Violence and Harm in the Context of Brexit: Gender, Class and the Migrant ‘Other’

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This chapter explores the impacts on EU nationals in the UK of living in the context of the debates and aftermath of the 2016 referendum on whether or not the UK should remain a member of the EU, that is whether to ‘Brexit’. The Brexit-related debates, policies and processes have created a context of harm involving structural violence, ‘gaslighting’, and related increases in xenophobia and hate crimes. The effects are also gendered, with women more vulnerable to aspects of the policies. The chapter explores some these issues, drawing on my own experience as a non-UK EU national, and on reports from other non-UK EU nationals living in the UK (compiled by other researchers and EU3million).

I draw on auto-ethnography, using my personal narrative and situating this in the socio-cultural-political context of the 2016 Brexit Referendum.

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result to contribute to understanding of the impacts of that context (Ellis and Bochner 2000). It is a story underpinned by a number of important shifts and trends in the UK, towards a much more right-wing populist discourse and xenophobic policies fuelled by neoliberal economics (Winlow et al. 2017; Walby 2018). In the UK, the use by the pro-Brexit politicians of a concerted approach involving lies and distortion of facts has created a new right-wing norm and interference with people’s lives and reality that is possibly more hidden than the seemingly similar but more obvious extreme tweets and actions by Donald Trump in the US.

My father brought my mother, my siblings and me from Denmark to live in the UK in the late 1960s. He was offered a senior job in a Danish multinational company and was thus what is described as an economic migrant, that is moving to another country in order to attain a better income and lifestyle for the family. At that time economic migrants, whether from the Commonwealth, EU countries or elsewhere, were deemed positive in policy terms as the UK required labour for the health service and other sectors, and also wanted industrialists like my father to come to the UK to create further jobs. This was the period when the UK were also inviting mass migration from the Caribbean and other Commonwealth countries for people to fill holes in the UK labour market, to work for instance as nurses and on the buses. Only later, especially since the 1990s, did the term ‘economic migrant’ come to be seen as more negative. What we have seen more recently is the shift in definition of economic migrant to ‘bad migrant who takes our jobs’, however erroneous in reality, and the possibly ‘deserving migrant’ as the asylum seeker who has had to flee their country of origin as a result of war and discrimination, with all migrants being seen in a more negative light.

I came to the UK as a child in the 1960s, a time when there was much economic migration to the UK from former UK colonies, including the Caribbean and South Asia. Those who came from the Caribbean are known as the ‘Windrush generation’ because the ship that brought the first 500 Jamaicans in 1948 was called The Windrush. The Black and Asian migrants to the UK faced gross racism in the years after they arrived, ongoing and renewed racism, and more recently a ‘hostile’ environment for immigrants. However, and possibly naively, I like many
others (EU brief 2019) did not think that the discrimination faced by those originating from the Commonwealth would in some ways be reflected in the experiences of white middle-class EU nationals. I did not anticipate the intersectional shift I would experience from being positioned as white, middle-class EU citizen to a re-positioning as ‘migrant’, and having to find ways of resistance including the seemingly ‘inverse’ resistance of ‘joining’ as citizen. This might of course be deemed especially naïve given other instances in history of increasingly right-wing governments and regimes constructing any minorities as ‘other’.

**Background: Hostile Environment for Immigrants and the 2016 Referendum**

The UK joined the EU (European Union—then termed the European Economic Community, EEC) in 1973, with conservatives and the centre-left politicians emphasising the benefits of being part of such an expanding trading bloc. However, there has always been some unease on the right wing of the Conservative Party that the EU was encroaching on UK sovereignty and individual liberty, while those on the left wing were suspicious of the EU as a capitalist project (Batrouni 2020).

Many articles and books will no doubt be written about the 2016 UK Referendum. These are likely to document how Prime Minister David Cameron agreed to the referendum in the attempt, as so many Conservative Prime Ministers before him, to appease the right wing of the Conservative Party, and how this failed, opening further opportunities for the right wing to control the political agenda.

