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A pub for England: Race and class in the time of the nation

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Abstract

The pub is often romanticised as a site of idyllic English 'working-class' sociability that is now under threat. Such melancholic invocations of the pub's plight are invoked amid the wider resurgence of a racialised English nationalism that makes particularly effective claims to a 'white working-class' and their putatively 'left-behind' anguish. This article challenges such dominant accounts, juxtaposing such racially defensive readings of the working-class pub against the otherwise overlooked phenomenon of England's 'desi pubs' (Indian-run pubs) through recourse to David Jesudason's *Desi Pubs* as well as drawing upon the accounts of the founder of Glassy Junction, a historic desi pub in Southall. Importantly, this overdue engagement of 'desi pubs' is considered not through frameworks of race and nation alone but also within conjunctural webs of capitalist stratification and subjectivity. Ultimately, we argue that attentiveness to desi pubs helps draw out convivial modalities of working-class sociability that exist outside of both otherwise ascendant racial and nationalist grievance frames and the sanitised but also prohibitive consumerist webs of aspirational distinction and individualism.

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Introduction

Within the burgeoning academic literature on the English pub, there has been much focus on community, belonging and social change, particularly vis-à-vis gentrification and decline (Jennings, 2007, 2016; Markham and Bosworth, 2016; Thurnell-Read, 2018, 2023). Yet, little reference has been made to race or ethnicity, despite overarching themes of community and belonging being overcharged by such implications (though see Bradby, 2007; Jayne et al., 2011). This is partially explained by the popular association between Englishness and the pub, rendering the latter constitutively indicative of the former, and that alone. Hence, in Mann's (2011) study of Englishness, his 'majority White' respondents invoked the pub in their attempts to define Englishness; while for Kate Fox (2004), in her wildly popular *Watching the English*, the pub becomes 'a central part of English life and culture', boldly claiming that 'it would be impossible even to *attempt* to understand Englishness without spending a lot of time in pubs' (p. 88).

But though the pub is often romanticised as idyllic English sociability, 'a mutable mini-England on every high street' (Burns, 2022), the pub is also lamented as under threat and in need of saving, as is the white working-class pub-goer who is seen as its exemplary patron. In 2015, Liberal Democrat Minister Stephen Williams and Conservative Lord Robin Hodgson went as far as to argue that pubs were closing down in 'traditional working-class areas' because of immigrants displacing local white working-class populations (Worrall, 2015). Within such debates, the pub becomes a metonym for a 'left-behind' white working-class, conjured in the context of reductive class-romanticism and against the backdrop of wider battles over what constitutes authentic Englishness. It is now well-observed, owing to key scholars like Virdee (2014), Shilliam (2018, 2020) and Kundnani (2023), that such framings not only artificially 'whiten' (Bhambra, 2017) Britain's contemporary working-class composition, but also erase historic ethnic minority and migrant working-class communities from view, despite the fact that the English working-class (even if discounting its imperial ambit) has never been exclusively white, nor have the English working classes ever represented a homogeneous entity.

Inevitably, such framings also erase historic *exclusions*, including, as Satnam Virdee has influentially documented, at the hands of socialist and trade union movements. Exclusions where claims to pay, conditions and resources but also to more general configurations of working-class identity and space were frequently policed and stratified by hierarchies of citizenship, whiteness and Englishness. Most relevant for our own thematic purposes, it is no coincidence that on Malcolm X's iconic visit to the United Kingdom in 1965, Avtar Singh Johul took him to the Blue Gates pub in Smethwick, a pub that upheld a colour bar and refused to serve them (Blankson, 2022). Avtar Singh Johul and the Indian Workers Association's challenge to this colour bar is, per David Jesudason (2023), one of two key moments in the history of the desi pub (broadly understood as an Indian-run pub, usually serving Indian food), and can be understood, in part, as a

class-based struggle for inclusion, as Asian foundry workers sought the ability to drink in the same establishments as their white co-workers.

The second key moment Jesudason cites is the life of the Glassy Junction pub (1994–2012) in Southall, West London, the first Indian-themed pub in the United Kingdom and the first to accept rupees as currency (Chaudhary, 2003). Resembling 'an old-fashioned English pub until you see the sign saying, "Rupees accepted"' (Financial Times, 2007), Glassy Junction is fondly described by Jesudason (2023: 14, 189) as 'a raucous celebration of Punjabi culture' and a 'legendary boozer'. Jesudason's (2023) guidebook *Desi Pubs* remains the only substantial book-length account of such pubs, though Gerd Baumann's (1996) celebrated ethnography of Southall features a photograph of Glassy Junction (p. 51), and describes its earlier incarnation, the Railway Tavern, as 'a living-room away from home' (p. 2). Brian Axel's (2001) exploration of the Sikh diaspora dedicates a whole chapter to Glassy Junction though he reinforces the taken-as-given association between pubs and Englishness when he argues that the Glassy Junction 'appropriates and transforms familiar and powerful signs of Englishness: the pub and the pint' (p. 184) through embossing the figure of the turbaned Sikh man onto pint glasses.

This understandable but oversimplified framing of Glassy Junction's celebrated status constitutes the unique entry point for our article, as Glassy Junction was founded by Amit's father, a self-styled 'third-generation publican'. He was, after all, 'born in a pub' set up by his grandfather, and then run by his father in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, reflecting colonial migratory routes as his grandfather had initially arrived in East Africa to work on the railways. Following a year living in Punjab, Amit's father moved to Southall aged 11, a suburban town in West London notable for its large Punjabi community. Importantly, as an adult he was a longtime punter at Glassy Junction's predecessor, the Railway Tavern, with whose white English landlord he had a warm relationship. As a result of these life experiences, to Amit's Dad, the pub represented a sense of familiarity and home; pubs were places he 'loved'. Indeed, his pub-going could be understood as 'learnt behaviour into which a person is socialised, which is passed from one generation to the next and structured by both continuity and change between generations' (Thurnell-Read, 2023: 4); even if such accounts of pub-goers are not typically referring to people such as Amit's father, largely because of the aforementioned association between pub-going and whiteness/Englishness.

