

‘Racialised political discourse as public pedagogy in the UK and Germany: the sanctioning of racial violence and reproduction of European whiteness’

Charlotte Chadderton and Anke Wischmann

Abstract

This paper explores the causes of anti-immigration riots via comparison between the riots in Southport, UK, in 2024, and those in Chemnitz, Germany in 2018. While previous research on anti-immigration riots has tended to focus on the role of the far-right or competition for resources, we find that in both cases examined here, in fact, mainstream political discourse normalises racism and legitimates racial violence. We conduct a Critical Discourse Analysis of politicians’ speeches, media commentary and policies relating to citizenship, migration and race in the years preceding these riots. To better understand the effects of mainstream political discourse, we interpret it as public pedagogy (Giroux 2000). This enables an understanding of political discourses as having pedagogical force that allocates racially polarised subjectivities to the population and lends political agency to those engaging in racialised violence. This comparative analysis allows us to examine the pedagogical role of political discourse in reproducing racial hierarchies and silencing systemic racism under the guise of far-right extremism or class-based deprivation. Drawing on theories of global white supremacy (Allen, 2001) and European whiteness (Blaagaard, 2008) we argue that the riots provide insights into the current nature of deeply embedded and structural white supremacy in both countries.

Key words:

Anti-immigration riots; public pedagogy; race; European whiteness; England and Germany.

Introduction

This paper explores the causes of anti-immigration riots via comparison between the riots in Southport, UK, in 2024, and those in Chemnitz, Germany in 2018. These riots were selected for their similarities: they were both sparked by stabbings, which triggered an anti-immigrant response, and were exploited by far-right groups. We seek to understand what led to these outbreaks of racialised violence.

Previous research exploring anti-immigrant riots in Europe has focussed on the anti-migrant narratives and activities of far-right extremist organisations (e.g. Selimi, 2016; Busher et al, 2022; Venkataramakrishnan, 2025), ethnic competition and social disorganisation (Braun and Koopmanns, 2010) and local cultural conflicts (Karapin, 2002). In this paper the two-country comparison enables us to show instead that mainstream political discourses fuel unrest and appear to sanction racist violence. Existing research has demonstrated that mainstream politicians have normalised radical right-wing narratives, allegedly while claiming to stem the rise of the far right. This has resulted in the normalisation of narratives in both England and Germany which might have been considered less acceptable a generation ago. They have done this, for example, by shifting their positions on immigration and cultural integration (e.g. Mondon and Winter, 2020; Boukari and Devakumar, 2024; Choonara, 2024; Hauenstein, 2025). As Valentim (2024) argues, there is only a perception that public attitudes have shifted to the right over the last ten years – attitudes do not change so fast. Instead, those attitudes were already present, but people are now sanctioned to act on them, due to mainstream politicians' support for opinions which would have been considered unacceptable previously. Politicians have noticed the public support for radical right views, which has given them an incentive to mobilise these views. Related to this, recent research is beginning to examine more closely the connection between mainstream political discourses and anti-immigration riots (see e.g. Godshaw and Singleton, 2025). However, there has been little focus on *how* these mainstream discourses cause riots, nor has there been a theorisation of these discourses to connect them to wider theories of structural racism. This paper aims to fill this gap.

In the paper, we argue that mainstream political discourses not only connect notions of race, citizenship and belonging, and normalise racism, they in fact function as public pedagogies, understood as 'the production, dissemination, and circulation of ideas [which] emerge from the educational force of the larger culture' (Giroux, 2004: 497). As public pedagogies they allocate polarised, racialised subjectivities which are taken up by the rioters and seem to legitimise racist violence. Moreover, the comparative approach enables us to show that these mainstream political discourses reflect societal and state-sanctioned discourses of European whiteness, long-standing in Western Europe: social and political structures which

privilege those classified as white and disadvantage those from racially minoritised backgrounds. A comparative analysis of these riots through the theoretical lens of whiteness enables us to throw fresh light upon the changing nature of systemic racism in Europe. The comparison between two countries enables a broader understanding of the potency and pedagogical impact of these discourses.

The riots

In July 2024, a man entered a children's dance class in Southport, north-west England and attacked several children and the lead with a knife, killing three young girls and seriously injuring others. On social media, a false rumour spread that the killer was Muslim and an asylum seeker, and a false name was shared. Two nights later a large group of people rioted outside the Southport mosque and in the streets of Southport, protesting against immigration. In fact, the killer was a British citizen, born in Cardiff, and non-Muslim. His parents were reportedly originally from Rwanda (AJLabs and Al Jazeera staff, 2024). Over the next week, the riots spread throughout the UK, with rioters attacking mosques, hostels where recent migrants were housed (or thought to be), businesses owned by racialised people, immigration lawyers and the police. 29 riots in 27 towns and cities were recorded between 30th July and 7th August (Downs 2024).

At the Chemnitz city festival in Eastern Germany on 25 August 2018, a dispute took place involving several people, in which a 35-year-old male was stabbed and killed, and two other people seriously injured. Two suspects were arrested. The reason for the dispute, and the nationalities of those arrested, were initially not made public. However, rumours spread on social media that the suspects came from a so-called migrant background and that they had been sexually harassing women- which the murder victim had been trying to prevent. This was later denied by police, although by then the rumour had spread on social media. A Syrian asylum seeker was charged with the murder, although he denies his involvement. The second suspect, reportedly an Iraqi, remains on the run (MDR Sachsen 2023). From 26th August, riots developed in which rioters protested against what they referred to as 'foreign criminal activity'. These took place for several days and then developed into regular protests in the city over a number of weeks. National media reported what they referred to as a 'hunt

for foreigners' on the streets of Chemnitz, with rioters shouting racist slogans and violently attacking People of Colour.