I was in the North East of England at the time of the referendum. I was doing research fieldwork in the area and arrived on the eve of the vote. Coming from Bristol, a strongly ‘remain’ area in the South West of England, I was struck by the sea of posters advertising what looked like the Labour Party. Many windows had red ‘Labour colour’ posters with similar layout to the Labour posters I had seen in Bristol—where Labour was supporting remaining in the EU. But here in Newcastle the posters did not say ‘Labour’ but ‘Leave’. It was obvious that the Leave campaign had not only hijacked the Labour colour but copied their poster layout,
presumably so that voters in an otherwise mainly Labour area would think Labour was advocating Leave. The Leave campaign ‘guru’ Dominic Cummings later boasted that indeed that is exactly what they had done. In the event many in the North East did vote to leave the EU, also creating one of the key fracture lines in the Labour Party around policy regarding the EU. But that is another story (Batrouni 2020).

While Prime Minister Cameron and his cronies were cockily sure that the outcome of the referendum would be a vote to remain in the UK, the sea of posters that met me in Newcastle made me think otherwise. I thought it likely that Leave would win, which of course they did, if only by a small margin, by 52–48%. One aspect that appears to have had scant attention so far is that the 3.5 million non-UK EU nationals living in the UK at the time of the referendum were not allowed to vote in the referendum—despite paying taxes and contributing much to the UK. If they had been allowed to vote this is likely to have swung the outcome in the other direction, to remain.

It is clear that the anti-EU sentiment expressed in the Brexit referendum vote was also reflected in Government policy and wider public opinion in the years before the referendum. For instance, Pantazis and Pemberton’s (2011) review of opinion polls found public opinion supportive of a shift to authoritarianism. And the wider anti-immigration ‘hostile environment’ championed in particular by Theresa May when she was Home Office Minister was embedded from the early 2010s in a number of policies aimed at restricting EU nationals’ access to and rights in the UK under the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition and Conservative Governments. The UK referendum in June 2016 regarding whether Britain should remain in or leave the European Union of 28 countries was a particular milestone in the UK shifts in attitudes towards and policy regarding immigration, but also the culmination of a longer period of anti-immigration sentiment and policy. The 52% of the population who voted to leave may have done so for a number of reasons, for instance, the feelings of loss and victimhood resulting from loss of empire, de-industrialisation and austerity might be deemed to have led to coping through scapegoating ‘others’ (see e.g. Ogden 1979). These problems were presented by the right-wing politicians as resulting from the seemingly ‘unstemmed’ migrants coming to the UK
within the context of free movement across the EU, rather than resulting from their own neoliberal policies and failures. A key feature of the Leave campaign's message was thus anti-immigration—about ‘gaining control of our borders’ and stopping migrants from taking British peoples’ jobs.

The referendum unleashed anti-foreigner rhetoric and hate crime, as well as further encouraging the far-right politicians and populist groups who had pushed for the referendum in the first place. Moreover, while anti-foreigner sentiment has tended to apply to those from non-EU countries, and especially those from the global South, the referendum made it obvious how non-UK EU nationals were also being targeted within anti-immigration rhetoric and policy.

In the early 2010s, Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron initiated a series of legislative measures to limit access by EU migrants to jobs and welfare support, arguing against the EU principle of free movement and ‘unleashing UK nationalism’ (O’Brien 2015). The UK consequently saw wave upon wave of anti-EU migrant regulatory reform beginning from the 2013, including ‘introduction of a three-month prior residence rule for Jobseeker’s Allowance; scrapping Housing Benefit for all EU jobseekers; the withdrawing of job centre interpretation for EU jobseekers; the introduction of cut-off for Jobseeker’s Allowance; and the introduction of a minimum earnings threshold to have work classified as work’ (O’Brien 2015, p. 111). These changes not only contravened EU law because they went against the EU principles of free movement and equal treatment, but have increased pressures on EU nationals whether in work or not, as well as feeding into a ‘xenosceptic legal and administrative culture’ (ibid.).