While missing from the literature on pubs, for us, the desi pub is noteworthy precisely because it encourages us to reconsider the pub as a site for alternative possibilities that are disentangled from rigid notions of Englishness and receptive, in turn, to convivial realities. Following a range of scholars who have drawn upon Paul Gilroy's (2004: 39) conceptualisation of urban multiculture, our reference to the convivial as developed in this article refers to the understatedly radical openness that is frequently articulated in contemporary towns and cities, where people of assorted backgrounds living in proximity and through extended cultural and social entanglement casually habituate ways of life and patterns of thought that become less wedded to otherwise enduringly defensive taxonomies of race and nation. As importantly, recent research on conviviality has ably asserted that such convivial improvisation, and its attendant spatial and leisure infrastructure, remains resolutely working-class, contrary to enduring assumptions about how

such cognate ideals (say, cosmopolitanism) are popularly maligned as constituting elite lifestyle projects and aspirational distinction practices. It is accordingly this working-class context and contingency that has become increasingly decisive (Back and Sinha, 2018) for any politically timely and empirically resonant account of multiracial space and possibility. For our purposes, however, it is noteworthy that for all the emergent research on conviviality, including work that addresses such otherwise contrasting places as the deportation centre (de Noronha, 2019), the combat sport gym (Singh, 2023) or the Peterborough factory and warehouse (Rogaly, 2020), the pub is yet to feature, perhaps still too easily presumed to be a monoracial enclave.

Yet, Glassy Junction was not exclusively patronised by – or run for – local Indian residents, but was, as Dudrah (2012: 34) notes, ‘frequented by multi-racial drinkers’, with Amit’s father proudly reminiscing that ‘everyone was welcome!’ Similarly, Jagdish Patel’s (2023) commissioned project on Black Country desi pubs notes that ‘people of all backgrounds socialised together in the factories and the pubs’. His powerful photographs capture an array of pub-goers – white, Asian, Black, women, men – forced to live and work in close proximity against the backdrop of deindustrialisation and increasing precarity, offering a poignant example of what Rogaly (2020) describes as ‘non-elite cosmopolitanism’; a form of working-class multiculture that we argue presents a different reading of the pub than is otherwise documented.

It is here that this article’s intervention lies, as we use the desi pub as a lens through which to rethink the pub in relation to decline and also to draw out the pub’s convivial possibilities. The first section looks to theorise and complicate prevailing nationalist narratives relating to the English pub. Following this, the section ‘A pub for other Englands’ offers a substantial empirical account of desi pubs in order to engender different answers to questions of race, class and the pub, through a focus on the pub’s convivial possibilities. Relying primarily on the already available theoretical and historical literatures, we empiricise our commentary through recourse to Jesudason’s guide, which we use to consider a more timely reckoning with the wider social salience but also possibility of the contemporary pub. Further distinctiveness is obtained through making avail of Amit’s on-going personal communications with their father, a figure who played a formative role in the history of the desi pub, with Glassy Junction inspiring a host of similarly named pubs from Wolverhampton to Glasgow (Jesudason, 2023). At first, this took the form of recalling conversations, of which there were many growing up, when Amit would regularly be regaled with tales from Glassy Junction’s heyday, and then through regular discussions with his father throughout the writing process for this article, which was complemented by newspaper articles (*The Times of India*, *New York Times*, *Financial Times*, *The Times* and *The Guardian*, to name a few) and academic texts where Glassy Junction is referenced. Our ultimate purpose is to constructively critique conflict-determinist claims to national and racialised conceptions of culture and space. Of course, we are not suggesting that the pub is ever a utopia, and are aware that, as in all social spaces and routines, intersectional social exclusions as figured by sexuality, gender, class and other forms of normative closure are commonplace. Such manifold absences will not be attended to in this piece, though, in other work arising from the same research project, we will not only draw out such exclusions but equally, continue to query excessively flattening claims about the pub being exclusively monosocial spaces.

A pub for England

That the pub might be invoked as uniquely indicative of authentic Englishness is scarcely surprising. The pub invokes much that remains hallowed about England's narration of self and its attendant cultural iconography: hearty, earthy and modest, all of which are stylised against the allegedly affected cosmopolitan fancies of continental taste. However, what is sufficiently distinctive about the pub's manifest status in anchoring particular invocations of national whiteness, and also proving therein a productive object of anti-racist contestation of the kind we attempt in this article, is the reconfiguration of those very invocations of nation and race as they play out in today's political theatre. Two important emphases obtain here. First, the rehabilitation of something called the 'white working-class' as the ur subject of the nation. And second, the shifting psychosocial geographies of the nation, where the putatively humdrum provincial expanses and its accompanying narrative of *decline* take on a more preeminent significance.

It is first worth attending to the rediscovered discursive prominence of working-class ascriptions, and the implications therein of how the pub, too, gets popularly figured. Under an erstwhile neoliberal moral economy, a petit-bourgeois, shopkeeper-themed figure (Evans, 2023; Hall, 2017) emerged as the primary subject of conservative common sense. Here, the doggedly entrepreneurial subject, plugging away with independent vigour, was typecast as the ideal subject of 'Little England'. Concomitantly, it was a certain yuppified aspirationalism – captured in the colloquial ethos of the Essex or Mondeo man – that seemed more at home with the uplift, 'greed is good' drive that a liberated market economics extolled (Valluvan, 2019). Accordingly, whenever the working class were explicitly invoked during this period, it was nearly always as moral homily, where working-class *culture* was routinely stigmatised as suffering from an endemic welfare dependency and anti-social nihilism (Littler, 2018).

