

Why Critical Whiteness Studies needs to think about warfare

Vron Ware

Open University, Storbritannien

The history of whiteness is intrinsic to the concept of race itself, in all its changing formulations and fatal outcomes. Despite the continuing and careless use of racial terms to refer to skin colour and ethnic origin, one of the benefits of subjecting the term to political analysis has been to draw attention away from whiteness as a physical set of attributes, and to investigate and undermine its discursive power and symbolic currency within different national contexts. The uneven geographical spread of Critical Whiteness Studies, as it rapidly became known, was inevitably rooted in US perspectives, definitions and theoretical insights, or at least those of Anglophone countries such as the UK and more recently Canada and Australia. This hampered – as well as influenced – the ways that whiteness has been conceived within Europe. Charting the discursive production of whiteness as a racial construct demands a reckoning with the national past: colonial history, patterns of postcolonial migration, the development of multiculturalism as policy and practice. For all these reasons it has been difficult to produce definitions of whiteness that apply within and across multiple locations.

Roger Hewitt, who has written extensively about racial conflict and perceptions of multiculturalism among working class communities in the UK, argues that whiteness is usefully conceived through the historicised and gendered notion of citizenship, whether this is achieved through the status of settlers or natives. Whiteness does not necessarily arise from a conception of the ethnic majority or the dominant ethnicity, he suggests, but is ‘augmented with the idea of ‘born to rule’ or ‘standard by which all others are judged’ or ‘grid through which all things should be perceived’. This is the realm of the long history through which a cultural hegemony of ‘whiteness’ was achieved.¹

Hewitt is particularly concerned with the way in which particular groups of ‘migrant whites’ are considered more or less threatening than others. Since the influx of economic migrants into the UK from new EU countries in 2004, new hierarchies have been established: attitudes to Poles, Kosovans, Bulgarians and Lithuanians, for example, reflect the degree to which they are considered useful, threatening, needy, or hard-working. Within the new Europe, he argues, ‘Our conscious as well as tacit knowledge of racial discourse construction is immense – we have seen so much of it – and in truth many of its contradictions and putative ironies are very simple matters:

1 Roger Hewitt ‘Seeing Whiteness Through the Blizzard.’

populations and their governments like immigrants who contribute something to the social good and don't threaten.²

Hewitt is not playing down the historical significance of white supremacy in differentiating between who is deserving and who is not, but attempting to raise urgent questions for socially committed researchers in this new Europe. 'Whatever changes have been occurring to the positioning of "blackness" – and people of African or African Caribbean and African American heritage have not benefited equally from global cultural shifts – the meaning of "whiteness" in contemporary European urban environments is very far from hegemonic.'³

Matthew Frye Jacobson's analysis of whiteness as a political and cultural category documented how it came to mean different things in terms of citizenship, national identity, and immigration discourse over a long sweep of US cultural history.⁴ His more recent work, *Roots Too: white ethnic revival in post-civil rights America*, continues this archaeology of national formation. Here he traces the development of identity politics in the post civil rights era from the 1960s to 2001. During this period, Ellis Island – the symbolic sanctuary for immigrants fleeing persecution – replaced Plymouth Rock – the legendary landing stage of the Pilgrim Fathers – as the touchstone of national identity. Recognising the elemental career of white primacy as it has been articulated through the politics of nation-making – immigration and patriotism in particular – Jacobson demonstrates how the revived attachment to ethnic identities – the celebration of the hyphen – gave rise to new forms of inclusion and exclusion even as the potent mythology of the 'nation of immigrants' continued to be celebrated. His book concludes with a call to pay strict attention to 'patterns in our collectivised sense of naturalized Americanness...These more than anything else constitute the historical weave of that hypnotic political ideal, *America*.'⁵

Thinking about how to apply a critical analysis of whiteness to the contemporary politics of racism and national identity discourse in Britain, I have come to realise that the organisation of the country's armed forces provides a rich seam for exploring the terms and boundaries of citizenship and national belonging, not just in historical terms but *especially* in the present. Since the NATO operations in Afghanistan – and here I include so-called peace-keeping elements as well as active military operations – involve European as well as North American countries, this inquiry also offers a valuable opportunity for transnational conversation, if not collaboration. Here I want to explore some of the links between war, military service, citizenship and national identity in the UK as a way of suggesting fresh sociological perspectives on racism, whiteness and exclusion in postcolonial Europe.

