



BOOKS AND CLASSICS

## The Blind Spots of *Eurowhiteness*

Review of Hans Kundnani, *Eurowhiteness: Culture, Empire and Race in the European Integration Project* (Hurst 2023)

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### Abstract

Hans Kundnani's *Eurowhiteness* is an attempt to bring the question of race in Europe to the forefront. Such attempts are of service to academic and public debate. However, there are reasons to questions the far from nuanced construction of Kundnani's protagonist, the 'pro-European', and the descriptions of the causes and implications of Brexit. A more careful reconstruction of European integration and a summary of the history of the United Kingdom could have made this book less tendentious.

**Keywords:** European Integration; Racism; Whiteness; Legacies of Imperialism; Brexit; Migration Policy

### 1. Introduction

Attempts to bring the question of race in Europe to the forefront, and to remedy blind spots when it comes to acknowledging how racism affects societal structures and individual lives on a daily basis, are a service to European society. Hans Kundnani's *Eurowhiteness* is such an attempt. Its publication comes at a moment when political movements in Europe that rely on nationalism and anti-immigrant rhetoric, accompanied by racist stereotypes, continue to establish their presence in parliaments and governments. The publication of *Eurowhiteness* also comes at a moment when it would appear that there is a growing awareness within European Union (EU) institutions that racism is a fundamental problem.<sup>1</sup> *Eurowhiteness*, then, is in dialogue with its time.

However, *Eurowhiteness* is not best described as a book about the question of race and racism in the European Union. It is not a granular account of how the EU's institutions, its leaders and its laws, may or may not sustain racist structures, and the ways in which such structures could be understood to have roots in Europe's centuries spanning history of colonialism. Kundnani does address the fact that the origin of the European Union is interlinked with European colonialism, which is now emphasised by a growing body of multidisciplinary scholarship.<sup>2</sup> Kundnani also

<sup>1</sup>See for example: European Commission, A Union of Equality: EU anti-racism action plan 2020–2025, COM(2020) 565 final; FRA Report, Encouraging hate crime reporting – The role of law enforcement and other authorities (2021); and European Parliament resolution of 17 January 2024 on European historical consciousness (2023/2112(INI)), P9\_TA(2024)0030.

<sup>2</sup>Eg A Mazrui, 'African Attitudes to the European Economic Community' 39 (1963) *International Affairs* 24; C Cosgrove, 'The Common Market and its Colonial Heritage' 4 (1969) *Journal of Contemporary History* 73; F Snyder, 'New Directions in European Community Law' 14 (1987) *Journal of Law and Society* 167; J Scott, *Development Dilemmas in the European Community* (Open University Press 1995); G Garavini, *After Empires: European Integration, Decolonization, and the Challenge from the Global South 1957–1986*, Oxford Studies in Modern European History (Oxford University Press 2012);

builds on those who have theorised the idea of Europe as having been forged with the idea of the superiority of whiteness.<sup>3</sup>

Rather, Kundnani's central thesis is that the European Union promotes a regionalism best explained as nationalism, which as such is a regionalism that dwells on and promotes a regional version of 'ethnic/cultural nationalism',<sup>4</sup> or 'Eurowhiteness'. Kundnani thus adds to a critical cautioning of 'Europeanism' once formulated by Hannah Arendt,<sup>5</sup> and more recently taken up by those who study the development of the EU's constitutional structure.<sup>6</sup>

Kundnani develops this thesis, which is interesting though not startlingly novel, over the course of six chapters, each of which has its own focus. The first chapter presents the overall thesis of EU regionalism as a form of 'ethnic/cultural nationalism'. Chapter two then surveys the roots of this regionalism in ideas of Europe from antiquity to the Second World War and argues that the EU carries through century-spanning presumptions of the whiteness and Christianity of Europe. The third chapter discusses the link between early EU integration and colonialism and argues that the narrative of European integration as solely centred on European peace has obscured the determinative role of colonialism. Chapter four introduces the 2004 EU eastward enlargement as a case study of the book's overall thesis and sets out to illustrate how the EU undertook a 'civilising mission' in Eastern Europe. The fifth chapter argues that the euro-crisis accelerated the trends explained in the previous chapters, and that since then the EU has gone further into ethnic and cultural versions of European identity politics. Last, the book turns to the United Kingdom and puts forward the claim that Brexit can enable the UK to leave an ethno-regional EU behind and become global once more.