And though a lot else also prevailed in the intervening period, it is widely acknowledged that the self-same moniker of 'working-class culture' is now heralded by a post-Brexit, UKIPified political Right, exemplified by Ford and Goodwin (2017) who influentially reference a 'left behind', 'let down', 'politically disaffected' white working-class whose 'values and identity attachments were increasingly at odds with the mainstream liberal consensus' (pp. 19–20). It is accordingly evident that the market-society gospel of the Thatcherite position has, to an admittedly contested degree, ceded ground to an incoherent but still noticeably post-neoliberal nationalist politics of English grievance (even if governing Tory cadres are still residually wedded to their formative Thatcherite principles; Davies, 2019; Meadway, 2021). And though such a reheated nationalism draws on multiple ideological strains and complementary social locations, it has scoped a particularly aggressive path for the so-called white working-class, caricatured as such a conjuring of course is, to become the fetish object of a reoriented British conservatism – a conservative politics that is much more masochistically beholden to an anti-migrant and anti-liberal alarmism than it is to a formal defence of neoliberal morality and/or the market-project as a hegemonic cause (James and Valluvan, 2020: 1242). Put colloquially, the formal accent is now on impugning the woke classes, not the working classes. Or, in more conjunctural terms, the working-class subject as exalted during

the Keynesian welfare-state era has again taken centre-stage, but now only as a proxy of nationalism, of social conservatism, of aggrieved whiteness. As Shilliam (2020) reflects, 'it has become clear that the white working class is the fundamental constituency of contemporary populist imaginaries – a constituency unfairly left behind and now deserving of redemption from the vicissitudes of globalization including competition from non-white and/or migrant labour' (p. 224). This is herein a nationalism which seeks to draw out a particular racial supremacism and exclusivity alike at the level of working-class identification, maligning 'multiculturalism', immigration and even the most benign of anti-racist causes as constituting a corrosively classed humiliation. Such processes are seen as denoting only elite conceits and middle-class lifestyle refinement, dispensed at the expense of everyday working-class values and subjectivity. In other words, the contemporary has revived a nationalism that stakes a fresh claim to working-class identification. A class that is seen as coterminous not with material or labour concerns, but becomes instead a culturalised space, a culturalised specificity that indexes the common people and their common attachments.

The pub is accordingly vested here with a newly reinforced political significance. While always having been a misappropriated signifier of honest Englishness and working-class authenticity, it is now a more laden invocation as Englishness, and its constitutive emphasis on working-class loss, have themselves become so outsized amid a reconfigured political commonsense. The pub's caché also appeals to those left-wing populists who similarly anoint themselves autochthonous tribunes of the working class, encapsulated in the outcry when Conservative London mayoral candidate Rory Stewart admitted preferring Pret to the pub (The Standard, 2019). Here, not going to the pub was situated as being out of touch with true, common-man Englishness, and a reinforcement therein of Stewart's elite status. But particularly telling is how this habituated reading of the pub as a celebrated bastion of working-class culture masks in fact a more complicated recent history and sociopolitical contingency. The pub has historically been invoked through what are in fact multiple and contradictory registers of classed propriety, or lack thereof. For instance, as a residually gentry space that is still evident in how the rustic pub acts as a much-feted marker of affluent shire life as peopled by the commuting banker and managerial classes, as noted in Newby's (1977: 343) account of the loss of rural pubs to the 'gin-and-Jag' trade or Heley's (2008) 'squirearchy'. Or, conversely, as a feral site of 'lumpen' dysfunction, where the irredeemably poor congregate and where dangerously dense hubs of social pathology are incubated. Or even as a space *against* which more decorously aspirational spheres of consumer sociability are to be cultivated, as they might have been in the interwar period, when local authorities and brewers alike built 'improved' pubs designed to edify both the drinking experience and the pub's patrons (Gutzke, 2005; Jennings, 2007). For example, The Downham Tavern (opened in 1930), built for the 27,000 residents of the London County Council's Bromley estate, and the largest pub in the United Kingdom until 1971, emphasised food and table service and offered a dancehall, cinema, beer garden and child-minders (Boak and Bailey, 2017: 62). Similarly, during the aforementioned shift towards a neoliberal moral and consumer economy, a different symbolism of leisure was fashioned as more becoming of working-class mobility, one that makes avail of budget holidays to 'the Med' and patronises the emergent wine bar and nightclub economy (Moss, 2020).

But today, as others have noted (Carter-Esdale, 2020), the pub has been reconsolidated as an unequivocally affirmative shorthand for monoethnic working-class congregation, characterised by a comfortingly homogeneous sociability beloved by the white working-class. When Nigel Farage, a stockbroker-gone-rogue champion of comely working-class charm, was routinely to be found raising a 'tankard' for the cameras, it confirmed with a certain kitsch immediacy the pub's revived centrality to the times. Even Tim Martin, founder of the ubiquitous Wetherspoons pub chain, might be seen as having benefitted from being the nation's de facto pub landlord, partially accounting for his pugnaciously disproportionate prominence as a pro-Brexit ideologue. Indeed, if taking Farage, Martin, and the more general poetics of Brexit politics seriously, the pub might be productively construed as a revealing metonym for the wider political philosophy that anchors nationalist claim-making in general. If 20th-century humanist ideals, either in their socialist or liberal guises, are commonly maligned as peddling a 'practically thin and ethically abstract altruism' (Prakash, 2015: 28), then nationalism stakes a claim to the 'thick affective ties' of community, whose putatively 'prepolitical' (Gilroy, 2000: 8) bonds cohere the necessary base for the exercise of welfarism, solidarity and even selflessness itself. The pub is therefore not simply a symbolised motif of Englishness, though it is that too. But rather, it stages the sociabilities that the nation, as nationalist commonsense, claims as indicative of what makes a society worthwhile and makes an invocation of ethico-political community even possible.

The proper contemporary salience of the pub is also better finessed once distinctive stylistic features of today's nationalism are identified, as opposed to simply ascribing it a condition of generic patriotic meaning. Namely, many have compellingly argued that today's English nationalism largely operates along a revanchist, masochistic register, where it is less about commanding a particular economic or social project or drafting a sense of belonging for its own nation-making sake but is, instead, primarily an (albeit majoritarian) 'identity politics' that seeks to both codify and thereupon monopolise a particular nationalised schema of pain and suffering. That is to say, today's nationalism largely operates amid what might be provocatively dubbed a partially quietist, partially post-political style masquerading as 'hyperpolitics' (Jäger, 2022).