2 Roger Hewitt 'Seeing Whiteness Through the Blizzard, pp. 41-2.

3 Ibid, p. 50.

4 Matthew Frye Jacobson *Whiteness of a Different Color: European immigrants and the alchemy of race* 1998.

5 Matthew Frye Jacobson *Roots Too: white ethnic revival in post-civil rights America* 2006.

Queen and Country

The sight of a blond female TV star of a certain age waving a lethal Nepalese sword with one hand as she brushed away tears from her eyes with the other was guaranteed to draw massive media attention. Against a backdrop of elderly foreign soldiers draped in medals, framed by headlines evoking strong feelings of loyalty, decency, pride and shame, the spectacular brew of celebrity, militarism, national identity and colonial memory was irresistible. Actor Joanna Lumley, known largely for her portrayal of Patsy, a rather dissolute, amoral character in the British TV sitcom *AbFab*, was the figurehead of the Campaign for Gurkha Justice which has been fighting for parity of terms and conditions for Nepalese soldiers who are part of the British Army, serving in separate Gurkha regiments. But the tears of joy that flowed down Lumley's cheeks not only stemmed from the emotive struggle to recognise the 'moral debt of honour'⁶ owed to a group of people tied to Britain through residual and anachronistic colonial settlements. They also signalled the triumph of a powerful idea about what it means to be a soldier in the service of the nation.

The campaign to challenge the British government's ruling on the rights of Gurkha veterans to settle in the UK has forced the issue of citizenship and military service into the public domain. In May 2009 Gordon Brown's government suffered a hugely symbolic defeat after refusing to grant those Nepalese soldiers who had retired before 1997 the right to reside in the UK – and to have free access to health and welfare rights. This refusal was swiftly revoked after Lumley's charismatic intervention, backed by seemingly unanimous public support. Commentators of all political persuasions have consistently supported Gurkha campaigns for equity, claiming that Britain has a moral duty to acknowledge the sacrifices made by those who serve in its armed forces. Far from being another category of unwanted immigrants seeking to cash in on their tenuous connections to the UK, the retired Nepalese soldiers and their dependants were cast as deserving entrants to the national collective. Numerous online forums, phone-ins and other sources of public reaction testified to the popularity of the Gurkhas in contrast to the 'wrong' kind of claimants: those economic migrants, asylum seekers and 'spongers' who had nothing to contribute in return. The Nepalese ex-servicemen had earned their claims to citizenship rights, if not their entitlement to retire in dignity, in the country for which they had risked their lives.

The prolonged media attention that revealed their shoddy treatment was also an opportunity to educate the British public about who the Gurkhas were, as well as their role in Britain's late 20th century wars. Few people under the age of fifty had any idea that Britain has retained part of its colonial army after a tripartite agreement between India, Nepal and Britain in 1947. Although numbers had been reduced since then, little attention had been paid at the time to the Gurkhas' active involvement in the Falklands, for example, as well as in Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor, Sierre Leone and

⁶ Vanessa Allen "Treachery! The government unveils new residency test for Gurkhas..." (internet 2009-04-24).

Iraq. The death of Corporal Kumar Pun in Helmand Province on 7 May, just three days after Lumley's triumph, was a reminder that Gurkha units are integral to NATO operations in Afghanistan.

