volunteer Worker scheme - which would allow them to work in the UK – contingent upon their racial suitability (McDowell, 2008). The Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962 and 1968 illustrate the attempted exclusion of BAME commonwealth immigrants to the UK. These past policies highlight the historical attempts to control both white and BAME immigrant populations. However, during the 1990s focus shifted towards BAME immigrants, culminating in the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. This leads us to the contemporary landscape: where both government policy and public attitude discriminate more heavily against BAME immigrants than their white counterparts (Ford, 2011).

On any given day up to 3000 foreign nationals are detained in Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs), and they can remain there for months, or even years (HMIP and ICIBI, 2012). Bosworth (2014) describes the legal barriers faced by detainees, such as inadequate access to legal counsel, or a lack of opportunity to disclose victimization of human trafficking. Centres are often unsanitary and overcrowded – and this is reflected in the increasing rate of self-harm in IRCs over the last decade (Independent Monitoring Board, 2017).

While the problematic nature of IRCs is routinely reported in the media, public awareness and compassion towards these immigrants remains low (Smith, 2018). Antony (2019) suggests a reason for this, providing a contemporary application of the theory of Moral Disengagement (Bandura et al., 2001). Moral Disengagement posits that the public can be made to ignore and endorse immoral activities when techniques such as using ‘euphemistic labelling’ (rephrasing something with the intention to change someone’s outlook of it) or ‘diffusing individual responsibility’ are employed. These techniques can be seen in historical UK legislation - for example, the use of ‘alien’ as a synonym for immigrant in the Aliens Act 1905. A more contemporary example can be found in Serco’s labelling of detainees in IRCs as ‘residents’ (Smith, 2018) – falsely implying that they have the choice to leave. Antony states that these techniques have been applied to the inhumane treatment of immigrants, and explains the resultant apathy from the public.

Another example of government sanctioned maltreatment of immigrants can be seen in the excessive levels of surveillance they endure. Warren and Mavroudi (2011) analyse these extravagant levels of surveillance, explaining how many immigrants must register their presence with police, and how biometric technologies capture facial images and fingerprints of immigrants as they cross the border into the UK. While the authors acknowledge that some people may not see these measures as severe, they argue that the procedures unnecessarily generate a feeling of mistrust and suspicion towards immigrants - an attitude that’s readily adopted by the public.

Ezzati (2021) supports this claim, arguing that the acceptance of the inhumane treatment in IRCs and the ubiquity of immigrant surveillance often leads to dehumanization, and subsequent othering of immigrant populations. Ezzati states that as the general public become more familiar with the persecution faced by immigrants, they grow more comfortable with exhibiting aggression and intolerance towards them. This results in the increasingly common perception that immigrants are a threat; a population to be feared and treated with hostility.

A less-direct way that the state encourages public intolerance of immigrants is though the organisation of immigration management organisations. Bowling and Westenra (2018) provide an in-depth analysis of the numerous bodies designed to control immigrants; ranging from government bodies like the Border Force, UK Visas and Immigration, and local police forces, to private companies like G4S and Serco contracted to manage IRCs. Not only is this a less effective way to manage immigrants in comparison to states that use a more centralized immigration management model (Vogel et al., 2009), it also has a pernicious societal effect.

The authors argue that immigration management is now so pervasive that it has entered the pubic social sphere. This is an idea reiterated by Aliverti (2015), who takes this notion a step further, arguing that immigration policing is now – more than ever before – undertaken by the public. Government initiatives such as ‘Prevent’ encourage public servants (such as teachers and nurses) to survey immigrant populations, justifying this under the rhetoric of terrorism prevention (Patel, 2017). Another example is the Immigration Enforcement hotline, which provides an avenue for any member of the public to inform police of suspected illegal immigrant activity. Whether any member of the public, or any civil servant is qualified to identify illegal immigrant activity is seemingly irrelevant.

Walsh (2014) uses the theoretical perspective of ‘Autonomization’ to explain how the shifting of responsibility in managing immigrant populations can develop into intolerant behaviour and an increase in immigrant targeted hate crime. Autonomization describes the process whereby grassroots movements mobilize to challenge a perceived social problem, and align themselves with government motives to justify their actions. Walsh’s application of Autonomization states that when governments make policies designed to paint immigrants as a threat, the public interpret these policies as an invitation to enact their own ‘rough justice’. An example of such a grassroots movement can be found in the work of Mondon and Winter (2020), who assert that the English Defence League (EDL) routinely engage in intimidation and violence against immigrant populations, particularly BAME immigrants. The authors further state that the EDL align with certain political policies, and argue that this affiliation of the EDL with certain political positions legitimizes the violence they enact against immigrants.

A prevalent argument among advocates of UK immigration policy states that immigration protocols have no racialized element. It is argued that policy is designed to be tough, but fair – accepting immigrants based on characteristics like language ability, or the level of persecution a refugee faces in their home country (GOV.UK, 2014), while ignoring factors like ethnicity and skin colour (John Reid MP, 2006; UK Border Agency, 2008).

The evidence suggests otherwise. The intersectional nature of being both an immigrant, and a member of the BAME community means that BAME immigrants face additional obstacles when entering and inhabiting the UK. Walia (2021) supports this by introducing the theory of Border Imperialism; which suggests that borders are not just geographical lines that delineate where one country ends and another begins, but rather a method of control used to regulate groups of people. Border Imperialism uses a post-colonial perspective to argue that borders are a tool used by states to enact racially prejudicial views, particularly in countries like the UK that once controlled large empires. Using this perspective, Walia argues that the UK use their stringent border controls and immigration policies to continue to regulate and persecute BAME immigrants. She explains that this persecution takes the form of indefinite detention, practises of arrest without charge, and deaths of immigrants while in detention centres – all specifically targeting immigrants seen as “undesirable,” or as Walia argues: BAME.

Once living in the UK, pervasive government policy surrounding the lives of BAME immigrants continues. Employment becomes difficult, as BAME immigrants face both a higher likelihood of discrimination from employers (Carlisle, 2006), and more stringent bureaucratical processes limiting the type of work and contract (Schweitzer, 2020). The Migrants Rights Network (2015) states that both the employer and employee can face considerable fines if an illegal immigrant is employed, and as proof-to-live and proof-to-work can take many forms, the average employer is rarely equipped to identify and accept documentation. As a result, foreign looking people are often denied employment opportunities, despite being on average more highly educated than their white immigrant counterparts (Lindley, 2009). Furthermore, the UK’s aforementioned anti-terrorism strategy ‘Prevent’ encourages public servants to notify the government of people they deem suspect. BAME immigrants are disproportionately represented in these reportings, while only 11% of cases are investigated further (ONS, 2020) – suggesting a lack of validity in these claims. Despite this, Prevent has been heralded as a success by government officials (Bentley, 2018). This demonstrates the racialized nature of government immigration policy, both at the border and within the country.

In conclusion, this essay has shown the racially prejudicial nature of UK immigration policy, and shown how this discrimination bleeds into society, constructing an environment that actively encourages racial injustice. The UK government uses a range of tools to exacerbate this culture of intolerance towards BAME immigrants: IRCs and coercive surveillance are used to dehumanize immigrants, while the responsibility of controlling immigrants is incrementally, but surely, passed to the public. Finally, the argument that immigration policy is divorced from racial bias has been demonstrated to be false. The state engage in wilful and unethical forms of social control of BAME immigrants, both at the border, and within society.

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