The Marxist commentator Richard Seymour (2020a, 2020b) has convincingly argued that contemporary nationalist-populism does not intend to mitigate perceived suffering. Instead, it prefers to operate as a 'perpetual grievance machine' (Behr, 2021), of which Brexit/the European Union (EU) was productively prolonged as a particularly generative negational cause and immigration – particularly when Black, Brown and/or Muslim – its most foetid animating fear. This is in other words, a grievance-machine that, as opposed to orchestrating an ameliorative promise, in fact amplifies the experience of suffering, trafficking in the perverse and yet addictively narcissistic pleasure of understanding one's collectivised self, *qua* nation, as a suffering subject. Analogously, the tortured appeal of today's nationalism has been characterised as 'heroic pain' (O'Toole, 2018), where charismatic leaders (Gerbaudo, 2019) help harness the symbolic economy of asking whose experience of victimhood might be acknowledged as the only dignified and authentic one, as a political end in itself.

Herein, while it is easy to see the pub as an aggressively distorted and selectively promoted signifier of English bonhomie, its rediscovered salience must also be written

through English belonging's contemporary emphasis on victimhood and decline. This being a victimhood and narrative of decline that nationalism does not attempt to arrest but, on the contrary, seeks to amplify and copyright as the only sanctioned form of collective grievance and worthy suffering. The cultural theorist of populism, Anton Jäger (2022), has usefully dubbed this generalised grammar of contemporary politics the hyperpolitical. The hyperpolitical displaces the post-political, 'end of history' technocratic key of the Blairite and equivalent interregnum, returning through digital media communication and its commercialised logics of swarm and flow to a particularly arresting political frisson and incessance. If politics once seemed to have become secondary, it is now as if politics enjoys an exhaustive mediatic quality, creating an impression of a 'permanent Dreyfus affair' (p. 412). But, crucially, the hyperpolitical also resembles the post-political insofar as it does not intend for 'politics', as mass movements with a purposefully agonistic quality, to be actioned. Indeed, it actively eschews compromise, coalition, or mass organisations and is largely indifferent if not actively hostile to the possibility of progress or futurity. It is instead largely preoccupied by competitive contestations about having one's victimhood – the only true drive of political experience and claim-making (Davies, 2023) – publicly dignified as the only deserving pathos while all other claims to victimhood are presented as fraudulent or exogenous. The paralysing implication is that the hyperpolitical, here registered through a nationalist and nominally classed whiteness, only seeks to dignify in more and more righteous terms the nation's irreparable loss, its irreversibly fallen state.

The configuration of the pub in the contemporary political conjuncture is herein doubly oriented; it is reasserted as a conduit of distinctively working-class English belonging, but it is also concomitantly emblematic of decline and neglect. That is to say, the pub is not only English but is presented as an Englishness that is under siege, irreversibly 'left behind', as captured in 2011 by *The Mirror* bemoaning 'they have been at the heart of our communities for centuries – but now Britain's pubs are under threat . . . The local is in crisis'. What is often portrayed as being under threat is not the pub per se, but what the pub represents, which is not only the aforementioned notion of a time-worn Englishness, but, also, as the distinctively *provincial*, anti-metropolitan, town-oriented geography (Leddy-Owen, 2019) that becomes emblematic of those invocations of typically English community. Popular media narratives frequently focus on local attempts to save the under-siege, emblematically town-based provincial pub. For instance, the *Guardian's* coverage of how local residents saved the Packhorse pub in Somerset offered a romantic account of a nigh Blitz Spirit styled British resilience (what Gilroy (2004) influentially identified as the totemic period that English nationalism's 'postcolonial melancholia' harkens to) fighting off forces of change, when in reality, it was a story about a hyper-affluent community who could afford to cobble £1 million together to 'save' the pub (Morris, 2018). Such reports were a preview of the remarkably mawkish coverage that followed the 2023 demolition of the Crooked House pub in Dudley, including, again, in the *Guardian*, whose articles and accompanying podcast on this topic were the newspaper's most popular at the time of writing this essay. Of critical note regarding the reliably attention-grabbing nature of such stories is not the otherwise benign and perhaps even commendable celebration of locals resenting the closure of local hubs of community life. Instead, it is the very question of why is it the pub that frequently acts as such a salutary

stage for such tales that remains noteworthy – wherein, it is the potent twinning, through the pub, of provincially 'local community' with the plight of the nation writ large that reveals particular hallmarks of English nationalism's distinctive contemporary resonance. Building opportunistically on the residual traces of a much earlier Hogarthian 'gastronationalism' (Edwards, 2019: 629) pitting foreign spirits (gin) against indigenous beer, these arguments for the pub seem to curate a dense palimpsest of patriotic associations that tie it to a distinctly provincial and town-based architecture of leisure and communal interaction that links the golden age working-class pride of the post-war period to the precipitous present.

A deconstruction of this lament, as framed through English whiteness and its claims to working-class culture, is further aided by considering a longer history of the pub. It is worth remembering that people of colour have frequented British pubs as patrons, workers, entertainers and proprietors for centuries since the early-17th century (Bressey, 2015; Fisher, 2004; Fryer, 1984; Kaufmann, 2017) and that many other countries and cultures make similar claims for their own drinking places – German Kneipe, Japanese izakaya, Turkish or French cafes – as the English do for pubs (Kneale, 2021). Longer histories of loss rarely take note of these facts, however. Instead, they frequently return to a particular moment in the history of the pub, and one deeply conservative author, while simultaneously claiming a *new* sense of loss and grievance.