In constructing the central thesis of EU regionalism as a form of nationalism and in explaining the repercussions of this state of affairs on questions of race, culture and the accommodation of imperial histories, Kundnani designates an agent, the 'pro-European' and uses it as his foil to describe the presumptions and falsities that has made this ethno-regionalism possible. Throughout, and in detail in chapter six, he also uses the Brexited United Kingdom as a

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V Dimier, *The Invention of a European Development Aid Bureaucracy: Recycling Empire* (Palgrave Macmillan 2014); P Hansen and S Jonsson, *Eurafrica: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism* (Bloomsbury Academic 2014); D Caruso and J Geneve, 'Melki in Context' in F Nicola and B Davies (eds), *EU Law Stories* (Cambridge University Press 2016) 506; G Bhambra, 'A Decolonial Project for Europe' 60 (2002) *Journal of Common Market Studies* 229; KK Patel, *Project Europe: Myths and Realities of European Integration* (Cambridge University Press 2020); N El-Enany, *(B)ordering Britain: Law, Race and Empire* (Manchester University Press 2020); J Silga, 'The Ambiguity of the Migration and Development Nexus Policy Discourse: Perpetuating the Colonial Legacy?' 24 (2020) *University of California Los Angeles Journal of International Law and Foreign Affairs* 163; D Ashiagbor, 'Race and Colonialism in the Construction of Labour Markets and Precarity' 50 (2021) *Industrial Law Journal* 506; SR Larsen, 'European Public Law after Empires' 1 (2022) *European Law Open* 6; M Brown, *The Seventh Member State: Algeria, France, and the European Community* (Harvard University Press 2022); E Marker, *Black France, White Europe: Youth, Race, and Belonging in the Postwar Era* (Cornell University Press 2022); H Eklund, 'Peoples, Inhabitants and Workers: Colonialism in the Treaty of Rome' 34 (2023) *European Journal of International Law* 831; D Ashiagbor, 'Decentring Europe in EU Social Law Scholarship' 2 (2023) *European Law Open* 479.

<sup>3</sup>This has been theorised by many, see Aimé Césaire's connection between the de-civilizational effect colonialism has had on the development of European society and role of race hatred in that process: A Césaire, (introduction by RDG Kelley), *Discourse on Colonialism; A Poetics of Anticolonialism* (Monthly Review Press 2000). This version of *Discourse on Colonialism* was first published in French in 1955. See also Étienne Balibar on the connection between the idea of whiteness and supranational Europe: 'The colonial castes of the various nationalities (British, French, Dutch, Portuguese and so on) worked together to forge the idea of "White" superiority, of civilisation as an interest that has to be defended against the savages. This representation – 'the White man's burden' – has contributed in a decisive way to moulding the modern notion of a supranational European or Western identity.' E Balibar, 'Racism and Nationalism' in E Balibar and I Wallerstein (eds), *Race, nation, class: ambiguous identities* (Verso 1991) 43; See also, for a century spanning account O Otele, *African Europeans: An Untold History* (Basic Books 2021).

<sup>4</sup>*Eurowhiteness*, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup>H Arendt, 'Dream and Nightmare: Anti-American Feeling in Europe' (Commonweal 1954) <[Dream and Nightmare | Commonweal Magazine](#)> accessed 19 November 2024.

<sup>6</sup>Editorial, 'Keeping Europeanism at bay? Strategic autonomy as a constitutional problem' 59 (2022) *Common Market Law Review* 313–26.

comparison. This comparison serves to establish how Kundnani thinks the EU and the UK relate to their respective colonial histories and how these histories are likely to determine their respective futures. This review will discuss first, the foil, and second, the comparison put forward in Hans Kundnani's *Eurowhiteness*.

## 2. The Foil

Kundnani draws a distinction between 'ethnic/cultural nationalism' and 'civic nationalism', and argues that the EU's regionalism shares more with the former than the latter.<sup>7</sup> The agents of this condition are the 'pro-Europeans', who have erroneously considered the foundation of the EU as purely a civic moment, without realising that they are in fact promoting European ethnic and cultural solidification.