Theoretical framework: European whiteness

A consideration of theories of whiteness can potentially enable a deeper understanding of narratives of race and racism in relation to riots in England and Germany. Whiteness in this sense refers to social, cultural, economic and political structures and relations which privilege those classified as white, and disadvantage those from racially minoritised backgrounds.

There is some debate around whether the concept of whiteness, originally developed as a concept in the US, is appropriate to describe racism in Europe. Some have argued that race matters less in Europe than in the US, and migration status and citizenship matter more (as reported by e.g. Walgenbach 2009). Others have countered this by noting that work on migration and citizenship, particularly in continental Europe, has in fact traditionally neglected to fully theorise the racialised aspects of these, although that has changed recently. Still others have argued that while race is important in Europe, the notion of whiteness across these different societies, with distinct histories and cultures, manifests very differently in different places, and one cannot talk of European whiteness at all (as reported by e.g. Blaagaard, 2008).

Allen (2001) however argues that what he refers to as 'white supremacy,' is a 'global system that confers unearned power and privilege on those who become identified as white while conferring disprivilege and disempowerment on those who become identified as people of color' (p. 476). This system is a 'global opportunity structure' for white people, has common features globally and originates from Europe. He identifies four further features as follows: Firstly, '[g]lobal white identity was founded on false images of the 'civilised' white self and the 'uncivilised' person of color' (p.476), which allowed Europeans to justify colonialism, exploitation and systemic violence towards People of Colour. Secondly, the nation state, commonly understood as naturally occurring, is in fact politically constructed and territorialises global white supremacy. Thirdly, whiteness is not only central in notions of

national belonging, but in the construction of the European as the universal human, which positions People of Colour as 'abnormal' and marginalises Blackness in particular (see also Essed et al. 2019). It refers to a set of normative practices and understandings which are deeply embedded in society. Lastly, global white supremacy is normative and involves a denial, or at least a lack of recognition, of the way racial structures and racism shape our society (Allen, 2001). Whiteness has thus become entrenched as a hegemonic framework shaping knowledge production, cultural norms, and societal structures globally, ensuring that colonial power dynamics continue to influence contemporary relationships, discourses, and institutions. It does not (necessarily always) refer to skin colour, rather to structures of domination and oppression which shape values, attitudes, interpretations, roles, identities, social positioning, interaction and policy. This understanding, of whiteness as a system, challenges dominant understandings of racism as only conscious and deliberate racial discrimination and white supremacy as only referring to right-wing extremism. Allen argues that he purposefully chooses not to use the term 'whiteness' 'to describe this system because it is a less overtly political term that avoids the fact that the racism of middleclass whites is not peripheral to white supremacy but rather its central demographic' (p.476), and instead refers to 'white supremacy'.

Theorists of European whiteness (e.g. Blaagaard, 2008; Garner, 2006) draw upon, and build upon, many of these broad features of global white supremacy. In addition, they have argued that considerations of whiteness in contemporary European contexts are shifting, and culturally and historically specific. Blaagaard (2008) warns against the risk of American understandings of whiteness tending towards a black-white binary, which essentialises European experience. Instead, European scholars have argued that European whiteness should more explicitly theorise the role of citizenship and national identity, culture, religion, gender, and class, as they intersect with race, to better understand how whiteness plays out in different European contexts (Blaagaard, 2008). Firstly, throughout Europe, there is a conflation between Europeanness and whiteness (Bonnett, 1998). Citizenship and national identity are regarded as white, and racially minoritised people often positioned as foreigners, despite not being immigrants (Clarke, 2021; Williams, 2024). Notions of Europeanness are often defined through descent and maintain a notion of biological race. Secondly, culture is also conflated with national identity in Europe. Even when race or

biology is not mentioned, where cultural markers are used to emphasise difference, it is implicit in the discourse:

‘In practice, [...] cultural demarcations are often drawn and used in a form that naturalizes them by implying that they are more or less immutable. [...] The descriptions may then be drawn upon as part of a common-sense vocabulary of stereotypes that blur any strict distinction between culture and biology.’ (Rattansi, 2007: 104.)

Thirdly, whiteness in Europe is often equated with secularism. Islam tends to be considered the ‘other’ of Europeanness, drawing on notions of Orientalism. Muslims are stereotypically viewed as intolerant, backwards and oppressive of women, and Europeans as progressive, liberated, and gender equal (Blaagaard, 2008). This narrative also masks white racism and sexism. Moreover, whiteness in Europe is classed: For example, although all who are classified as white receive racial privilege from whiteness, the middle classes are more secure in their white privilege, while the working classes occupy a more precarious position within whiteness (see e.g. Clarke, 2021). Lastly, European whiteness is often equated with the defence of (perceived) beleaguered identities, resource allocation (Garner, 2006), the welfare state, and a fear of Islamic dominance (Blaagaard, 2008).

Like all social structures, structures of white supremacy have to be continually reinforced to be effective (Preston, 2007). It is therefore socially produced and reproduced in social, economic, political and discursive spaces, including in the narratives of the rioters, and the commentary on the riots. While the notion of white supremacy will help us understand the riots, the riots also offer fresh insights into the shifting nature of white supremacy.