This decision to withhold citizenship rights was cast as a clear breach of the Military Covenant – a notional agreement between the British nation and its Armed Forces drawn up by the Army and published by the Ministry of Defence in 2000. This contract has no legal binding, but is an attempt to outline the obligations owed to soldiers both by government and society. The text of the Covenant states that, "In return for putting the needs of the nation and the army before their own, British soldiers must always be able to expect fair treatment, to be valued and respected as individuals, and that they (and their families) will be sustained and rewarded by commensurate terms and conditions of service." But while the media drama ensures that people are constantly reminded of the Gurkhas' historic role within the British Army, the implications of the more recent recruitment of foreign nationals have yet to be explored.

Race to recruit

When a country is involved in active military operations, the figure of the soldier becomes an especially rich object of investigation, one that is highly symbolic of how the nation is constituted. Political scientist Ron Krebs argues that 'the military is the key hinge institution sitting astride and mediating between domestic and international politics.'⁷ Bearing in mind that this theoretical generalization obscures the huge differences between different national states, it is still a valuable comment on the Janus-faced nature of military institutions. In an exploration of how that hinge operates as a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, Krebs asserts that military manpower policies are likely to be crucial to shaping the politics of citizenship, the definition of the political community, and thus the boundaries of nationality. The mass army is today on the run, he suggests, and privatized security forces are making a comeback...⁸ but who serves remains a question of importance.⁸

If the war in question is unpopular, or the terms and conditions of working in the armed services are deemed unattractive for a variety of reasons, then the army is forced to recruit from where it can. Soldiers take time to produce and the quality of training determines the caliber of the end product. For those interested in the politics of citizenship and national identity, paying attention to an army's manpower policies and strategies when the army is actively involved in military operations becomes an important way of investigating the limits of the nation – both as an idea (if not a hypnotic political ideal) and in policy terms as well.

Who serves has become inextricable from who deserves. Geographer Deborah Cowen, who has studied the development of social citizenship in Canada, argues that the

7 Ron Krebs "A School for the Nation? How Military Service Does Not Build Nations, and How it Might" 2004, p. 123.

8 Krebs p. 124.

involvement of citizens in 'war work' effectively changed the notion of mass welfare as a service that was granted to a right that was deserved. 'Mass warfare', she writes, 'ingrained a sense of social right in the national population.'⁹ This was intrinsically linked to the institution of national service.

Cowen also notes that Britain's Beveridge plan which inaugurated the modern welfare state was built around parallel assumptions. From the 1930s the term 'social security' referred to the government's responsibility for the social welfare of its people who were, in turn, thought to owe some form of national (usually military) service in return. "Social security,' Beveridge would explain, 'must be achieved by cooperation between the state and the individual. *The State should offer security for service and contribution.*' "(emphasis in Cowen)

Any consensus about a political framework that justifies ever-tightening immigration controls that define the boundaries of nationhood today will emerge out of bitter negotiations to determine who is eligible for social welfare and what forms of allegiance or duty this might demand in return. With a strong national identity the traditional rules are clear: one must be ready to kill and to die for one's country, or give up one's children, in exchange for protection by the state. The soldier is inseparable from the citizen, a point continually repeated by the far right. But what issues are raised by the manner and scope of military recruitment when the country is involved in deeply unpopular wars and its own reluctant citizens are deemed increasingly overweight, unfit and unsure of their place in the world?

The modernisation of Britain's Armed Forces gathered pace when conscription was finally scrapped in 1960. Although the end of national service was hotly debated in the immediate aftermath of the 1939–45 war, the consequences of this measure for civil society have not been fully explored. One effect has been an increasing separation between military and civilian worlds, and now the public is only intermittently concerned with how the Armed Forces attracts new recruits. Meanwhile those who die in battle are still represented as proudly serving Queen and Country, despite plenty of evidence to show that this might not be why they joined up.

