

Diversifying British Political History

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Abstract

This article explores what the diversification of British political history might look like. Building on an expanded definition of citizenship and attention to ‘ordinary’ politics, it suggests several questions which might diversify political history’s content and approach. Whom do we count as political actors? Who has access to democratic processes and where does politics happen beyond these processes? To what forms of political thought do we attend? Drawing on examples from my own research on refugees and asylum seekers in modern Britain, and on the wider field of modern British history, I demonstrate the possibilities of diversification as a way to enliven political history’s future.

Keywords: diversity, agency, democracy, citizenship, Britain, refugees

Introduction

I HAVE NEVER considered myself a political historian, but a cultural and social historian whose work may have something to say about politics. The world of parliamentary debates, internal party politics, opinion polls, committee meetings and manifestos felt remote from my pursuit of the everyday experiences of migration, empire and war. Political organisations, structures or policies might offer the necessary framework for my research—the legislative change which impacted constituents, non-governmental organisations’ commentary on policy change, the MP who offered leverage for a campaigning group—but not its substance. Yet, as I prepared this article, I was reminded how closely my work is shaped by key political questions about citizenship, about the state, and about the postcolonial and global geopolitics that have informed political responses to refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.

Partly this is because of the expansive definition of citizenship I employ which looks beyond a purely legal and formal framework. Instead, I follow Matthew Grant’s conception of citizenship as ‘a key way of framing questions relating to the basic interactions between individuals and the state, and between individuals within society’.¹ By thinking about citizenship as relational and everyday, I have considered, ‘Who gets to be a family in the UK and in Europe?’ And ‘who is able to have

a family life that is private from the state?’² These questions were, and remain, urgent for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants who sought sanctuary in the UK in the second half of the twentieth century: the Ugandan Asian women with British citizenship unable to bring their ‘foreign’ husbands to join them; the unaccompanied child refugees from Vietnam seeking family reunification; the surveillance of relationships and marriages deemed ‘questionable’ by border control, the police and other state authorities. These are clearly political questions, though perhaps not the questions political historians might ask. How might this expansive way of thinking about citizenship, and in turn, about the state and politics, make possible the diversification of this field?

Susan Pedersen’s 2002 chapter, ‘What is political history now?’, described the optimist who might declare that ‘we are all political historians now’.³ As political history was

¹M. Grant, ‘Historicizing citizenship in post-war Britain’, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 59, no. 4, 2016, pp. 1187–1206.

²These are questions inspired by scholars working on gender and family as experienced by enslaved peoples including J. L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery. Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic*, Durham NC and London, Duke University Press, 2021.

³S. Pedersen, ‘What is political history now?’, in D. Cannadine, ed., *What is History Now?*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 37.

rediscovered and redefined at the turn of the century by social and cultural historians, parts of the field were ‘flourishing’, with ‘new investigations into popular politics and political culture’.⁴ In many ways, my contribution here echoes the optimist’s position some twenty years later. There are many contemporary examples of the diversification of British political history in similar areas. Across the broader field of modern British history, historians are doing this work through the lens of social or cultural or other historical subdisciplines and addressing what it might mean to ‘decolonise’, ‘feminise’, ‘queer’ or ‘diversify’ political history. These terms are distinct—to diversify is not necessarily to decolonise—not only in their subjects of study, but also in their approaches. But, each encourages a more critical perspective on accepted institutions and structures. In this short piece, I concentrate on the first of these questions, building on existing attention to popular politics and political cultures to broaden the actors, sites and locations where politics happens. But in so doing I hope to examine more widely what is classed as politics and to challenge some of the perceived boundaries of the field. ‘Diversification’ does not mean losing the fundamentals of political history, but questioning how these have been defined or established, while considering what might have been lost. This could be taken much further by learning from postcolonial, feminist or queer history approaches, a point to which I will return briefly.

In the following discussion, I share some examples from my own research into the experiences of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in modern Britain as a way to consider who we count as political actors, who has access to democratic processes and formal politics, and to whose political thought we attend. Pedersen also makes an impassioned case for the need for comparison, for us to ask ‘more routinely how global conditions, state structures and competition between states’ affect our national story (and, at that, frequently an English story), especially in international or imperial frames. Through the act of ‘diversification’, as I loosely term it, we can sharpen our awareness of the entangled

geographies of British politics and interrogate the national frameworks we use for analysis.