Methodology: Understanding political discourse as public pedagogies

In order to better understand the connection between the riots, racism and politics, we employ the concept of public pedagogy. Public pedagogy in this case refers to education which takes place beyond the formalised spaces of schools and universities. Sandlin et al (2011) argue that there are five forms of public pedagogy: ‘(a) citizenship within and beyond schools, (b) popular culture and everyday life, (c) informal institutions and public spaces, (d) dominant cultural discourses, and (e) public intellectualism and social activism’. In this study,

our focus is dominant cultural discourses, the 'pedagogical aspects of the cultural milieu, such as public policy, political discourse, widespread cultural values, [which] reinforce specific forms of citizenship as well as reproduce individual and collective identities' (p. 351). Giroux (2004) argues that pedagogical force of culture tends to be underestimated. In particular, we examine political discourse, understanding this as functioning as public pedagogy, by which we mean that political discourses have pedagogical force. A consideration of political discourse as public pedagogy enables us to better understand the dynamic between culture, power, and politics.

What makes political discourse pedagogical? Giroux (2000) argues this occurs via the way political discourse legitimates dominant relations of power, shapes identities, mobilises desires, gives meaning to experiences, affects how people think about themselves and their relationship to others, lends agency, produces notions of difference, community, responsibility and feelings of belonging, connects private issues to larger social conditions and collective forces (Giroux, 2000). It is processes of learning which constitute the mechanisms by which politics allocates subject positions. In this study, the notion of public pedagogy enables an understanding of the relationship between political discourses of racism, discourses of white supremacy and the riots. An understanding of politicians' narratives of racism as public pedagogies enables us to grasp the pedagogical influence of the racialised narratives. Via political discourse, all citizens, and non-citizens, are allocated roles: as insiders and outsiders, as civilised or uncivilised, as citizen or non-citizen, as a member of 'the (indigenous) people', or as a threat to this body.

To explore the pedagogical force of racialised political discourse in England and Germany then, this study employed a qualitative document analysis approach (Bowen 2009). The primary sources analysed included political speeches, media commentary, and key policy documents and reports. These were selected from the ten years preceding the riots in each case (2008-18 in Germany and 2014-24 in England), during the riots, and immediately afterwards. Examining sources from preceding years enabled us to identify the significant political discourses of the time which formed the context for the riots.

The selection and analysis process followed these steps:

a. Source selection criteria

Political speeches: Selected speeches were those delivered by prominent national and regional politicians (e.g. Prime Ministers, Chancellors, Interior Ministers, and key opposition leaders) during or immediately following the riots, or those that addressed related issues of immigration, national identity, and public order.

Media commentary: A purposive sampling strategy was used to collect media articles from national newspapers and public broadcasters with high circulation or influence (e.g., The Guardian, BBC, Al Jazeera, Der Spiegel, Deutsche Welle). Both news reporting and editorial content were included to capture both coverage and interpretation.

Policy documents: Relevant policies and reports were identified through government portals and included legislation (e.g. Immigration Acts), official statutes and major commissioned reports.

b. Analysis

The selected materials were examined using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) informed by theories of global white supremacy (Allen, 2001) and European whiteness (Blaagaard, 2008) outlined in the theoretical framework above. Analysis focused on identifying:

- Recurring racialised tropes and binaries (e.g. civilised/uncivilised, insider/outsider)
- Attribution of blame for the riots (e.g. individual pathology vs. structural racism)
- Implicit and explicit references to white subjectivity, exclusion, and inclusion.

These were understood as having pedagogical functions (Giroux, 2000; 2004), thus shaping public perception of belonging and threat, racialised identities, and political agency.

c. Comparative strategy

The two case studies were analysed in parallel to highlight similarities and differences in discursive strategies and their sociopolitical implications. Attention was paid to how discourse circulated across national contexts and the extent to which it reflected or resisted broader patterns of European whiteness.

Analysis of the riots: commonalities between England and Germany

In this section we consider firstly the race-related discourses explicit and implicit in the rioters' narratives and acts, and secondly, in the commentary on the riots. These discourses reflect long-standing discourses of European whiteness and global white supremacy: The rioters' narratives reflected discourses of England and Germany under threat, of Britishness and Germanness as white, they were anti-Muslim, and there was an intersection of raced and gendered narratives. The commentators' narratives denied this racism and instead blamed the riots on the far-right or the working class.

The rioters' narratives and acts

A consideration of the race-related discourses contained in rioters' narratives shows the following (with inevitable elements of cross-over):

Firstly, the notion that Englishness and/ or England and Germanness and /or Germany is under attack, threatened by incomers or immigrants. In England this included chants such as, 'No surrender!', 'English 'til I die!', (Ahmed, 2025), 'We want our country back' and 'Take our country back' (Rigg, 2024). There were chants of 'Stop the boats' (Rigg, 2024) in reference to boats of migrants crossing the English Channel. Graffiti sprayed on a hotel included 'Get out England' (sic) (Safdar, 2024). In Germany chants included 'Ausländer raus! [Foreigners out], 'Haut ab!' [Get out] und 'nicht willkommen' [not welcome] (Klinker and Obert, 2018:6), 'Asylflut stoppen!' [stop the asylum flood] (Deutsche Welle, 2018a).

Secondly, rioters focussed on Britishness and Germanness as white and exclusionary of racialised 'others'. In England this included chants such as, 'There ain't no black in the Union Jack' (Safdar, 2024) and attacks on racially minoritised people. Equally in Germany there were attacks on racially minoritised people and rioters chanted 'Deutschland den Deutschen!' [Germany for the Germans] and 'Wir sind das Volk!' [We are the people] (Klinker and Obert, 2018:6). This slogan was originally used by protesters in former East Germany (the German Democratic Republic, GDR) in the late 1980s to deny the legitimacy of the state. However, in this case it is used as an ethno-nationalist call for separate ethnic groups to keep to their own national space, and a critique of Chancellor Merkel's liberal immigration policies (Önnerfors 2019).