In 1912, Hilaire Belloc's essay 'On Inns' called the English to arms to protect their pubs. Belloc argued that 'Inns are the mirror and at the same time the flower of a people', so that Norman and Basque inns could only have developed in those regions; both kinds of pub were worthy of note, but 'a man that would merge one in the other and so drown both is an outlaw', Belloc suggested, 'and to be treated as such' (Belloc 1948, p. 120). The inns of South England reflected and sustained that region, then, but this was no ordinary region. For Alun Howkins (2014), this imagined geography, 'the South country', became symbolically central at the end of the 19th century, as political attention shifted from Britain's industrial cities to the rural south and east, threatened by agricultural depression and the metropolis. Belloc traced the outlines of an alien modernity which threatened to 'murder' the inn, the 'motor things and money-changers' that converted an old inn into 'an Hotel built of iron and mud, or ferro-concrete', alongside the poverty of 'the dreadful great towns of the North', where inns were left 'ramshackle and dilapidated . . . slattern', before being pulled down 'to make an open space wherein the stunted children may play' (Belloc 1948, p. 122–123). The developers' 'sham' inns reflected the transformed landscapes of the South; neither could ever be authentic.

Belloc's essay concludes with four sentences that have been much repeated in recent years, particularly through the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent pub lockdown:

> From the towns all Inns have been driven: from the villages most. No conscious efforts, no Bond Street nastiness of false conservation, will save the beloved roofs. Change your hearts or you will lose your Inns and you will deserve to have lost them. But when you have lost your Inns drown your empty selves, for you will have lost the last of England (Belloc 1948, p. 124).

These sentences, and particularly the last two, have been tweeted by accounts across the British political spectrum: anti-vaxxers, local representatives of the Campaign for Real

Ale (CAMRA), progressive activists in the hospitality sector, beleaguered publicans, *Telegraph* readers @-ing Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak. Belloc's words are particularly amenable to a quick tweet, because they make the pub a threatened national symbol. By shifting his focus from the South country to 'the last of England', Belloc suggested that while inns reflected their roots in place – because the inn synecdochically stands in for the South country, and the South country stands in for the nation as a whole – a threat to the inn is really a threat to England as a whole. And in the contemporary milieu, the local particularities of place – the dreadful great towns of the North and the peaceful South country – are subsumed in one place: the nation.

We remain naturally wary of inferring too readily about why a defiantly fin-de-siècle Belloc was enjoying a new lease of Twitter (now X) life 100 years later. But of simple instructive significance for us is how such a formally conservative dirge about the pub as nation is revived in ways receptive to newly reconfigured, distinctly contemporary nationalist narratives of decline and grievance.

In sum, the pub remains in its most ostensible sense a rather generic, nigh hammy object when subject to a critical analytic lens. But when situated within the conjunctural particularities of a post-neoliberal new right populism, the pub's availability for such a politics takes on a more precise shape – more contextually indicative of how a new nationalism establishes an appeal that is nostalgic, affective, tangible and built into the animating motifs of white and provincial working-class victimhood, and in whose defiant image a new right politics asserts its legitimacy.

A pub for other Englands

It becomes evident that laments for what the pub can or used to do succumb to a two-fold trap. One, they wrongly invoke English pubs as distinctly emblematic spaces of national culture but also as nationally celebrated working-class bastions of sociability, ignoring the multiple terms by which such classed associations were either discouraged or held up as a basis by which multiple exclusions were normalised. For instance, Camilla Schofield's (2023) careful study of complaints made to the Race Relations Board about racist exclusions from working men's clubs from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s illuminates 'struggles over space, resources, and racial power' (p. 6) in a very similar site, one defended by its members as a white space, and now nostalgically recast as an oasis among multiculturalism, for example, as 'the final resting place of the endangered, authentic cockney' (p. 3) in the BBC One documentary *Last Whites of the East End*.

Second, the lament for the pub disregards the far more salient reasons by which the pub does indeed become beleaguered, reasons that flow from shifting commercial realities as well as its attendant cultural mores. The reconfiguration of commercial ownership and property markets induces as well as responds to shifting logics in the cultures of late capitalism. In terms of drinking, this has taken the form of a steady fall in the number of pubs since the late-19th century, the increasing importance of restaurants as rival licenced spaces and changes in the kind of alcohol consumed (Foley, 2021; Moss, 2020). Perhaps the two most significant recent changes concern domestic drinking and the increasing control of urban nightlife by pub companies offering themed experiences. Since supermarkets were granted licences for off-sales in the 1960s, alcohol has increasingly been

sold for consumption at home; a greater volume of alcoholic drinks has been sold through off-licences as opposed to on-sales since 2000 (Foster and Ferguson, 2012). At the same time, urban centres have been transformed, as 'pubcos' developed themed chains of premises pitched at different lifestyles, positional goods marking social distinction (Wynne et al., 1998). The effect has been to 'displace older, historic modes of nightlife based around the community pub [which were] connected strongly to more mass forms of collective consumption in the working-class industrial city' (Hollands and Chatterton, 2003: 378), marginalising alternative or subcultural independent forms of nightlife. This is a late capitalism where privatised atomisation favouring domestic consumption and the increased emphasis on discerning, lifestyle-premised experience consumerism both mitigate against the largely make-do, cheek-by-jowl repetitiveness of local pub-going.

However, this context seems to have become less important to contemporary arguments. In *The Death of the English Pub*, Christopher Hutt (1973), an early chair of the Campaign for Real Ale, forcefully critiqued the big brewers for ruining the quality of beer, lowering its strength, reducing consumer choice, and pushing out independent brewers and popular tenants. Since the millennium, critics like Chatterton and Hollands (2003) have made comparable arguments, and the IPPR (Muir 2012) criticised brewery chains for their readiness to sell premises for conversion for housing. Unfortunately, however, though such economically situated critiques still endure, they are generally drowned out by established right-wing themes. The UK Government's apparent neglect of the pub has largely been represented in terms of heavy-handed and uncaring state intervention into private businesses, in the form of high and increasing levels of duty on alcoholic drinks, particularly beer; the 2007 smoking ban; and the pandemic lockdowns of 2020–2021. These characterisations of this threat evoke a particular kind of pub, one relying on income from drink rather than food, on smokers, and on the 'regular' patron deprived by lockdown of a 'second home'. And as we have surveyed in the previous section, almost all such interventions, whether right or left, remain insufficiently critical of the ethnonationalist assumptions integral to these ideas of loss, or have even enthusiastically embraced them. In this, they would seem to subscribe to the view identified by Jason Edwards (2019) in his analysis of Brexit and 'gastronationalism': 'We simply require leaders who know who and what the *people* are, and how best to deliver what they want' (p. 635), reneging in turn on less ethnonationally mediated conceptions of cultural loss, desire and politicisation.