Who are these 'pro-Europeans', presented as the protagonists of the book? With the exception of Ursula von der Leyen's twitter account and a fleeting reference to the former High Representative Catherine Ashton, they are, when cited, all men. The intellectual building material of Kundnani's 'pro-European' is as if Jürgen Habermas, Ulrich Beck and José Manuel Barroso taught a masters class together at the College of Europe while inebriated. Kundnani paints a picture of a promotional flurry of delusional cosmopolitan ideas, which hides unself-examined euro-centrism. Kundnani's 'pro-European' believes that the EU is an agent of cosmopolitanism as it mixes European nations and therefore cannot countenance the implications of Europe's colonial history, oscillating between ignoring the existence of, and subtly promoting racial stereotypes about 'non-Europeans'. Characters resembling something close to Kundnani's 'pro-European' could surely be found walking the streets of Brussels and firmly believing that they are the best example of the 'European way of life', but as a representation of those who are 'supporters of European integration or the "European project" in its current form', it is limp.<sup>8</sup> For instance, it would have been useful to engage with a broader group of intellectuals – academics like the political theorist Seyla Benhabib,<sup>9</sup> the lawyer Gráinne de Búrca,<sup>10</sup> or the international relations scholar Kalypso Nicolaïdis,<sup>11</sup> who have written nuanced texts about the EU's relation to 'the other', its *raison d'être* and its colonial amnesia, while apparently appreciating the existence of the European Union.

While Kundnani's book summarises over 1500 years of intellectual history of Europe as an idea and is particularly interested in European integration politics in the post-Second World War era, it still does not consider other versions of pro-European visions. It does not mention politicians such as Simone Veil, Altiero Spinelli or Willy Brandt. It does not consider alternative political projects. See for instance Aurélie Andry's history of who sought to construct, and through what methods, a social Europe beginning in the 1970s, which entailed:

wealth redistribution, market regulation, social and economic planning, increased public control over investments and economic forces, economic democratization, upward harmonization of European social and fiscal regimes, improved working and living conditions, guarantee of the right to work, and access to social protection for all. It also included environmental concerns, proposals for a democratization of European institutions,

<sup>7</sup>*Eurowhiteness*, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup>S Benhabib, 'In Search of Europe's Borders' (Dissent 2002) <[In Search of Europe's Borders - Dissent Magazine](#)> accessed 19 November 2024, p. 33 and S Benhabib, *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents, and Citizens* (Cambridge University Press 2004).

<sup>10</sup>G de Búrca, 'Europe's *raison d'être*' 18 (4) (2011) *Maastricht Journal of European and Comparative Law* 418–20.

<sup>11</sup>K Nicolaïdis, "'Southern Barbarians'? A Postcolonial Critique of EU universalism' in K Nicolaïdis, B Sebe and G Maas (eds), *Echoes of Empire: Memory, Identity and Colonial Legacies* (I.B. Tauris 2014) 283.

and claims to rebalance the international system to favour the development of the rising ‘Third World’.<sup>12</sup>

Andry’s comprehensive account illustrates the diversity of pro-European projects in the post-Second World War era, which should be taken into account if you seek to define, as does Kundnani, what pro-European means, historically as well as today.

While any foil by nature is a summary, it is hard to follow Kundnani when he treats pro-Europeans as a group without internal disagreements. A consideration of whether and how this ‘ethnic/cultural regionalism’ that he identifies has co-existed, or been sustained by the pro-European left (not just a handful of German intellectuals), including by trade unions and feminist movements, would have made his argument engage more than the caricature.<sup>13</sup> In other words, to say that a selected group of elite pro-European (mostly) men have ignored the EU’s colonial history, down-played the problem of structural racism in Europe, and promoted self-glorifying regionalism is likely plausible and a point worth making (a reference to the current High Representative Josep Borrell’s infamous jungle analogy should be made),<sup>14</sup> but to say that this group captures the ‘pro-European’ is unconvincing. Therefore, Kundnani side-lines the potential structural power of his own critical argument, and perhaps misses an opportunity to move an important debate forward.

Overall, Kundnani is right to note that there are those pro-Europeans who exaggerate ‘the difference between the EU and nation states and, in so doing, idealise the European project as if it stood for the opposite of nationalism’.<sup>15</sup> Yet even as this point should be accepted, he still misses the ideas and actions that such idealisation has inspired, both celebratory and critical, which forms part of the sprawling pro-European political experience. And although certainly some, far from all of such pro-European texts and actions, have promoted a stifling identitarian form of European politics.

### 3. The Comparison

Comparisons comes with risks. Whether it is people, groups or countries that are compared the risk is that the comparison obscures more than it clarifies and distorts more than it resolves. In the last part of *Eurowhiteness*, Kundnani places the Brexited United Kingdom next to the European Union and reflects on how their respective relationship with their colonial histories makes them differently able to embrace a less eurocentric and less eurowhite future.