Thirdly, the riots had Islamophobic elements: There were attacks on mosques in England and the name of 'Tommy Robinson', the founder of the now defunct anti-Muslim English Defence League was shouted (Ahmed, 2025). Online, false rumours that the attacker was a Muslim spread, encouraging rioters to target Muslims. In Germany people made the Nazi salute (Der Spiegel, 2018a), and shouted 'Kanaken', a racist slur directed at people of Turkish heritage, Muslims, and People of Colour (Klinker and Obert, 2018).

Fourthly, there were gendered elements to the rioting in both countries, which intersect with race: in both countries, it was mainly white men who rioted (although not exclusively), and in both cases they were originally mobilised to riot over an attack, or alleged attack, on white females by Brown or Black men: in England, the attack was on little girls at a dance class, and in Germany it was rumoured (although never confirmed) that the dead man was killed protecting a white woman from sexual assault by the assassins.

Commentary and response to the riots- a denial of (mainstream, middle class) racism

In the response to the riots, in both countries, from mainstream politicians and commentators, there was both a denial of racism and an implicit denial of responsibility for racism- they blamed the riots on right-wing extremism and so-called 'left-behind populations' or the class 'other'.

a. Denial of racism

In England, although a House of Commons report on policing the riots described the riots as 'anti-immigration' (Downs, 2024), the current British Prime Minister, Kier Starmer, initially at least, described them as, 'the actions of a tiny, mindless minority in our society.[...] It's not protest. It's not legitimate. It's crime...' (Starmer 2024a). Starmer thus at this point seems to deny the racist nature of the riots, in line with wider apolitical explanations for rioting in general, which explains rioters' involvement as somehow located within the individual and does not recognise any socio-political reasons (Wilmott et al, 2024).

Equally, while German Chancellor Merkel herself did acknowledge the racist aspect to the riots, some politicians played down the racist aspects, including the Saxony State Premier, Michael Kretschmer, who argued that the rioters were just angry about the death of a local man, and that there were 'no pogroms on the streets' (reported by Deutsche Welle, 2018b) and Maassen, President of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, who suggested that the racist chants and incidents seen in video footage were falsified (Klinker and Obert, 2018). He was later forced to resign.

Moreover, Merkel's liberal immigration policies were blamed for the riots even by mainstream politicians. Wolfgang Kubicki, deputy federal chairman of the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and Vice President of the Bundestag, claimed 'The roots of the riots lie in Chancellor Merkel's "We can do it"' (Welt 2018). The CSU Minister of the Interior at the time, Horst Seehofer (2018-2021) said that the 'migration issue is the mother of all political problems' (Tagesspiegel, 2018) - a statement that was echoed by leading politicians from the Socialist Democratic Party (SPD), Christian Democratic Union (CDU), and the Left.

b. Racism as a feature of the extreme far right

In both Germany and England, there was a focus by politicians and commentators on known far-right extremists promoting and fuelling the riots (Downs, 2024; Klinker and Obert, 2018; Begrich, 2018). For example, Starmer, is quoted as saying, 'I utterly condemn the far-right thuggery we have seen this weekend.' (Starmer, 2024b). Similarly, the press spokesman for the German government at the time said, 'There is no place in Germany for vigilante justice, for groups that want to spread hatred on the streets, for intolerance and for extremism' (Der Spiegel, 2018b). This is not, of course, to downplay the key role of right-wing extremist organisations in the riots. Indeed, well-known far right figures posted online, stoked tensions and organised marches. However, the focus on the far-right alone is potentially problematic as it fails to properly recognise both the involvement of ordinary people in the riots (Leser et al, 2019), and the similarities between narratives of the rioters, and the rhetoric of much mainstream politics. Indeed, it promulgates the notion that racism is extreme, rather than mundane - a common feature of global white supremacy (Allen, 2001).

c. Racism as located in the class 'other'

In both England and Germany, the riots occurred in areas sometimes referred to as 'left-behind'. They are areas of high economic deprivation, but also frequently (both explicitly and implicitly) stereotyped as being culturally deprived (Bhambra, 2017; Lewicki and Shooman, 2020). This deprivation is given as a reason for the riots (Schuman, 2018; Lacroix, 2024). In Britain, the riots took place in Southport, Rotherham, Hull, Sunderland, Plymouth, Stoke, Liverpool, Weymouth, Tamworth, Newton Heath (Manchester), Solihull (Birmingham), Blackpool, Bristol, Belfast, Bolton, Middlesbrough. The majority of those charged with offences came from some of the most economically deprived areas, were more likely than average to be unemployed, have low qualification levels, and suffer from ill health (Lucy, 2024). These areas have experienced de-industrialisation, and suffered perhaps disproportionately from the dismantling of the welfare state. In Germany, they occurred in Chemnitz, former East Germany, which has experienced de-industrialisation, high levels of unemployment and parts of East Germany are facing demographic collapse as young people move west (Sandten, 2019).

While these areas are indeed poorer, and we do not wish to suggest that the socio-economic situation did not contribute to the riots in any way, the riots were not directed against politicians and the slogans were not (directly) about the economy. Successive governments in the UK and Germany have not responded to deprivation and poverty, the recent cost of living crisis, or riots, by taking significant concrete steps to address them (Francis, 2024; Mondon and Winter, 2024).

Explaining the rioting, and the racism, through poverty and (perceptions of) cultural deprivation effectively achieves a distancing from mainstream and middle class cultures, absolving mainstream politicians and middle class racism. Research into the Chemnitz riots suggests that middle class people were as involved as working class ones (Schumann, 2018).