To repeat, this is a two-fold but mutually reinforcing slip, where a revisionist and class-fetishising nationalism misreads the realities of the recent past and, by concomitant implication, overlooks the shifting terrain of capitalist profit concentration and consumerist individualism alike that pertain to the economic struggles of the pub. It is against this impasse that this section looks to assert an alternative lens, bringing through the cosmopolitan and/or contested histories of where and for whom did the pub manifest. It becomes apparent that a grievance-oriented nationalist nostalgia obscures awareness of other sites where the pub is indeed being revived and on terms that play to meaningful futures, futures that are tangibly prefigured in the present. And as the geographies of working-class multiculture become re-spatialised in contemporary England, often in the surrounding suburban orbit of larger cities, be that London, Birmingham or elsewhere, it also allows for an appreciation for the pub cultures that are being engineered there.

Patel's aforementioned explorations of Black Country desi pubs synthesises some of these strands, where he notes how many of the pubgoers he encountered spoke of 'decline' in the context of local industries. Yet, this did not result in nostalgic invocations of an under-siege white working-class, as Patel's powerful photographs capture a wide range of people from a variety of backgrounds 'at ease with difference' (Rogaly, 2020), reflecting the realities of working-class multicultural attachments forged by those thrown together (Massey, 2005) on the margins, in this case, the deindustrialised ruins of Smethwick. Instead of lamenting social change vis-à-vis the pub, those Patel spoke to described how the now Indian-run Fourways Inn had improved. As Patel (2023) aptly reflects, 'despite what we hear in the press about multiculturalism, one of the benefits of these mixed multicultural havens is that they are safe and welcoming, and of course, they have cheap beer and food'. What is noteworthy is that while Indian restaurants were already established features of everyday English town life, these often reinforced existing racial hierarchies, where diners were white and servers, often expected to assume servile dispositions, were first-generation migrant workers (Kalra 2000, p. 159). In direct contrast, the desi pub is where drinkers/punters who happen to be white jostle and share space with fellow desi/non-white drinkers, as one congregation.

Some might read this as simply succumbing to certain platitudes about multiracial life being a common feature of much contemporary England, intimating that such contact is in itself politically consequential. And certainly, much writing on conviviality and multiculture does indeed resort to such ultimately empty niceties, simply describing the presence of multiethnic space and social encounter as allegedly noteworthy for its own sake (e.g. Nowicka and Vertovec, 2014). More searching conceptualisation does however actively identify some distinguishing properties, properties that help better establish why certain spaces might be constructively captured as convivial and foregrounding, through its cultural configuration, a wider political significance (see Valluvan, 2016; Singh 2023; de Noronha 2019; Gilroy, 2004).

The significance of these desi pubs, when seen through this wider conviviality lens, lies in the way they upend a white English centrality but without actively staging surrogate, minoritarian ideals of communitarian membership or exclusivity. Amit's father's decision to replace the Railway Tavern with Glassy Junction, installing a tandoor-oven and adorning the seemingly English-looking pub with exaggerated Punjabi iconography – such as images of bhangra dancers, Sikh farmers, agricultural tools, and a 'five feet tall' map of Punjab (Axel, 2001: 185) – cannot be neatly reduced to Glassy Junction, or desi pubs more broadly, existing as a simple collision of 'English' and 'Punjabi/Sikh' culture. The pub was aimed at 'everyone and anyone who wanted the experience', serving an eminently mixed clientele a combination of lagers, lassis and freshly cooked food from the tandoor in the back, all of which could be purchased in pounds or rupees. The pub absorbed the already diverse clientele of the previous Railway Tavern that he much enjoyed, but Amit's father revelled in making that multicultural ethos even more symbolically visible by asserting in the Glassy Junction assorted Punjabi motifs, reflecting the majority South Asian demographics of Southall, that also established a wider attention-grabbing novelty, one which became significant for those transiting through the nearby Heathrow airport. As the *New York Times* reported in 2006, 'the Glassy Junction pub was full of visitors with American and European accents stopping to tame their taste

buds and watch some English football or cricket before getting back on the train'. In its heyday, the pub, an iconic Southall landmark (Nahar, 2016), was a family-friendly pub, open to all, where 'children would play, while their parents enjoyed food and drink in the beer garden'.

The focus here is on how dignifying claims to a particular ethnic background (i.e. the Indian/Punjabi/Sikh *in* the desi prefix) are not in themselves defensive attempts at essentialist closure in the face of racist exclusion elsewhere, though such retreat to spaces of 'safety' would in themselves be understandable. Jesudason's own attempt to define what constitutes a 'desi pub' is telling. He initially considers other entry points – patronised mostly or exclusively by British-Indians; owned by British-Indians; or a 'melting-pot' – before settling on 'a place steeped in British-Indian culture that fosters inclusion' (Jesudason, 2023: 12). This understated phrasing pithily captures the conceptual emphasis of what is otherwise known as conviviality. To repeat, conviviality is conceptually interested in how shared life becomes liberated upon the normative subject, conceived in this instance along the terms of white English nationhood, being dislodged from its centrality (Valluvan, 2016; Gilroy, 2004). But equally, that dislodging is undertaken undemonstratively, where there is not a particularly pointed attempt to fill in that displaced, vacant normativity with an alternative minoritarian equivalent around which the assumed subjectivity and symbolism of the space is to be exclusively staked. The space's inclusivity lies in its openness, not requiring the otherwise often prohibitive cultural capitals and literacies when access to space is contingent on the implied, lifestyle-based pronouncement of a particular 'political principle' (e.g. liberalism, 'anti-racism', being progressive, etc) or even a formally observed 'ethnic identity'. In this spirit, it is fitting that desi pubs have become in some English towns and cities quite ordinary features of the urban/suburban environment, where, alongside the allure of food and/or drink, they also feature as prominent spots for locals to watch Premier and Champions League broadcasts (such pubs are often distinctive for the dizzying number of screens mounted on the walls) and have even been folded into certain football fanbases' weekend routines. At The Grove, the iconic Handsworth (Birmingham) desi pub, Jesudason (2023) notes that, on local matchdays,