Grenadan-born Private Johnson Beharry, awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery in the early stages of the Iraq war, was explicit about why he defied family and friends to join the British Army during a particularly low period of his life. He describes in his autobiography *Barefoot Soldier* the moment he realized that he was eligible as a citizen of a Commonwealth country. Having read a recruiting advert on an old newspaper he found on the tube, he made up his mind to apply: 'If I joined the army all my problems would be solved at a stroke. I can remain in the UK. I might even get a British passport.

'I'll also get a reasonable wage, but best of all, I'll break completely with the past.'¹⁰

9 Deborah Cowen *Military Workfare: The Soldier and Social Citizenship in Canada* 2008.

10 Johnson Beharry VC *Barefoot Soldier: The Amazing True Story of Courage Under Fire*, 2006 p. 196.

Beharry's frankness is echoed in many contemporary soldier memoirs and other testimonies from British-born working class counterparts who are similarly motivated by the desire to escape a cycle of drugs, poverty or dead-end jobs rather than by some abstract notion of loyalty to the nation. However, before the recession transformed the UK economy in autumn 2008, it was proving impossible to meet recruitment targets without looking further afield.

The patriotic support for the Gurkha veterans aroused by Joanna Lumley reflects deeply held loyalties towards those who fight on behalf of Britain. They are 'our boys' and deserve 'our' full backing, which includes the benefit of pensions, free health care and the right to remain in the country. The Nepalese soldiers' position as separate but equal in principle has been established. But the public is not yet aware of the sheer number of other foreign recruits deemed eligible to serve within the British Army as part of a diverse but integrated workforce. Unlike the Nepalese, these are citizens of the Commonwealth, an intergovernmental organisation founded in 1931 as part of Britain's former empire and subsequently modified to fit the different political demands of the later 20th century.¹¹

Military museum curators at last collaborate with schools to explore the rich archives detailing the contribution of colonial troops in the 1914–1918 and 1935–45 wars – if only in Black History month once a year. But it is rare for political commentators to acknowledge that Britain's role in the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan is largely made possible by recruiting significant numbers of young women and men as a direct result of those same historical links. While we are used to acknowledging the contribution made by postcolonial migrants to key British institutions such as the National Health Service, the link between military manpower and migration studies is seldom made, either in academic circles or in the public domain.

The British Army now employs personnel from over 35 countries. Figures published in 2008 show that there were 7,240 officers and soldiers from Commonwealth countries, trained and untrained. Of these, 2,205 were Fijian, 690 Ghanaian and 630 Jamaican, while South Africans and Zimbabweans combined totalled 1,365.¹² The host of immigration issues involved in employing non-UK nationals in the Armed Forces not only highlights the complex link between welfare and warfare, but, more importantly, lays bare the contradictions at the centre of national identity.

Many of these soldiers join with no particular intention of becoming British citizens, others aspire to dual nationality and some join in the hope of acquiring 'the red passport' for themselves and their extended families. Although there are a number of

11 The Commonwealth is an intergovernmental organisation of fifty-three independent member states, most of which were formerly parts of the British Empire. They co-operate within a framework of common values and goals, as outlined in the Singapore Declaration, which includes the promotion of democracy, human rights, good governance, the rule of law, individual liberty, egalitarianism, free trade, multilateralism, and world peace. Sixteen of these recognize Elizabeth II as their queen.

12 Army Personnel Statistics Report 2008 by DASA.

exemptions and minor privileges for members of the Armed Forces, the fact remains that they are individually responsible for their immigration, visa and passport issues and are not guaranteed any particular entitlements on the basis of their exceptional work. My ethnographic research indicates that this knot of issues moves the focus away from the Army as an employer towards the state as the arbiter of who is deserving of the rewards of citizenship, and on what terms.

In the context of British government policy it is hard not to conclude that there is an insidious double standard operating in the name of restricting immigration for the benefit of the country. Non-European foreigners, whether skilled or unskilled, are now to be barred from employment as doctors, teachers, categories of nursing and many other occupations in favour of applicants from the EU. At the same time, citizens from Commonwealth countries, many of whom were oriented towards the 'mother country' by education, religion or family ties, are invited to risk their lives for Britain and to profess loyalty to the Queen (who remains the head of the Commonwealth too). Europeans, on the other hand, citizens of countries that were at war with Britain within living memory, are prohibited from joining the Armed Forces but are free to enter the country and qualify for benefits through reciprocal agreements.