Public pedagogies of European Whiteness: connecting the riots with mainstream political discourse

In this section we connect rioters' narratives and discourses associated with the riots, with mainstream political discourse relating to immigration and citizenship in England and

Germany. These discourses are analysed through the theoretical lenses of European whiteness and global white supremacy. By analysing these political discourses as public pedagogies, we show here how they allocate roles, shape identities and create in-groups and out-groups, which enables us to understand how the rioters engaging in racist acts were lent political agency. Although these discourses operate at national level, our analysis shows how they connect to wider European and even global discourses of whiteness, nation, religion and class (Allen, 2001; Clarke, 2021). Through its policies and utterances, government creates the conditions for racial hatred. Racist stereotypes are reported unproblematically by a media which does not challenge them. Thus, racism seems to be sanctioned by politicians and the media. The misinformation online about the riots seemed believable because of longstanding stereotypes of Muslims and recent migrants as terrorists, criminals and unBritish/German. The state is fully invested in this, as illustrated by elections fought on the issue of immigration as a negative in both countries, a perceived threat to 'our' people and culture, and policies to reduce immigration (Mondon and Winter, 2024).

We identify six main discourses:

- Citizenship as raced;
- (White) Europe under threat;
- Britishness and Germanness as white, indigenous, classed and disenfranchised;
- Britishness and Germanness as secular and anti-Muslim;
- Britishness and Germanness as threatened by 'uncivilised' predators;
- Britishness and Germanness as non-racist.

These discourses not only mobilised rioters to violence, they can be understood as key discourses in current expressions of European whiteness.

Citizenship as raced

Both rioters' narratives and immigration politics in England and Germany create links between race and citizenship. Britishness (and Englishness) and Germanness are conceived as white, and (by implication) People of Colour conceived as non-citizens. Immigration politics over decades has created (both real and perceived) insiders and outsiders of the

nation, and racialises insiders as white and outsiders as racialised (Lewicki 2018; Monton and Winter, 2024).

In Britain a series of Commonwealth Immigration Acts (1962, 1968, 1971) turned people who came as citizens into ‘immigrants’ and gradually formalised a link between whiteness and Britishness (Bhambra, 2017). This was followed by the abolition of birth-right citizenship (*jus soli*) in the 1981 Nationality Act. ‘Whilst race and ethnicity were never directly named, the 1981 Act effectively designed citizenship so as to exclude black and Asian populations in the Commonwealth while leaving ‘routes home’ for white nationals born within the boundaries of the empire’ (Tyler, 2010: 63).

Germany’s trajectory, though distinct from Britain’s imperial legacy, has also racialised citizenship through ethnonational principles. For much of the postwar period, *jus sanguinis* (citizenship by descent) defined Germanness as biologically inherited, excluding millions of migrant workers from Turkey, Southern Europe, and North Africa and their children from legal and symbolic belonging. A 2000 reform introduced conditional *jus soli*, allowing some children of non-German parents to acquire citizenship. However, access remained conditional upon assimilation—via long-term residence, language proficiency, and demonstration of ‘German values’—requirements that continue to disproportionately affect racialised and Muslim communities (Bundesministerium des Inneren, 2023).

Both countries introduced citizenship tests, the UK in 2022 via New Labour's Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act, and Germany in 2008 via the Immigration Test, enabling non-citizens who had lived in Germany for at least 8 years and satisfied criteria such as not being benefit-dependent to apply to be naturalised. However, these re-embed cultural expectations into citizenship and reinforce the expectation that citizenship must be ‘earned’ via citizenship tests for those without British or German ancestry, thus maintaining the link between citizenship and race (Kostakopoulou, 2010).

(White) Europe under threat

Rioters' narratives had much in common with the so-called 'great replacement narrative' which claims that European culture is under threat, and Europe is being overrun by non-Europeans, often portrayed or imagined as Muslims, and Islamified, through liberal immigration policies pursued by political elites (Leser et al, 2019). The narrative is both cultural and biological, being dependent on myths of historic ethnic homogeneity (Ekman, 2022). In politics, migration is represented as a threat to Britain and Germany, politicians and the media never mentioning its benefits. In both countries references are made to 'swarms' and an 'invasion' of migrants (Richards, 2022).

The British government has created what they call a hostile environment for migrants, which by design aims to deter migrants from coming to the UK. This is both a policy approach (via the 2014 Immigration Act) and a 'generalised state-led marginalisation of immigrants' (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021). This has both fuelled public concern over immigration, as well as allocating active roles and responsibilities to public servants, employers, banks, landlords, healthcare, private companies and members of the public into controlling migration and policing (perceived) migrants (ibid). Politicians of both right and left have placed importance on stopping small boats crossing the channel, stoking fears of hordes of invaders arriving in Britain. This campaign refrain, 'stop the boats' was picked up by the rioters.

As a core actor within the European Union, the German government has played a leading role in shaping and supporting increasingly restrictive border regimes, particularly in the Mediterranean. Through its backing of Frontex operations, Germany participates in a securitised migration framework that involves turning back boats, outsourcing border control to non-EU states, and obstructing humanitarian rescue missions—measures that disproportionately target racialised, non-European migrants. These policies enjoy bipartisan support across major parties, including the CDU, SPD, and FDP, indicating a broad political consensus on the racialised policing of Europe's borders.

Domestically, this border hardening aligns with a long-standing and increasingly prominent narrative of demographic anxiety. Since Reunification, German political discourse has frequently framed the nation's demographic future as precarious—emphasising the decline of ethnic German birthrates, an ageing population, and the supposed reproductive 'surplus'

of Muslim communities. This has produced a moral panic around demographic ‘imbalance,’ with migration from majority-Muslim countries framed not only as an economic or cultural issue but as a biological and civilisational threat (Goetz, 2021). In the German context this biocultural framing is not confined to the far right. Fears of a demographic crisis have been echoed by centrist and liberal politicians, media outlets, and think tanks, lending respectability to ideas once considered extreme. Unlike in the UK, where overtly biological discourses remain largely peripheral, in Germany such tropes have entered mainstream debates under the guise of pragmatic policy-making. In doing so, they contribute to a racialised imaginary of European whiteness as fragile and under siege—legitimizing exclusionary policies and normalising a defensive posture against racialised migration.