> A huge number of mixed grills are ordered as sharing platters to a mixed crowd of men, women, white, black and brown. It's also not tied to one football club; an equal number of Aston Villa and West Bromwich Albion fans visit before and after their games. Harmony is the watchword of the modern Grove. (p. 101)

It is this unstudied, perhaps even drab but ultimately open everydayness that more politically radical scholars of conviviality prize, as they believe it prefiguratively incubates wider possibilities of meaningfully collective politics that work beyond identity, work beyond the delimitations of nation, race and individualised, self-aware solipsism alike.

In more substantive empirical terms, it is evident that its more regular patrons do not come to the desi pub because they want to share in exoticised consumption nor as a direct assertion of ethnic identity and its distinctiveness. They come because of its locally familiar and everyday convenience. But equally, in so doing, local patrons, including assorted white and other non-Punjabi/non-desi working-class people who have not

undertaken the white flight characteristic of some of their generational peers, also experience a regularised space that is stripped of a white English centrality. As Amit's father comments about Glassy Junction, 'patrons thought they were walking into a Punjabi village' and were even able to get a '20% discount if they came in traditional Punjabi costumes', an offer at times taken up inoffensively by white punters for 'a laugh'.

Or, put differently, the absence of such an entitled ethnonational normativity is rendered politically remarkable precisely as it is habituated as unremarkable. Jesudason's original intention for *Desi Pubs* was to celebrate places 'frequented mainly by British-Asians', but he found that 'there was a certain sector of white working-class culture that also needs to be – finally – recognised and celebrated'. Capturing the ordinary and mundane nature of working-class multiculture, Jesudason (2023) reflects,

> When I first visited Smethwick in the West Midlands, I was taken aback, not only by how this was an Asian-majority town dealing with a post-industrial world, but how the white population loved their – and 'their' is crucial here – desi pubs. They lived lives far removed from gentrified areas, with many friends who were Asian, and even knew a smattering of Punjabi. Instead of running away or complaining about 'immigration' these ordinary people embraced change and discovered their lives could be enriched by it. (p. 5)

Importantly, when Jesudason (2023) proclaims 'Smethwick is my Wakanda' (p. 130) because most of the pubs are owned by British Indians, this is not nationalist yearning, but rather reflects the fact that Asians were once excluded from Smethwick's pubs, making this once unthinkable – something also true of Southall and the intense racism and racist violence that previously characterised it (Nijjar, 2021). Such conceptualisations of conviviality – which operate beyond the injunctions of integration and its underlying nationalist ethos but also the defensive ethnic essentialisms as propagated by a multiculturalism principle – also help identify a key distinction that often gets lost in more generalised celebrations of minority or non-white space. Namely, as Jesudusan intimates, desi pubs typically host a variety of backgrounds that can easily get missed when subsumed within misleadingly comprehensive racial categories. Ranging, for instance, from second- and third-generation citizens to older first-generation veterans but also, and perhaps most interestingly, the new migrant – who at times is without citizenship and/or is frequently toiling in precarious, disposable, and often informal labour markets. The fact that the Glassy Junction was particularly renowned for accepting rupees, though in part, a mischievous gimmick according to Amit's dad, makes this general feature of many desi pubs evident – where the recourse to rupees nods to its accessibility to often impoverished new and/or transient migrant workers, as well as Indian tourists. As former Glassy Junction regular and journalist Saptarshi Ray recalls to Jesudason (2023), 'the idea was you land at Heathrow, get picked up, get a pint and kebab without having to change any money' (p. 15). For Amit's father, 'it was a loss leader to make the patrons feel at home'. The rupees – not legal tender – were apparently donated to charities in the Punjab, representing something of a poetic full circle for Amit's father, the self-styled East-African born, Punjabi-come-English pub landlord.

These distinctions matter, particularly to a class-conscious reckoning with race and racism and where, as scholars of racial capitalism argue (Bhattacharyya, 2018), the citizen/

migrant distinction has become particularly decisive to the contemporary co-articulation of racism's entangling with nation-state capitalism (de Noronha, 2019). In classic multiculturalism and 'community space' type social science literatures, there prevails a recidivist assumption that desi space means all desis, or Muslim space means all Muslims, and so forth (see Brubaker, 2005 for elaboration). When in fact key diasporic stratifications determine how any such space might be characterised. The space where the landlord drinks, prays or dines, or where the boss drinks, prays or dines, is not necessarily where the renter or overexploited labourer frequents or feels comfortable, even if both might be impressionistically conceived of as belonging to the same communal background. Their access to the affordable leisure of the local desi pub is herein of indicative conjunctural relevance to any conceptualisation of urban sociability that does not simply exult diversity and minority space for its own sake. Instead, the desi pub becomes doubly interesting precisely because of its seeming ability to accommodate assorted migrant labouring classes who are otherwise subject to overdetermined anti-immigration demagoguery. This is a demagoguery that some established diasporic communities, including some 'desis' emblematic of the desi pub, have partly been able to escape, as they experience some partial if uneven lines of both economic and symbolic mobility into the folds of the British nation (Bhattacharyya et al., 2021).