Creating a Hostile Environment for Migrants

The then Home Secretary, and later Prime Minister, Theresa May suggested that the rationale was to create what she called a ‘hostile environment’: ‘The aim is to create here in Britain a really hostile environment for illegal migration’ (Daily Telegraph 2012). She used the words ‘illegal migration’ but was actually providing a hostile environment for migrants more generally, including legal migrants from the
EU. We thus see the use of the discourse relating to ‘illegal’ migration, that built on concerns about being overrun by refugees seeking a better life in Britain, as economic migrants, towards construction of a view of migrants infused with the notion of being potentially ‘illegal’, i.e. not wanted and subject to policing and scrutiny. But migration is not inherently illegal, and instead aspects of mobility were being ‘illegalised’. As Weber and Pickering point out,

> Across the Global North, governments are increasingly engaged in efforts to reduce the access of illegalised migrants to public services and regulated labour markets. In Europe, Australia and North America, eligibility restrictions on the provision of essential housing, health and education services, and legal sanctions on employers who hire undocumented workers are being systematically introduced. (Weber and Pickering 2011, p. 112)

The hostile environment led to new provisions in the Immigration Act 2014 requiring landlords to check the immigration status of their tenants, National Health Service surcharges for non-EEA migrants in an otherwise free health service, and new powers to revoke citizenship for individuals deemed ‘prejudicial’ to the UK. A further immigration Act in 2016 sought to also include employers in this ‘policing’ of immigrants and identifying of ‘illegals’, and increased sanctions against landlords who did not comply in doing the checks. Although supposedly not applying to EU nationals resident in the UK, as we shall see later, these measures of the ‘hostile environment’ have in actuality been applied to EU nationals, and will do so in the future.

Particularly badly affected by the general climate of ‘hostility’ was the so-called ‘Windrush generation’ of people originating from the Caribbean, who had arrived in the UK between 1948 and 1971. Although they and their children had been given leave to remain in the UK, and did not need to acquire UK citizenship, this was often difficult for them to prove and they were grossly discriminated against within the hostile environment. As a recent inspection by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate so starkly reports:
It had become clear that the Home Office had wrongly designated thousands of legal UK [Windrush] residents as being in the country illegally. …Some were wrongly deported to countries they had left as children half a century earlier, and others were mistakenly detained in immigration detention centres. Many were sacked by employers worried they faced £20,000 fines for hiring people without the correct documentation. Some were then denied benefits, leaving them destitute. Many were made homeless, denied NHS treatment and prevented from travelling. (Williams 2020)

This scandal led to the resignation in April 2018 of the then home secretary, Amber Rudd. But the ‘hostile environment’ had become embedded, and the structurally violent policies that emanated from the hostile approach remained.

**The Impact of Brexit: Structural Violence and Gaslighting**

The politics and policies that have surrounded Brexit since 2016 have created a context of what various writers have called structural and cultural violence (Galtung 1990) and aspects of gaslighting (Stark 2007). Galtung talks about cultural violence as ‘any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form’ (Galtung 1990, p. 292), in other words cultural violence is used to normalise and render acceptable structures that further inequalities and harm. Cultural violence is thus associated with ‘illegalisation’ of migrants and the development of an increasingly hostile, structurally violent, environment, which in turn can lead to directly violent impacts. In the context of Brexit structural violence can therefore be seen to become normalised through discourses of nationalism involving xenophobic, anti-immigrant, rhetoric of ‘gaining control of borders’, British exceptionalism, the idea that Britain will be stronger without Europe, and has led to hate crimes against migrants. Indeed the 2016 referendum result led to an immediate increase in direct violence against EU nationals,
including physical assaults, and in the immediate lead-up to the referendum a self-declared white nationalist carried out the murder of the remain supporting member of Parliament, Jo Cox.