Political actors: who is counted?

The first aspect of ‘diversification’ I consider is who counts as a political actor, and whose politics is taken seriously. This question was raised by Becky Taylor in her inaugural lecture at the University of East Anglia in 2022.⁵ In this lecture, Taylor urged historians to keep two thoughts in mind: the work that goes into taking somebody seriously on their own terms and the importance of understanding the world from someone else’s point of view. The history she has written has always modelled this meeting of people where they are, with a focus on people who have been cast as ‘problems’ or ‘unpopular’ people. She has done this in two ways. Firstly, attending to the structure and reach of the state in its plural forms: the welfare state, the immigration state, the state of policing and surveillance. Secondly, mapping the impact of this plural state on marginalised and mobile populations by understanding their relationships with, and responses to, the state, from their point of view.⁶ In so doing, Taylor has built on foundational work by authors like Susan Pedersen and Pat Thane in their wide-reaching studies of analysis of family, citizenship and the welfare state, as well as more recent analysis on the Race Relations Act and Race Relations Board by Camilla Schofield.⁷ All this work emphasises that, though some of these populations may be numerically small or localised, they have not been insignificant to the

⁵B. Taylor, “‘Unpopular people’ and the rewriting of history”, Lecture, University of East Anglia, 22 March 2022; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytQILUUP LDA>

⁶This includes B. Taylor, *Refugees in Twentieth-Century Britain: A History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021; idem, ‘Immigration, statecraft and public health: the 1920 Aliens Order, medical examinations and the limitations of the state in England’, *Social History of Medicine*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2016, pp. 512–533; idem, *A Minority and the State: Travellers in Britain in the Twentieth Century*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2008.

⁷E. Robinson, C. Schofield, F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and N. Thomlinson, ‘Telling stories about post-war Britain: popular individualism and the “crisis” of the 1970s’, *Twentieth Century British History*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2017, pp. 297–302.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 45.

making of the British past and should be treated with the gravity this warrants. Exploring how such populations have been categorised and treated by the state, and how they have responded, helps historians to understand the grounds on which the state has based its legitimacy, and the extent of its powers, at local and national levels. Their experiences remind us that the definition of a political issue is dependent upon those affected by the issue. What is political for some may not be political for all. Politics is personal.

By taking different people seriously as political actors, we can analyse, critique and compare the many ways of doing politics and being political in British history. Often this enables us to uncover new forms of political leadership and legitimacy, even where these have been brief, minor or failed projects. Examples might include the sanctuary movement of the 1980s, which sought to provide shelter for those migrants and asylum seekers threatened with deportation, or campaigns for a free and fair Europe rather than ‘fortress Europe’ ahead of the ‘harmonising’ immigration policies that accompanied the European single market. In many ways, this builds on the approach of the now not-so ‘new political history’ by considering how ‘ordinary’ people have tried to influence the state. Matthew Hilton argued in 2011 for politics as ‘ordinary’, when located ‘away from party, ideology and the central state ... [and] in the everyday interactions of ordinary people with the world around them’.⁸ Once again, this relies on an appreciation of politics as personal and relational.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) exemplify this idea of politics as ‘ordinary’. Using techniques like government lobbying, media campaigning and direct action, NGOs have transformed political engagement with the British state. The participation of MPs and peers as patrons, or on charity boards and executive committees, further indicates the ties that have bound these organisations and institutions together. My own work suggests that the rapid growth of refugee NGOs in the second half of the twentieth century shows how

refugees and asylum seekers were positioned as a political ‘problem’ to be solved. Analysing how groups like the Refugee Council, Ocken-den Venture, Save the Children or Christian Aid have worked with government departments, especially the Home Office, reveals their varying degrees of cooperation with, and contestation of, the central state’s understanding of ‘sanctuary’ for refugees as an ideology and practice. The archives of the Refugee Council hold varied correspondence and minutes of meetings with ministers and departments from various home secretaries and foreign secretaries to the National Assistance Board, as well as the government departments relating to work and pensions, health, housing and education. Throughout these interactions, the Refugee Council communicated, not always successfully, the views of their workers and volunteers, experts and researchers, their supporters amongst the general public and of refugees themselves. They offered one way of channelling ordinary peoples’ views and experiences into the messy business of doing politics.