Desi pubs do however themselves sit at the crossroads too, wherein two different possibilities or market orientations are presented. Two different types of desi pub are herein at stake in Jesudason's book. One which attests to the continued accessible and functionally humdrum vitality of such pubs (Kunzru, 2012: 87), and another where they get folded into a different, more bankable consumer market, as discussed earlier. The latter becomes less rooted in the core convivialities as theorised here along its key working-class exigencies but actively pursue something akin to a transient diners' market, where the desi/Punjabi symbolism becomes more knowingly curated as befitting a diversified consumer 'experience economy' (Bauman, 2007).

Jesudason's survey of desi pubs, both large and small, both iconic and makeshift, intermittently attends to this emergent tension. For instance, the Merrymaid, situated in one of Birmingham's most deprived wards, is relegated to the 'best of the rest' section:

> The decor here is unassuming but the atmosphere is warm, and the food is terrific. The mixed grills are renowned for being the best value in the country. This is the place you need to visit if you're after no-frills dining and to view what desi pubs were like before they became revamped to court families and people visiting from other areas. It's simple and it should be shared – this is ideal for large groups who want sizzling platters and plenty of beer. (Jesudason, 2023: 188)

Telling here is how Jesudason invokes the throwback, unadorned and lived-in aura of the pub, one which speaks directly to local working-class patrons in their full range but also their generally marginal, sedentary relationship to the consumerist society more broadly. But such nods to its somewhat dated feel also serve as an analytic euphemism that identifies a wider emergent shift. Desi pubs like the Merrymaid are conspicuous in *not* attempting to do what some of the other places seem poised to fashion, as a market for more discerning, purposeful consumerism opens up regarding a desi pub-cum-grill experience. Indicatively, Jesudason (2023: 11) is wary of counting increasingly popular town-centre chains selling 'Indian street food' as 'desi pubs' for exactly this reason.

Herein, it becomes important to deromanticise the desi pub *sui generis*, and instead, situate the desi pub's conviviality not within frameworks of race and ethnicity alone but also within the aforementioned webs of capitalist stratification and subjectivity itself. The desi pub is rooted in the wider conjunctural tension that afflicts all contemporary space. If our access to contemporary urban sociability is largely conditional on webs of privatised consumer transactions and the overarching market segmentations constitutive of it (Kunzru, 2012: 82), then the shift from spaces characterised by affordability and low-margins to more enterprising and bankable consumer experiences has wider significance for what we mean by conviviality. Consequently, as much as such spaces and their particular histories can be usefully understood as operating against and outside of the racist and nationalist imaginaries that might claim other spaces, it is important that research also attends to the diffused carving of cities and towns along labyrinths of consumerist privatisation. Here, the exigencies of market returns and its attendant consumer publics frequently threaten to override the more located, functionally messy provisioning that is characteristic of pubs like The Merrymaid.

Conclusion

This article sought to use the desi pub as a way to demonstrate the notable absences within the existing literature on the English pub, and to question the way in which the pub and the pint are imagined within popular debates centred on race, nation and class. The existence of pubs such as Glassy Junction illuminated by Jesudason and Patel offers a different reading of the pub that helps subvert uncritical assertions that 'it is impossible to understand Englishness without spending a lot of time in pubs'. Rather, for us, the existence of desi pubs in places like Smethwick, Southall and beyond highlight the emergence of alternative conceptualisations of the pub and its convivial possibilities. In short, one might even respond, 'which pubs are you going to; which England are you referring to?'

In other words, our centring of multiracial and often non-white led pub spaces scopes alternative realities by which white and non-white life – as it cuts across and destabilises not only racialised closures and defensiveness but also the governing distinctions of citizen and migrant, first generation and grandchild, and so on – unfold in common, entangled space. Not only do they disprove the nationalist or even just integrationist assertion that homogeneous coherence and common identification are the necessary basis for shared comforts, communicative intelligibility and ethics. But it also attests to the attritional will of commonly demonised, overexploited and overpoliced non-white communities, who forged in hostile circumstances spaces of enjoyment and invitation, remaking in constructively progressive terms the cultural web of England's interior, postcolonial space.

This is of further political salience because conviviality is also an entry into how explicitly working-class life today unfolds. Multiculture is often most thickly articulated in spaces that are constitutively working-class, by virtue of being peopled by migrants and the children and grandchildren of migrants, often living along the sprawling but outer peripheries of England's metropolitan life, who are themselves by background

working-class. It is for precisely this reason that sites of conviviality, such as the pub, act as entries into the possibilities of 21st-century working-class life itself.

Staking the conviviality of the pub is also the attempt to foreground working-class pleasure and interaction that endure outside racial and nationalist grievance frames as well as outside of the sanitised but also ultimately prohibitive consumerist webs of aspirational distinction and knowingness. But the staking of such convivialities is to also acknowledge that the desi pub is not immune to the commercial drives of the contemporary and its attendant classed subjectivities, and that the desi pub, too, must be parsed by the classed registers of what makes a pub meaningfully convivial. Particularly when, as this article has theorised, it is in the name of a patented 'working-class' experience that today's nationalist-populism invokes its exclusionary political appeal and laments.

Inevitably, it is a conviviality framework that has proven most apposite for drawing out how such spaces, of which the pub is only one indication, reveal important alternative possibilities about a contemporary Britain and its capacity for escaping a melancholic paralysis, embracing instead a pleasurable confidence about its multiethnic futures (Gilroy, 2004). In direct opposition to the claims to a provincial working-class whiteness that nationalist invocations of the pub profile, we have turned to alternatively provincial (not least, the Smethwicks and analogue spaces emblematic of desi pubs) working-class multiculture – drawing out a conceptually and conjuncturally repurposed sense of what precisely renders a space convivial but also working-class. Of course, this article's primary intention was to frame the innovative theoretical and political implications of opening cultural analysis to the phenomenon of desi pubs. It is this base, which we have empirically scoped through distinctive intergenerational authorial access as well as recourse to Jesudason's pioneering overview of such spaces, which we will develop in further descriptive detail in our future research, which will draw out the fuller lived-in context, texture and range as relevant to Britain's desi pubs and the unique, dissenting lens onto the English landscape of race, nation and class that it offers.

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Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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