Walby (2018), in a discussion of the shift towards far-right politics in parts of Europe, provides a further lens by exploring the links between violence and neoliberalism. She argues that neoliberalism in itself generates increased inequalities, which in turn generates violence: ‘neoliberalism, while purporting to shrink the state in relation to the economy, grows it in relation to violence, producing a larger and more coercive state, not a smaller state hereby producing the things it rhetorically claims to oppose’ (Walby 2018, p. 69). Her approach enables us to understand how in a context such as the UK, where an increasingly right wing and populist, yet still neoliberal, Conservative Government continues to deepen the ‘coercive state’, it also generates violence at more meso and micro levels in terms of hate crimes fuelled by the inequities generated by that state.

Following the Brexit referendum vote in June 2016, Prime Minister David Cameron, who had backed the case for remaining in the EU, resigned as Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative Party. In the leadership election that followed, which was held only within the Conservative Party, the final two candidates were Theresa May and Andrea Leadsom. It was clear that either would take forward a pro-Leave anti-EU, anti-immigrant approach. Leadsom, however, was politically even further to the right than Theresa May, had supported the Leave campaign and was more virulent in her call for restriction of rights. Echoing far-right politicians across Europe and the US (see Walby 2018), she favoured restriction not only of migrant rights but also women’s right regarding abortion and restriction of same sex marriage. One of her promises as leadership contender was that she would ensure the abolition of the same sex marriage legislation, which had enabled gay and lesbian couples to get married in Britain, but not Northern Ireland, for the first time in 2013 (Marriage [Same Sex Couples] Act 2013). I remember sitting on the sofa at home watching the leadership speeches on the TV with my female partner of 24 years, and realising that not only was my status as UK resident under profound attack, but that we were possibly about to lose our rights associated with gay marriage—which
might further undermine any future rights regarding UK residence and citizenship. Further inequities and structural violence would likely result involving the intersection between sexual orientation and citizenship. We decided then and there to get married. Our ‘Brexit wedding’ took place in November 2016.  

Another type of violence, involving a form of emotional abuse where the abuser manipulates situations to repeatedly undermine their victim and make them feel crazy has been called ‘gaslighting’, following the 1944 film *Gaslight* (Stark 2007). Gaslighting is part of emotional abuse in undermining the victim’s sense of self and wellbeing, and creation of fear. In gaslighting the abuser uses a range of techniques with the effect of de-centring and unbalancing the victims’ reality, that may include telling blatant lies, involve denying something was said even if there is proof that it was, wearing the victim down, telling the victim one thing but doing another, creating confusion, and projecting their own faults onto the victim. Gaslighting tends to be used as something that takes place at the level of the individual, but in the Brexit context elements of gaslighting are evident against EU nationals as a group more generally. In this instance the pro-Brexit politicians and Brexit oriented state used a particular range of gaslighting techniques, especially the telling of blatant lies, denying something was said even if there was proof that it was, creating confusion and wearing down of EU nationals, with the effect of unbalancing the EU national subject-victims’ reality and creating emotional distress. As Maike Bohn, co-founder of the group EU3million, outlines, the often contradictory and mixed messages that the pro-Brexit politicians provided about the rights of EU nationals’ amount to gaslighting:

... the UK government has not earned the trust of EU citizens, having spent the last three years gas-lighting our anxieties with mixed messages. Are we the much-quoted ‘neighbours, colleagues, friends’ or are we the ‘queue jumpers, benefits scroungers, unwelcome guests, draining the NHS’? (BueLTman 2020)