The People: Britishness and Germanness as white, indigenous, classed and disenfranchised

In both countries, the rioters drew upon a discourse which portrays the so-called ‘working class’ as both white and indigenous (‘the people’), as well as disenfranchised. This imagined group becomes at once particular as ‘white’ and ‘working class’ and universal as the ‘people’. Both in England and Germany, politicians and the media have constructed a ‘people’ made up of workers against an out-of-touch or contemptuous elite who fails to represent them and pursues liberal immigration politics, allowing immigrants and refugees to threaten jobs, resources and an imagined fragile essentialised white culture (Mondon and Winter, 2019). This enables a construction of minorities as classless (and thus non-native), a silencing of minorities as members of the working class, the working class as indigenous i.e. the people (Das Volk) and the people as white.

This discourse is evident in the mainstream politics of both countries. In Britain, for example, Brexit was characterised, by the leaders of the Leave campaign (Johnson, Gove, Farage), themselves members of the political elite, as a struggle between ‘the people’ and the political elite (Honeyman, 2023). The Brexit campaign positioned the UK as a historically white country in which foreigners had disproportionate advantage, and indigenous communities had become poor, left-behind, ‘strangers in their own land’. The Brexit victory was defined as a victory for the white working class, voting against globalisation and low-wage, immigrant labour- although the statistics do not bear this out, and leave voters were

in fact, more commonly middle class and from the wealthier south of England (Bhambra, 2017). In Germany the PEGIDA movement 'Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident' was equally characterised as the legitimate voice of the German population, the native working class with 'justified' concerns of in the face of resource competition from migrants, with politicians from all parties claiming that the concerns of 'the ordinary people' should be taken seriously (Patzelt, 2022). Politicians such as former SPD leader, then of The Left, Oskar Lafontaine, argued that there should be restrictions on immigration because of 'problems of wage and rental competition' (Zeit-Online, 2017) between immigrants and the white working class.

Such discourses are reflected in other parts of society. In education, for the last two decades in the UK there has been a good deal of high-profile attention paid to the underachievement of what is referred to as the 'white working class'. This narrative has been championed by mainstream politicians such as former UK Prime Minister, May, and has received a great deal of media attention. The alleged underachievement of white pupils is 'framed as the fault of initiatives targeting [...] ethnic minorities' (Adjogatse and Miedema, 2021). This narrative pits white pupils against a minority ethnic group, which is then perceived as privileged. Similar discourses are evident in Germany. In particular around the time Germany was accepting large numbers of refugees in 2015, politicians argued that significant numbers of refugees in school classes would detrimentally impact on the education of German children, especially working class children. Politicians such as the then Federal Minister for Education and Research, Johanna Wanka (CDU) argued for quotas of 'migrant children' (Der Spiegel, 2017). The 'white working class' is constructed as class and racially victimised, which perpetuates the idea that class disadvantage is to do with whiteness, whilst at the same time obscuring other disadvantaged groups (Adjogatse and Miedema, 2021).

Britishness and Germanness as secular and anti-Muslim

In England, the rioters attacked mosques, in Germany, they shouted anti-Muslim slurs. This reflects common discourses in the political mainstream in both countries which position Muslims and/or Islam as external to Britishness and Germanness and incompatible with British/German/European values (Marsden et al, 2023). These discourses draw on

longstanding Orientalist tropes of Muslims/Islam as traditional and outmoded, barbaric, authoritarian and intolerant which implicitly positions German/British society as progressive, liberal and enlightened (Lewicki and Shooman, 2020).

In the UK, for example, after 2001 and in particular after the London bombings in 2005, there has been a policy focus on the promotion of a shared British identity and values and anti-radicalisation. This includes government policies such as the teaching of Fundamental British Values, now statutory at all levels of education, which identifies values such as tolerance, democracy and the rule of law as fundamentally British. These also form the basis for the Life in the UK citizenship test on British customs and traditions. However, rather than the promotion of shared identity, the identification of a set of values as specifically British, rather than international, implies that the non-British (or those positioned as such), do not share them, and are intolerant, undemocratic and do not respect the rule of law. This calls up longstanding stereotypes of non-Britishness as uncivilised (Clarke, 2021), and draws implicitly upon stereotypes of Islam. A review for the Department for Communities and Local Government on opportunity and integration concluded that ‘cultural and religious practices in communities [...] are not only holding some of our citizens back but run contrary to British values and sometimes our laws’ (Casey, 2016: 5), explicitly mentioning Muslims of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin (Marsden et al., 2023). A counter extremism programme, ‘Prevent’, developed from 2007, rather than building trust and resilience, has, in effect, positioned British Muslims as prone to extremism and thus threatening to Britishness (Tazamal, 2024), and allocated a surveillance role to education and youth and community practitioners, and police (e.g. Thomas, 2016).