The nation in uniform

Looking at the British Army's recruitment practices in and from Commonwealth countries is a valuable exercise since it entails studying the institution's policies on equal opportunity and diversity as well as a range of citizenship issues affecting non-UK nationals. The extent of ethnic diversity is connected to the army's ability to reflect the social profile of the wider population, for example, and the face of the Army as a multicultural organization has enormous significance for representing Britain as a dynamic, essentially modern and postcolonial nation. Conversely, an army that is unable to attract ethnic minority recruits inevitably retains the appearance of homogeneity and symbolic whiteness, an image that is likely to have negative effects abroad as well as domestically.

Yet because military institutions are by nature closed and often secretive about internal policies and practices, they are easily by-passed by academics unless they have chosen to specialize in military sociology, political science or International Relations. This compounds the invisibility of the armed forces in academic discourse which makes it harder to study the effects of war on the politics of citizenship. As Tarak Barkawi, author of *Globalisation and War*, observes, 'Specialists in war and the military pay insufficient attention to society, politics and culture, while sociologists, cultural theorists and to a lesser degree political scientists are not sufficiently attentive to the importance of war to their subject matters. ...war and society stand in a dynamic interrelationship with each other.'¹³

13 Tarak Barkawi *Globalization and War* 2006 p. 28-9.

Foucault wrote that 'War is the engine of politics, the 'motor behind institutions and order. In the smallest of its cogs peace is waging a secret war...peace is itself a coded war.' Citing this quote, Cowen suggests, 'yet just as we must investigate the role of the state of exception in constituting our peace, we must also be willing to consider the role of the soldier as a figure of exception in the constitution of citizenship. When we do, a complex tangle of politics and geographies of work, war and welfare are opened for investigation'.¹⁴

At the centre of this tangle there are also important and urgent questions for sociologists seeking to interrogate the national, naturalised and racialised collectivities at the heart of our countries' own 'hypnotic political ideals'.

References

- Allen, Vanessa (2009) 'Treachery! The government unveils new residency test for Gurkhas ... that almost NONE of them can pass' Mail Online, April 24 2009. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1172758/Treachery-The-government-unveils-new-residency-test-Gurkhas---NONE-pass.html>
- Army Personnel Statistics Report*. Published 2008-12-08 by DASA.
- Barkawi, Tarak (2006) *Globalization and War*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Cowen, Deborah (2008) *Military Workfare: The Soldier and Social Citizenship in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Hewitt, Roger (2006–2007) 'Seeing Whiteness Through the Blizzard: issues in research in white communities', *Athanos* n. 10, pp. 41–50.
- Jacobson, Matthew Frye (1998) *Whiteness of a Different Color: European immigrants and the alchemy of race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Jacobson, Matthew Frye (2006) *Roots Too: white ethnic revival in post-civil rights America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Johnson Beharry VC (2006) *Barefoot Soldier: The Amazing True Story of Courage Under Fire*. London: Sphere.
- Krebs, Ron (2004) "A School for the Nation? How Military Service Does Not Build Nations, and How it Might". *International Security*, 28 (4).

Författarpresentation

Vron Ware är research fellow vid Open University i England och har tidigare varit vid University of Greenwich och Yale University. Hennes forskningsområde är postkolonialism och den sociala konstruktionen av etnicitet, kön och nationell identitet. Bland hennes verk är *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* (Verso, 1992), *Out of Whiteness: Color, Politics and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2002, med Les Back) and *Who Cares About Britishness? A Global View of the National Identity Debate* (Arcadia, 2007).

¹⁴ Cowen, p. 20.