Despite the history of erosion of EU nationals’ rights in the UK prior to 2016, in the period leading up to the Brexit referendum one of the
founders of the Vote Leave campaign, the main organisation arguing for people to vote to Brexit in the 2016 referendum, stated that: ‘It is irresponsible to scare EU nationals in the UK by hinting that their status might change after Brexit. No one’s suggesting such a thing’ (Danial Hannam in Led by Donkeys 2019). But this was of course not what he and his colleagues actually thought, nor were to argue once the referendum had been won in favour of Brexit. Instead, following the vote in favour of Brexit the new Government under Prime Minister Theresa May set out to fundamentally change the rights of EU nationals in the UK from having permanent leave to remain in the UK to having to apply for a new ‘Settlement Scheme’ with insecure futures. This complete undermining of what had been ‘permanent’ rights included gaslighting distortions of truth as well as creation of fear and confusion:

Before the Brexit referendum, EU citizens were told they had ‘rights’ of residence. Some were even issued with documents stating they had a ‘permanent right’ of residence. They are now told these ‘rights’ were no such thing but instead were conditional, temporary and could be taken away. (Yeo 2018b)

Imagine having lived in the UK most of your life, and to be told that the place where you have your home, your family, all your worldly possessions and any means of income is suddenly a potential illusion. That you may lose your access to healthcare, housing, work and welfare benefits that you have paid into all your adult life. That has of course been the terrible experience of the Windrush migrants, with some denied crucial healthcare, being made destitute because they were no longer deemed eligible to work, and some have faced deportation to a country they may never have visited since they left as children (Williams 2020). But these concerns have also become stark possibilities, and even realities, for EU nationals in the wake of the Brexit referendum.

In June 2017 the Government issued a Rights of EU Citizens in the UK Policy Paper Factsheet (Home Office 2017). This promised that EU nationals should continue to enjoy rights in the UK, and that there would be no fear of any ‘cliff edge’:
We want to ensure EU citizens continue to not only be able to live here as they do now but also to continue enjoying other important rights such as access to healthcare, education, benefits and pensions. These rights will apply to all EU citizens equally and we will not treat citizens of one member state differently to those of another. But this is without prejudice to our special relationship with Ireland. These rights will be enshrined into UK, not EU, law, enforceable through the UK judicial system. No EU citizen here lawfully before the cut off date, which is yet to be agreed, will have to leave as a result of us leaving the EU. There will be no ‘cliff edge’ for businesses or individuals and we want to keep together families living lawfully in the UK. (Home Office 2017)

However, at the same time the UK government set about negotiating a Withdrawal Agreement with the EU, which only created further anxieties and gaslighting for EU nationals living in the UK, as formal status continued to be beyond reach.

An outline withdrawal deal proposal was initially agreed between the UK and EU in December 2017, 18 months after the referendum. It showed that the rights of EU nationals were clearly being undermined. The UK and EU agreed that rights previously experienced by all EU citizens, including EU nationals in the UK, would no longer be automatic, however long they had previously been residing in the UK. Instead, EU nationals would have to apply for a new immigration status, as ‘settled’ or ‘pre-settled’. The eventual deadline for this became by June 2021.

If an individual had been resident in the UK before the UK formally left the EU, i.e. Brexited, at that time thought to be 29 March 2019, and resident for five continuous years before Brexit, had paid a fee—which was later dropped, have no criminal record, and were still resident at the time of the application, then that individual would be eligible to apply for ‘settled status’. Otherwise, with fewer than five years’ residence, the less secure pre-settled status could be applied for. Settled status was to include the same entitlement to public funds and National Health Service (NHS) healthcare as British citizens, preservation of EU rules on transfer and aggregation of social security, equal treatment of EU and UK citizens and mutual recognition of professional qualifications. However, there would be loss of other rights, such as the right to vote in local elections. Moreover, pre-settled status would be only a limited
leave to remain, with the individual granted five years to remain, with eligibility to apply for settled status as soon as they have completed five years continuous residence in the UK. If an EU national does not attain some form of settled status or is refused settled status, the individual will be faced with immediate illegalisation on Brexit. Thus EU nationals were faced with a potentially detrimental shift in status even worse than that of the Windrush migrants:

The problem faced by the Windrush generation was surviving in the modern hostile environment when lawfully resident but without documentary proof. The problem faced by resident EU citizens who do not apply for immigration status is arguably worse: unlawful residence and therefore the accidental commission of ancillary criminal offences such as illegal working, renting accommodation without possession of the right to rent and driving without immigration status. (Yeo 2018b)

Theresa May faced tremendous difficulties getting the Withdrawal Deal through the British Parliament, thus creating a further context for gaslighting of EU nationals, in this instance involving the insecurity of ‘will they/won’t they’ (Parliament) vote for the deal. The problem was mainly the right wing of the Conservative Party, many of whom were ‘Brexiteers’ and did not want to vote in favour because they thought the Withdrawal Deal would continue to create too close a relationship with the EU. We were faced with the problem that there would be a default ‘no-deal Brexit’ if Parliament could not agree to the deal by 29 March 2019. For EU nationals that would mean immediate loss of immigration status in the UK and becoming unlawfully resident. There ensued months of stress for EU nationals, of not knowing whether Britain would ‘crash out’ of the EU with no-deal and thus whether we would become instantly illegal immigrants, or at least incredibly vulnerable. As Colin Yeo points out, a no-deal Brexit at that point ‘...would expose affected individuals to the “hostile environment”, meaning it would immediately become a criminal offence to work in the UK and access to services including healthcare, bank accounts, rented accommodation and more would be restricted’ (Yeo 2018b). At the last minute Prime Minister May negotiated an extension of the Brexit end date with the EU, so disaster
for EU nationals was averted for the time being, but the ongoing stress and gaslighting effect remained without a deal being agreed or separate legislation enacted to ensure EU nationals’ more permanent settled status.

There were further instances of potential no-deal outcomes in June 2019 and again in September 2019 as the Conservative Party fought a battle, largely with themselves, concerning how extremely right wing and libertarian Brexit should be. In the end Theresa May stepped down as Prime Minister on 7 June 2019 citing her regret that she had not been able to deliver Brexit. The Brexiteers got their way, with Boris Johnson, who led the Vote Leave campaign in 2016, elected as the new leader of the Conservatives and thus becoming Prime Minister. Again, the new Prime Minister was chosen just by the Conservative Party while the rest of the country had no say.

The European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 was passed by the UK Parliament in January 2020, and now sets in law the status of EU nationals, to obtain settled or pre-settled status or to become like any other immigrant to the UK if they do not obtain settled status. As the law outlines, from January 2021:

As free movement ends, the UK will move away from the EU law framework of rights defined in the EU Treaties, the Free Movement Directive, and FMOPA. The EEA Regulations 2016 will be revoked at the end of the implementation period. In place of the EU law framework of residence, a domestic law framework for residence will be established based on the skills people can contribute to the UK. (EU Withdrawal Agreement Act 2020 Section 3)

Although the law applies to the status of EU nationals after 2021, when the UK is supposed to have left the EU and completed the transition period, we are already seeing increased discrimination and harm to EU nationals as a result. This has been compounded by the lack of documentation for individuals who have already attained Settled Status, where successful applicants are given an online reference number, but no physical documentation. Individuals from the EU have now been questioned regarding their access to benefits, whether they have attained
the new settled status or not, although previous rights continue to apply. In a recent report to a UK Government consultation, the group EU3million (2020) report numerous instances of such discrimination, and the increase in vulnerability and harm suffered as a result. For instance: a Hungarian national ‘needs to claim housing benefit and the housing officer told her she needs to provide the share code for her settled status, which she cannot access’ because her domestically violent partner had applied for Settled Status for her and held the online reference number (EU3million 2020).

The survey of 3000 EU nationals by Tanja Bueltman (2020) further documents the wide-ranging concerns and evidence of structural violence resulting from the shifts in EU migrant status, and how even those with Settled status now feel less secure and less integrated in the UK:

……ranging from discrimination and loss of identity, to concerns over a lack of transparency and visibility and a breakdown of trust in the government’s willingness and ability to deliver a secure status for the future. (Bueltman 2020)

The survey found that 10.9% of respondents were already being asked about settled status by landlords, banks and councils even though proof of the new immigration status is not required before 2021.