‘Messy’ is an apt term for refugee politics. Rather than just a ‘single issue’ of immigration, refugees were woven into the wider fabric of policy making, whether in promoting English language education for children, requiring training for employment for those whose qualifications were not deemed portable, or providing health and social care for elderly refugees. The sprawling nature of refugee politics means that the records of relevant NGOs and charities are deeply enmeshed in local council politics and funding, as well as their archives. This suggests the need for further attention to regional and local differences, rather than concentrating on the nation as the singular frame for analysis. The importance of the local is most evident in the provision of housing for refugees and asylum seekers. This was necessarily decentralised to local government because of dispersal policies that scattered new arrivals to limit the ‘burden’ of financial support and tolerance on existing populations. In 1980, the Woodchurch Tenants’ Association began to contest Vietnamese refugees’ residence in a housing estate in Birkenhead, offering one example of ordinary politics in action. Through campaigning work and disruption of council activity, the group successfully forced the council to stop housing

⁸M. Hilton, ‘Politics is ordinary: non-governmental organizations and political participation in contemporary Britain’, *Twentieth Century British History*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2011, p. 231.

refugees in the empty flats next door. These refugees were no longer able to have a private family life on the estate. The February 2023 attacks on a hotel where asylum seekers had been placed in Knowsley, just across the River Mersey, echoes the violent enactment of the politics of belonging evident in racist attacks on housing across the 1970s and 1980s.

NGOs have also enabled 'ordinary people' to engage with politics in their everyday lives. Consider the motivations of those who volunteered as refugee befrienders for the Refugee Council or Ockenden Venture, who worked in the charity shops of other NGOs, or who signed petitions for change, now the subject of a new research project.⁹ Volunteering with refugee groups, especially those which received less publicity, might offer a more direct or meaningful form of political intervention for those such as the voluntary workers in an office above a takeaway in Wood Green in Haringey taking phone calls for those looking for advice about how to get their families out of Cyprus; or the staff of the Refugee Council night shelter in Holborn who offered shelter to unhoused Kurdish and Congolese asylum seekers in the 1990s.¹⁰ Other forms of political activity spanned the individual and the collective: participating in boycotts, writing letters, going on protests or attending vigils. The letters (not all in green ink) received by Labour MP Judith Hart, for instance, from student unions, far-right activists and armchair political experts during her support for the Chile Solidarity Campaign of the 1970s and 1980s, were as frequently from those against her efforts as those in favour. While these behaviours have not necessarily been markers of deep political engagement or longstanding commitment to ideals, their study has expanded the sites of political activity and of political expertise to which we attend. It has drawn attention to more local political actions. Jessica White's work on the

Manchester Black Women's Co-operative, which has demonstrated the importance of regional perspectives to political organising, is one example.¹¹

Attention to those who claimed to be apolitical or anti-political, even in their pursuit of political aims or ambitions, is also vital. For some people, this was a re-conception of political activity to fit with personal or organisational limits or identity; in other cases, it was a strategy for widening their support base. Studies of women's work and organising by Helen McCarthy and Catriona Beaumont, through vehicles including the League of Nations, the Women's Institutes or the Mothers' Union, have illustrated some of the different forms this could take. This approach was also evident in campaigns around human rights, as in the Chile Solidarity Campaign. Here, claims of apoliticism through the language of rights enabled religious leaders and charity trustees to stand alongside trade union leaders or far-left party organisers in campaigning for increased governmental support. These claims were not without tensions or inconsistencies. Solidarity campaigners for Chile used exiles to gain political traction by giving talks at trade union or Labour meetings, while at the same time emphasising their lack of political affiliation or agency for fear of local or right-wing condemnation.

More recently, historians have paid attention to 'the vernacular': how people have talked about themselves and told stories in their own terms, whether in ideas, in discourses or in organising, to recast political actors and their sense of political identity. Attention to the vernacular has solidified ordinariness as a 'deeply significant political category', a form of claim-making and intervention in all forms of politics. The 'ordinary housewife' or 'ordinary bloke' has been its own kind of expertise in politics.¹² But other vernaculars have gained traction too. Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and

⁹A. Bocking-Welch, R. Huzzey, H. Miller and C. Leston-Bandeira, 'Petitioning and people power in twentieth century Britain', University of Southampton, National Centre for Research Methods, 2022, <https://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/id/eprint/4550/>
¹⁰P. Symon, 'Refugee tensions starting to show', *Times*, 17 September 1974; 'View from the night-watch', *CARF*, December 1996/January 1997, p. 5; <https://irr.org.uk/resources/carf-magazine-archive-1991-2003/>

¹¹J. White, 'Child-centred matriarch or mother among other things? Race and the construction of working-class motherhood in late twentieth-century Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2022, pp. 498–521.