Since German reunification, a recurring and highly charged debate has centred on the notion of *Leitkultur*—a contested term used to define a supposedly cohesive set of German core values. Originally framed as a response to the perceived failures of multiculturalism, *Leitkultur* emerged in the late 1990s and intensified in the 2000s as a boundary-making discourse that sought to clarify who belongs in the German nation, and under what cultural terms (Pautz, 2005). Although often presented as a neutral appeal to shared democratic norms, the concept has consistently been used to mark Islam and Muslims as culturally incompatible with Germanness. At the heart of this discourse lies an implicit conflation of

Germanness with a secularised Christianity. Political figures and commentators have invoked 'Western' or 'European' values—such as democracy, human rights, gender equality, and the rule of law—as foundational to German identity, while framing Islam as a threat to these ideals (Beinhauer-Köhler & Leggewie, 2009). This framing both secularises Christianity (stripping it of its religious content and rebranding it as civilisation) and religiously and culturally essentialises Islam, portraying it as patriarchal, authoritarian, and antithetical to modernity. Statements by high-profile politicians have reinforced this binary. Norbert Lammert, while president of the Bundestag, declared that European values rest on 'a shared religious tradition,' a phrase which, while vague, was widely understood to refer to Christianity and to implicitly exclude Islam. Chancellor Merkel's 2010 statement that 'Multikulti ist gescheitert' ('multiculturalism has failed') echoed this sentiment, reinforcing the idea that integration requires not mutual adaptation but the assimilation of migrants—particularly Muslims—into a hegemonically white, Christian-secular framework. This logic positions Muslims not simply as adherents of a minority faith, but as fundamentally outside the cultural and moral boundaries of the nation. The call for Muslim migrants to adopt 'German values' presumes those values are fixed, monolithic, and inherently non-Muslim—a stance that marginalises the growing number of German-born Muslims and reinforces a racialised dichotomy between the secular-Christian 'self' and the Muslim 'other'.

Britishness and Germanness threatened by 'uncivilised' predators

Both riots started as a response to (alleged in the case of Chemnitz) attacks on white girls or women by asylum seekers (allegedly in the case of the UK). It could be argued that the response connects to long-standing stereotypes of uncivilised immigrant/black/brown men threatening or oppressing women and girls and narratives of the white male saviour, who will rescue white women from the (Muslim) (sexual) predator (Lewicki and Shooman, 2020). In both countries, the discourse comes up frequently in political discourse and immigration and citizenship policy. Discourses and policies essentialise culture and values, creating hierarchical binaries: insiders and outsiders to citizenship. These stereotypes of cultural incompatibility create binaries which position Europeans as liberal and civilised, and non-Europeans as primitive and uncivilised.

For example, in Britain over the past 15 years, a narrative of what are referred to as 'Asian' or 'Muslim' 'grooming gangs' has become established both in mainstream political and popular discourse. These claim that a disproportionate number of Muslim/Asian men have been involved in 'grooming' young girls – mostly white British – for sexual abuse and exploitation. While scholars have argued that 'grooming gang' does not correspond to an established legal or scientific category, and that sexual abuse is perpetrated by individuals of all heritages, the attention paid to these crimes and the racialisation of the term (while many other equally high-profile sexual abuse cases involving white perpetrators are not racialised) draws on stereotypes of Muslim men as sexual predators and white women as vulnerable and exploited by Brown men, as well as discourses of cultural incompatibility in the form of orientalism (Cockbain and Tufail, 2020). Mainstream politicians such as ex-Prime Minister Sunak have also claimed that the issue has been ignored because of political correctness (Symonds, 2023) - or fears of the accusation of racism, providing credibility to the narrative that the 'good' (white) establishment should stand up to Muslim sexism, and that in doing so, they are not racist. MP Javid, himself of Pakistani heritage and therefore lending extra legitimacy to claims that the discourse is not racist, referred to 'racial motivation' of the perpetrators (Cockbain and Tufail, 2020).

Equally in Germany, following assaults on women in Cologne New Year's Eve 2015, there has been a high profile public debate about (racialised, Muslim) male migrants as a danger for (white, German) women. Young aggressive men with a Muslim background have become public enemies against whom the police have allegedly failed (Kersten, 2016). The assaults were regarded as a confirmation of 'Muslim patriarchy', which was pitted against alleged German values of gender equality, supported by politicians from all parties. In this discourse, Germany is positioned as a country where misogyny has been overcome, and is now located in racialised others (Boulila and Carri, 2017). After the incidents, a law was passed redefining the crime as not only when the victim fights back, but simply when the victim says no (Boulila and Carri 2017 p. 291). This redefinition had been on the feminist agenda in for years, but was only introduced when the perpetrator was unmistakably seen as a Person of Colour. These discourses of allegedly liberal Germans versus (Muslim) migrants run through many different spaces. For example, citizenship and language courses and exams test, among other things, attitudes towards to gender and sexuality. This positions Germans as a

group with liberal attitudes towards gender and sexuality, and not-yet-citizens as having 'uncivilised' attitudes towards sexuality and gender (Lewicki, 2018). Pronouncements from politicians on the topic are common, such as prominent CDU politician, Lengsfeld's, question, in 2017 'what "common values"' can there be between 'immigrants from tribal, misogynistic, homophobic societies and self-determined, emancipated [German] women?' (as quoted in Lewicki and Shooman, 2020: 35).

Britishness and Germanness as non-racist

The commentary around the riots presented them as either not racist, or located the racism within the far-right or the class 'other', thus implicitly absolving mainstream politics or middle classes from involvement or responsibility for racism. There is a longstanding tradition of presenting Germanness and Britishness as non-racist by mainstream establishment voices. This discourse has received an update as post-racial discourses have become more potent.

This is done firstly by denying the existence of racism. In Britain, the British Empire, the vehicle through which people across the world were violently oppressed and discourses of European white supremacy were reified, is often sanitised or glorified by politicians, media and education (Parsons, 2022). The 2021 Sewell Report on Race and Ethnic Disparities commissioned by the government against the backdrop of Black Lives Matter, as an attempt to change the narrative around racism, did identify some inequalities, however, it denied the existence of 'structural racism' and institutional racism, thus implicitly locating the blame for the inequalities in minority groups (Tikly, 2022). There is equally a long history of denying racism in Germany (Adaire, 2019). The performance of moving on from National Socialism actually meant that racism was considered something which occurred in the Third Reich, and not in modern Germany (Lewicki, 2018; Alexopolou, 2021).