The meaning of Brexit, Kundnani starts by cautioning his reader, ‘is much more complex and open-ended than is suggested by the idea of a nativist revolt’,<sup>16</sup> and it is in fact he contends, ‘almost

<sup>12</sup>A Andry, *Social Europe, the Road not Taken. The Left and European Integration in the Long 1970s* (Oxford University Press 2022) 5.

<sup>13</sup>For those interested in the links between colonial legal politics and the definition of workers’ rights and the protection offered by social security in post-Second World War Europe see L Zevounou, ‘Discrimination Based on Race: The Story of Moroccan SNCF Workers in France’ and K Fertikh, ‘Racializing the European Border: Free Movement of Workers and the (Former) Colonies’ in H Eklund (ed), *Colonialism and the EU Legal Order* (Cambridge University Press forthcoming 2025).

<sup>14</sup>In a speech making the point that Europe should engage with the rest of the world, Josep Borrell explained that: ‘Most of the rest of the world is a jungle, and the jungle could invade the garden. The gardeners should take care of it, but they will not protect the garden by building walls. A nice small garden surrounded by high walls in order to prevent the jungle from coming in is not going to be a solution. Because the jungle has a strong growth capacity, and the wall will never be high enough in order to protect the garden. The gardeners have to go to the jungle.’ European External Action Service (EEAS) Press Team, ‘European Diplomatic Academy: Opening remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell at the inauguration of the pilot programme’ (EEAS 2022) <[European Diplomatic Academy: Opening remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell at the inauguration of the pilot programme | EEAS](#)> accessed 19 November 2024.

<sup>15</sup>*Eurowhiteness*, p. 19.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 154.

impossible to capture the meaning of Brexit'.<sup>17</sup> This might very well be true, and it is an admirable analytical posture, which, however, would have been useful to apply to the process of European integration in the preceding five chapters.

Kundnani argues that because the EU is a vehicle for colonial amnesia, and, as expressed though Brexit, the United Kingdom does not approach its own colonial past in the same way and therefore, by being located outside the EU the UK can again connect to its former colonies and colonial history 'in a deeper and different way'.<sup>18</sup> While the 'pro-European' is coarsely one-dimensional, Kundnani seeks to include more voices in explaining the reasons the UK voted to leave the EU, which in and of itself is valuable. By lifting studies that details how UK minority populations perceived EU membership he concludes that: 'Thus, for at least *some* British citizens, Brexit was not so much an expression of white anger as the opposite: the rejection of a bloc that was itself perceived as being racist.'<sup>19</sup> The conclusion he draws from contrasting the EU and the UK, is that Brexit offers the opportunity to perform 'a rebalancing rather than a rejection of immigration', and therefore the post-EU future may hold the possibility of less European immigration and more immigration from former colonies.<sup>20</sup>

As Kundnani hangs to the act of comparison in arguing how in fact Brexit gives the UK the possibility to open its borders to the rest of the world and in particular the Commonwealth, it is regrettable that he does not refer at all to Nadine El-Enany's book (*B*)ordering Britain: Law, Race and Empire, which was published in 2020.<sup>21</sup> (*B*)ordering Britain is a meticulous account of how colonial legal politics constitute British immigration and citizenship laws, historically as well as today, and it shares Kundnani's opening observation regarding the European Union:

The mythological mainstream narrative on European integration is that it heralded a new dawn of peace, democracy and human rights. The reality is that the European Union's foundations lie in the colonial histories of its founding Member States, an origin story with which it has never grappled.<sup>22</sup>

However, differently from Kundnani, El-Enany's shows the ways in which UK and EU citizenship and immigration laws have reinforced each other, and how they both carry through colonial power structures and racial hierarchies. El-Enany follows this trend of mutual reinforcement through to Brexit. She explains:

Just as Britain passed immigration and nationality legislation designed to exclude racialised colony and Commonwealth citizens in the face of the defeat of its empire, European colonial powers came together in the post-war era to create a protectionist bloc to ensure that the spoils of European colonialism remained the domain of white Europeans. In view of this history, it is little surprise that Britain's European partners have been accommodating of its imperial identity and have not offered a challenge to its exclusion of its former colonial subjects.