¹²C. Langhamer, "'Who the hell are ordinary people?'" Ordinariness as a category of historical analysis', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 28, 2018, pp. 175–195.

Natalie Thomlinson's exploration of vernacular discourses of gender equality in the postwar British working class reveals bottom-up constructions of female selfhood and individuality.¹³ While women in mining communities may not have called themselves feminists, they certainly understood what being a woman and equality with men meant to them. Forthcoming articles by Colm Murphy, George Severs and myself, emphasise the political purchase of a vernacular of rights in 1990s Britain, used across campaigns for constitutional change, queer citizenship, and refugees and migrant protection.¹⁴ In campaigns for rights for migrants and refugees, using a language of rights insisted on a common understanding of humanity and dignity and aimed to distance this issue from party politics. These languages, used both by and about refugees, offer new frames with which to understand claims to legitimacy across a broader political landscape.

Precarious citizenship and access to democratic processes

Part of 'diversification' also means considering who had access to local, national or international democratic processes. The revolving door of 10 Downing Street in the final half of 2022, turning at the discretion of Conservative Party members and MPs, is a recent reminder of the limits of the electoral democracy on which the political system supposedly rests. But, thinking historically about democracy from the view of the electorate is another way to contest the state's 'legitimacy' and other avenues for political leadership. In the context of precarious and elastic definitions of citizenship, who can or wants to vote, or join a political party, or stand for election? Those excluded could be migrants, like those EU citizens resident in the UK who were unable to vote in the Brexit referendum. Or children, whose powers as political actors have been readily demonstrated in the school strikes for action against climate catastrophe, but who

are many years away from being able to vote. Refugees and asylum seekers, the homeless, the Gypsy and Traveller communities may not have the stable address needed for inclusion on the electoral roll. Those treated violently or with suspicion by the state may prefer to remain off the radar of authorities.

These questions apply to the historical record too. Whose opinion is solicited? Who is willing to be surveyed or to engage with the state through commissions and enquiries? As well as questioning the representativeness of polling data or surveys as sources, we could think about the other places where political opinions are expressed. These are not new questions. Historians of the disenfranchised, including historians of suffrage, have long dealt with politics beyond the electorate. But, they push us to locate where, and in what form, those outside the electorate are participating in politics. During the latter decades of the twentieth century, groups like Liberty (formerly the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL)) and the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, used legal appeal systems to establish precedent, to guarantee rights and freedoms to those whose citizenship was challenged or who were threatened with deportation. This included cases of women resident in Britain whose foreign husbands and fiancés were not granted automatic entry. The NCCL brought these cases to the European Court of Human Rights on the grounds of sex discrimination in British law. These legal systems were inherently political in determining how the legitimacy of the state was formed and maintained.

Broadening political history also means considering challenges to the legitimacy of the state. The radical refugee organisation Refugee Forum, led by Ronnie Moodley, refugee and exponent of liberation theology, built an underground network of sanctuary spaces in the 1980s to house those who had lost their right to remain in the UK. This was a deliberate engagement in illegal activity to call out the inhumanity of government policy. Moodley described the effort as working 'in Christ's way' and a 'moral obligation', claiming 'civil disobedience is a necessary quality of Christian mission wherever the laws of a society do gross damage to human beings.'¹⁵

¹³F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and N. Thomlinson, 'Vernacular discourses of gender equality in the postwar British working class', *Past & Present*, vol. 254, no. 1, 2022, pp. 277–313.

¹⁴These pieces will appear in a special issue of *Contemporary British History* about Britain in the 1990s, forthcoming in 2023.

¹⁵R. Moodley, 'Theology and practice for the '90s', *Race & Class*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1990, pp. 76–83.