Secondly, racism is rationalised, and located in the class 'other': Commentators on the riots were able to draw upon a construction of the white working class as racist (Misik, 2020; Clarke, 2023). Indeed, the argument that racial self-interest is allegedly justified due to the discourse that the white working class has been left-behind has been portrayed as

legitimate, (since e.g. the silencing of the fact that minorities are more likely to be socio-economically disadvantaged (Bhambra, 2017)), rather than racist.

In Germany, there is a potent discourse which constructs East Germans as the source of racism. CDU politician Johannes Gerster went as far as to blame East Germany for outbreaks of neo-Nazi violence in the West (Aldridge, 2019). The former East is positioned as 'lagging behind' in terms of civilization, modernity and democratic culture in the West (Lewicki and Shooman, 2020). Three reasons tend to be given for this: Firstly that there are fewer people from migrant backgrounds there, so the population is allegedly less used to them. Secondly, that denazification did not take place, and therefore the population are allegedly still attracted to racist narratives. Thirdly, East Germans remain culturally marginalised and under-represented politically (Sandten, 2019).

Racism, rationalised into justifiable feelings of racialised disadvantage, is therefore located within the class 'other', silencing the role of politicians, the media and the middle classes in constructing racist discourse. In fact Lewicki and Shooman (2020) in their comparison of politicians' anti-Muslim discourses, found little difference between the former East and former West. They also argue that longitudinal data suggests that a nationalist vision of society, currently strongly linked to support for Islamophobia, resonates with around half of the population across Germany (Lewicki and Shooman, 2020).

Thirdly, the British and German governments refer to racism as extremism, never linking themselves to the far right, while at the same time pursuing policies which reflect the far right's narratives (Fekete, 2019). They position themselves as the bulwark against the far right, when the reality is much more nuanced (Mondon and Winter, 2020). The growth of fascism and the extreme right is in direct relationship to the racism of the state or the racism of institutions (Fekete, 2019), resulting in the normalisation of far-right narratives. The normalisation of racism is actually fuelling the far-right (Tazamal, 2024).

These discourses: the denial of racism, racism's rationalisation or location in the working class or allegedly culturally deprived, and the understanding of racism only as extreme rather than culturally and politically mainstream, are all features of white supremacy. They

also all provide an important public pedagogical context for the absolution of mainstream politicians' responsibility for racist riots.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that a consideration of political discourse as public pedagogy enables an insight into what causes anti-immigration riots and how this occurs: mainstream discourse contributes to legitimating views which might otherwise have been considered extreme, by assigning subject positions, which are then taken up by the rioters. Roles are allocated as racialised insiders and outsiders, threat and threatened, privileged and unprivileged. Although the blame is given to populism, far-right organisations and racist communities, in fact discourses of white supremacy are manufactured by political and media elites, in a top-down fashion (Mondon and Winter, 2024).

The comparative approach and theoretical lens enables us to provide insights into the nature of European white supremacy. Similar discourses of white supremacy can be identified across England's and Germany's distinct contexts and histories. All the features of Allen's (2001) 'global white supremacy' are present: whiteness is constructed as civilised, it is linked to citizenship-insiders, its normative nature enables a denial of racism, especially by those most privileged by it - the mainstream establishment, and middle class. Our study also demonstrates that white supremacy in the UK and Germany draws upon both biological and cultural/political notions of racial privilege, while simultaneously, positioning white people/culture/Europeanness as threatened. Minorities, especially Muslims, are constructed as the threat, and excluded from constructions of citizenship and native class positions. White supremacy is either viewed as extremist, or it is rationalised. It is located in the working-class which is at once constructed as white (and thus privileged insiders) and disenfranchised. This enables a sanctioning of racism by the political mainstream and a denial of both the existence of white privilege, and of white supremacy's links to the middle-class political establishment.

Moving beyond critique, this study suggests several pedagogical and policy-orientated recommendations. Mainstream politicians have the opportunity to counter racist discourses

rather than manufacturing and fuelling them. Real alternatives to a white supremacist society might involve inclusive constructions of citizenship and class, a rejection of raced binaries both biological and cultural, and resisting the securitisation of migration. Politicians and media actors should be held accountable not only for overt hate speech but also for the subtle reproduction of white supremacist logic in mainstream rhetoric. Wider public pedagogy initiatives—including media interventions and community-based programmes—should challenge the normalisation of racialised binaries and problematise connections between race and citizenship. In formal education, curricula should be reoriented to critically engage with histories of colonialism and migration and reject the all-too-common glorification of imperialism, foregrounding how whiteness has been constructed and maintained in European national imaginaries. Citizenship education should move beyond assimilationist models to foster genuinely pluralistic understandings of national belonging. Teacher education, in both countries, lacking a focus on race at all, should include training in racial literacy- an understanding of how racism operates. By foregrounding the pedagogical power of political discourse, this study contributes to broader efforts in education and race equity to dismantle structural racism not only at the margins, but at the cultural and institutional centres of public life.

This was a comparative study of riots in two countries. Future research could investigate connections between anti-immigration riots, mainstream politics and racist discourses in other countries and other cases, to establish how widespread this issue is. Equally, the methodological approach of analysing political discourse as public pedagogy helps us to understand how the population becomes invested in certain, potent discourses, which could be useful in many fields across the social sciences.

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