Existential Issues of Identity and Belonging

Since arriving in the UK in the 1960s I have retained Danish citizenship. As a child I was given ‘leave to remain as a school student’ in the UK, living with my resident parents, and a stamp to this effect was added to my passport in 1971. After 1972 there was no need for EU nationals like myself to seek British citizenship status to remain in the UK, as we all became ‘EU citizens’ when the UK joined the EU. This is also echoed in the low number of UK citizen applications by EU nationals in the years before Brexit. However, issues of identity and belonging are of course complex. In the 1980s my then partner could not understand why I did not change my citizenship from Danish to
British. After all I had lived in the UK most of my life even by then, had attended school and university in the UK, and was now developing a career based in the UK. We had many rows about this. But what she did not understand was the attachment to identity, and that I would have lost my Danish citizenship at that time if I applied for British citizenship. I felt a strong affinity with my country of origin, not least because I had not had any choice about leaving. I felt in many respects ‘Danish’. I preferred the Danish way of plain speaking, which has however always led me into trouble as being ‘blunt’ or ‘rude’ in the UK, I like the greater focus on gender equality in Denmark, the quality of life and wellbeing. I feel at home when in the Danish landscape and speaking the Danish language. But I had of course also become ‘British’ even without naturalisation, and as a colleague recently remarked, I had become ‘as British as marmalade’. Thus, I have become an ‘in-between’ or ‘hybrid’, as so many other migrants have also described their experience (Zubida et al. 2013), with both countries having shaped who I am.

The Brexit referendum result led to me having many sleepless nights and anxiety as I, along with other EU nationals, worried about future access to work, losing freedom of movement, social benefits, access to bank accounts and healthcare, and the gaslighting uncertainties created by lack of clarity about whether there would be a Brexit deal, no-deal Brexit or even no Brexit at all. By the summer of 2017 I decided I was faced with two options in order to remain in the UK with at least some continuing rights: to apply for the new Settled Status, or to go through the much more laborious and very expensive process of applying for UK citizenship. I decided the latter, to pursue UK citizenship, in order to maintain the rights I had already accrued in both the UK and EU. Interviews with other EU nationals (Yeo 2018a) indicate similar decisions:

For many EU citizens we interviewed, becoming British is often perceived as the only way to preserve the status quo, keeping the same rights as before such as having the same right to work, enjoying full freedom of movement, the right to education and overall rights to social protection. In other words, by becoming British, they assure themselves that they will be treated equally to British citizens. Interviewees reported a general
loss of trust in the UK state. In particular, the Home Office’s hostile environment policy, until recently not something that more privileged EU citizens had to worry about, is perceived as a growing threat to them too.

In 2015, prior to the Brexit referendum, the UK Government had already made it more difficult to apply for citizenship as an EU national. Previously evidence of ‘leave to remain’ was a valid reason to apply for citizenship, but was no longer the case after November 2015, when applicants instead required the new status of Permanent Residence prior to a citizenship application. I therefore had to go through the two-step process of applying for Permanent Residence, apparently based on income level, continuous residence for at least five years and lack of criminal record; and once that had been obtained, to apply for UK citizenship based on continuous residence for at least five years, lack of criminal record, evidence of ability to speak English, and knowledge of the UK via the ‘Life in the UK’ test. The whole process was extremely expensive, costing nearly £4000 including an immigration lawyer’s fees. Merely submitting the application for citizenship required a fee to the UK Home Office of £1330. In other words, the process involved multiple barriers regarding residence, income, ability to pay fees and so on. In interviews with 103 EU families following Brexit, Yeo noted the concerns such barriers to UK citizenship had created:

The acquisition of British citizenship was not a major concern for EU citizens and family members prior to Brexit, as the relatively low numbers of applications prior to 2016 indicate. This can perhaps be explained by the enhanced security of status conferred by EU free movement law compared to other long term residents under UK law. After Brexit, the new vulnerability of EU citizens and family members to deportation under UK law compared to EU law, for example, means that barriers to British citizenship take on new significance. (Yeo 2018b)

As the first step towards attaining UK citizenship I began my application for Permanent Residence, but was soon defeated by the online forms to be filled in. As I was an EU citizen in an, at that time, EU country, i.e. the UK, the forms just kept bringing me back to the same place in an
endless circle. I could not fill them in! Further sleepless nights ensued. By chance I then met one of my bosses, a senior member of University staff, while out shopping, and shocked her with the level of anxiety I was feeling about Brexit. She provided links to relevant resources in the University and links to a good immigration lawyer who could help prepare my application. I was thus suddenly in a very good position compared to most other EU nationals pursuing a similar route. None the less, the whole process of applying for citizenship took nearly two years and would have taken nearer three if I had not married, so my Brexit wedding was indeed useful. In November 2019 I obtained the letter saying I had been successful in my citizenship application. The final step was to attend my ‘Citizenship ceremony’, a surreal experience of being welcomed as someone newly arrived in the country—despite having lived in and contributed to the fabric of the UK for over fifty years. There were many other EU nationals at the ceremony who like me had decided, after living in the UK for many years, that an important element of individualised resistance to the increasingly structurally violent context we faced as a result of the Brexit Referendum, was to apply for UK citizenship.

**Conclusion**

This chapter set out to express and help us understand how the context around Brexit has impacted on EU nationals living in the UK. A number of key elements regarding this wider context have been identified, related to cultural and structural violence (Galtung 1990), gaslighting (see Stark 2007), and the inequities and violence associated with neoliberalism (Walby 2018). The neoliberal economic approach involving long-term austerity measures imposed by the Conservative-led governments in the years before the Brexit referendum helped to fuel the inequities that enabled a more authoritarian far-right politics to emerge. It also fed into and enabled what may be deemed a structurally violent hostile environment against migrants, further embedded through culturally violent xenophobic discourses around ‘illegal migrants’ and British nationalism and exceptionalism. EU nationals living in the UK were caught up in
this wider context and focused on as a key problem. Moreover, the tremendous shift in status of EU nationals in the UK resulting from these shifts and the move to Brexit: from EU citizen to insecure resident and ‘illegalised migrant’, have impacted EU nationals as emotional abuse and especially as ‘gaslighting’, through the stress of lies and perpetual threats to individual identity, citizen status and livelihoods that they have experienced.

As this chapter was being finalised we were in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. None the less, rather than pausing or extending ongoing Brexit negotiations (as this is written the next final date is end of December 2020), the UK Government was continuing to threaten a ‘no-deal’ Brexit. Moreover, the Government were bringing in new immigration legislation that would formally shift the position of EU nationals to that of any immigrant—as the legislation indicates this will “see EU and non-EU migrants treated equally” and probably include minimum salary thresholds for entry to the UK. It is a crucial step in implementing the changes wanted by the Vote Leave campaign. As key Vote Leave member and now Home Secretary Priti Patel has stated, the immigration bill is historic, bringing to fruition the Australian-style points-based system first outlined by Boris Johnson and Michael Gove when they were fronting the Vote Leave campaign during the 2016 referendum, and which will in future apply to all migrants, from the EU and elsewhere.

Notes

1. Although Leadsom did not win the leadership contest and therefore did not become Prime Minister, many of the Government Ministers currently (at the time of writing) serving under Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s Government have similar views and support abolition of same sex marriage and undermining of women’s rights.

2. While no minimum income is stipulated in law to qualify for Permanent Residence in the UK, an income requirement is actually applied—at least equal to the Primary Threshold for Class 1 National Insurance Contributions, currently £9500. Thus anyone not earning or earning less than this are likely to be refused PR, typically women in part time and low paid jobs, or not working but bringing up children.
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