This group was praised by A. Sivanandan, then director of the Institute of Race Relations, for demonstrating anti-racist, migrant and refugee solidarity, and as creating a possible future for working class communities of resistance. These organisations are neither niche nor special interest. While small, they were deeply enmeshed in networks of anti-racist and migrant associations, often operating in coalition or alliance when lobbying the NGO sector. As constituency residents even if not registered voters, they build relationships with sympathetic MPs, visible in Clare Short's work with the Indian Workers Association in Birmingham or Bernie Grant's longstanding associations with Hackney migrant groups.

Diversification also means looking beyond British politics. Just as historians of empire, global and transnational history have questioned the nation state as a framework for analysis, so too we might question the bounds of the nation within politics. The entangled political aspirations of the refugee who does not necessarily want to be in Britain any longer than is needed draws us into new political geographies. Interviews with Chilean exiles in the UK, both by contemporary sociologists and oral historians, have demonstrated that while Chilean solidarity politics brought exile communities into contact with British politics, their allegiance to Chile remained supreme. Other arrivals to Britain in the twentieth century were not necessarily so imbricated with the politics and prospect of a return 'home'. Indeed, for many arriving from the former empire as citizens, Britain's politics were their own. But, the importance of international political ties and allegiances should not be underestimated, particularly in diasporic contexts. Acknowledging these entanglements helps to reframe geopolitical relations with the UK beyond the boundaries of the nation-state and work towards a more transnational and comparative approach to political history.

The political thought to which we attend

Finally, diversification means reflecting upon the political thought and thinkers to which we attend. This includes both the historical thinkers whose ideas and influence upon British politics may not have been widely

acknowledged and the historiography that is mobilised in the pursuit of political history. The first is readily apparent in recent developments in black British history, which have built on the pioneering work of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Bill Schwarz to expand the canon of political thinkers and activists. Examples include Caroline Bressey's work on Catherine Impey and her radical political magazine, *Anti-Caste*, in the late nineteenth century, which drew important African, Asian and other international activists to her home in Somerset as part of a network of anti-racist politics.¹⁶ Theo Williams has shown that activist-intellectuals like Amy Ashwood Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah and George Padmore were among black radicals who influenced British socialism before the Second World War.¹⁷ Rob Waters, in *Thinking Black*, exposes the contours of radical black political identity and cultures within and beyond the nation.¹⁸ In the essential transnationalism of this political thought, these vivid demonstrations of entangled and global black politics further trouble the geographic boundaries of modern British history: pan-Africanism, transatlantic Black Power, the feminism of the global South. There are similar possibilities of recapturing political thought through feminist and queer histories, through histories of disability and the history of children and young people.

We might also consider the politics of citation within political history. Diversification is not only about expanding the historical actors deemed political, but the historiographical conversations and debates that political history enters. This is not just an 'add and stir' approach, but a more foundational reconceptualisation about who we read, whose ideas we take seriously and who we include as part of our intellectual workings out. What are the ley lines and pathways that British political history has not yet trodden? Sara Ahmed has described citation as feminist bricks and feminist memory: 'It is how we leave a trail of where we have been and who helped us along

¹⁶C. Bressey, *Empire, Race and the Politics of Anti-Caste*, London, Bloomsbury, 2015.

¹⁷T. Williams, *Making the Revolution Global. Black Radicalism and the British Socialist Movement before Decolonisation*, London, Verso, 2022.

¹⁸R. Waters, *Thinking Black. Britain, 1964–1985*, Berkeley CA, University of California Press, 2018.

the way ... they are the materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings.¹⁹ It is why this article has been oriented around the work of others who offer models for how political history can be and has been done. Will British political history's future dwelling be built on existing foundations, a disciplinary Houses of Parliament, or might it find a new form or design?

I remain optimistic about the future of British political history. And though I'm not sure that we are all political historians now, I am even more convinced that understanding the

political implications of the broader field of modern British history will help secure the vitality of this field and enhance its diversity. Much of this work, by the politically-minded if not politically-defined, meets the criteria Pedersen outlined, even if it does not always articulate them as such. The possibilities for connection and collaboration within the broader field of British history seem ripe for the taking.

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¹⁹S. Ahmed, 'Feminist shelters', *feministkilljoys*, 30 December 2015; <https://feministkilljoys.com/2015/12/30/feminist-shelters/>