In spite of this, a common misconception that gained traction in the run-up to the 2016 EU referendum was that Britain's control over its borders is hampered by its EU membership. The reality is that Britain has always exploited its EU membership to enhance its capacity for control. It played the role of agenda setter in the context of early European intergovernmental cooperation on asylum and immigration policy, successfully pushing for the adoption of

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<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>21</sup>El-Enany (n 2).

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 175.

exclusionary policies across Europe. It retained its freedom to choose when to participate in measures on immigration and asylum after securing a flexible opt-out in 1997. Britain has consistently used its opt-out to participate in restrictive measures that strengthen its capacity to exclude, while rejecting those aimed at enhancing protection standards for people seeking refuge in the EU. Although it grudgingly accepted the principle of free movement of EU citizens, it did not join the Schengen Area and thus continues to exercise border controls in relation to the nationals of other EU Member States. In spite of this, the Leave campaign argued that exiting the EU would allow Britain to ‘take back control’ of its borders.<sup>23</sup>

El-Enany’s argument shows the colonial origins of EU and UK immigration policy, but she also shows the complex ways in which the UK’s and the EU’s laws and policies interconnect with and mutually support each other. She does not, like Kundnani, strive to arrange the analysis to show that one is ‘better’ than the other. El-Enany’s work is therefore analytically more complex and results in a more valuable contribution to academic and public discourse. She also evinces something that Kundnani does not mention – that over decades the UK pushed for a more restrictive EU immigration policy. The EU works by adopting laws that become valid in all its Member States, and until it did not, the UK participated in formulating the common European standard of immigration and citizenship legislation. This interconnected quality of EU governance is ignored in Kundnani’s account, which makes it much harder for him to granularly account for how colonial legal politics and racism have found expression in laws and politics nationally, regionally and, although his book does not concern this, globally.

Under the subheading ‘Brexit as opportunity’, Kundnani ends his book *Eurowhiteness: Culture, Empire and Race in the European Integration Project* on a line of argument that applies the word ‘rebalancing’ to sorting and choosing between the types of immigrant that the UK should prioritise. While Kundnani’s desire to enable greater mobility between countries that used to be connected through colonialism is understandable, to this reader, grouping and then hierarchising one group of immigrants over the other is a misuse of the word ‘opportunity’.

#### 4. Conclusion

Reading Kundnani’s book we learn, if we did not yet know, that centre-right European political leaders, an important force in post-Second World War European integration, are not particularly interested in addressing the reverberations of European colonialism in EU politics. We can also come to agree, if we did not already, that identity politics, whether its object of desire is national or regional, is destructive in its chauvinism. For those, however, who would like to understand the connection between whiteness and Europe both as a historical fallacy and an ideology and practice of oppression, it would be a better idea to read Olivette Otele’s *African Europeans: An Untold History*.<sup>24</sup>

In *Eurowhiteness*’s first pages, when introducing what is perhaps the most compelling chapter critiquing the turn the EU took after the austerity measures of the euro-crisis years, Hans Kundnani makes a convincing observation in defining what the book is and is not about:

Neither does the book offer any solutions to the complex institutional problems the EU faces and on which many discussions of the future of the EU focus. However, it does make an argument about the structural connection between the (neo-)liberalisation of the EU and the salience of cultural issues in European politics. As economic policy has been depoliticised within the EU, political contestation has shifted to issues around identity, immigration and Islam. Any solution to the EU’s problems must therefore go beyond the usual one-

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 175–76.

<sup>24</sup>Otele (n 3).

dimensional debates about “more” or “less” Europe— that is, integration or disintegration— and focus instead on how democracy can be deepened within the EU. This, I would suggest, must in turn involve a repoliticisation of economic policy in order to reverse what I call “the civilisational turn” in the European project and to move back towards a more civic regionalism.<sup>25</sup>

A discussion, however, of these solutions, he says, is ‘for citizens of member states of the EU’, not for him as a British citizen.<sup>26</sup> While it is legitimate to not offer solutions, the reason that he gives for not doing so recalls the tragedy of shrinking, rather than expanding, what is a common concern. However, what Hans Kundnani inadvertently gives ‘the citizens of EU member states’ is a version of what pro-Europeanism could look like. It could be a project that opens the EU to the lessons of global colonial history and turns it towards egalitarian political interaction on the global stage, internally acknowledging and remedying racism in its laws, politics and institutions, all while re-politicising and democratising the debate about economic policy. The more that join such a project, one would feel like telling Hans Kundnani, the better.

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<sup>25</sup>*Eurowhiteness*, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*