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Interrogating the "economic migrant" in British political discourse: race, class, the economy and the human

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 30 years, the label "economic migrant" has become widely used in British political discourse. Yet it has not been subject to sustained scrutiny. Those that have considered how it is used have predominantly focused on its relationship to asylum. In this paper, I build on such work by examining some of the core ways the "economic migrant" is conceptualized in British political discourse. Based on an analysis of Hansard data and select British newspapers between 1983 and 2021, this article establishes three common formulations of the label. Then, drawing on work related to Man, race, class and the economy, it argues that in different ways – in part, depending on different policy contexts – these usages produce distinct class-based forms of racialization that are grounded in ideas of economic otherness. The "economic" in "economic migrant" plays a central to justifying inclusion and exclusion on classed, racialized terms.

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KEYWORDS Economic migrants; economic migration; race; racialization; Sylvia Wynter; asylum

Introduction

Over the past 30 years, it has become increasingly common to hear people speak of "economic migrants" (see Blair 2004; Bulman 2021); it is a label used across different academic disciplines (McDowell 2009; Consterdine and Hampshire 2014; Guðbjört and Loftsdóttir 2017), in media reporting and in "the executive branch of government in many jurisdictions" (Foster 2016, 229; also see Spiegel 2018).

In Britain, it has become so regularly used that BBC Bitesize, a free online study resource, includes a definition of the ostensible form of migration this label refers to. GCSE Geography students (typically 14–16-year-olds) are

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informed that "economic migration is […] a choice to move to improve the standard of living by gaining a better paid job" (BBC n.d.). This description might seem uncontentious; similar to the term "migrant" (Anderson and Blinder 2017), there is no universally agreed definition of this label, but those that do exist seem to tally with how broadcaster describes an "economic migrant" (see European Commission n.d.).

However, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) argues its use should be "discouraged for a number of reasons", including that it is "questionable" to categorize the complex drivers of migration into one single reason (2019, 61–62). Such a warning complements a strain of immigration scholarship that highlights how labels like "migrant" or "asylum seeker" are neither apolitical nor static (Zetter 2007) but help create hierarchies of movement (Crawley and Skleparis 2018).

Nevertheless, despite this awareness, "economic migrant" has yet to be clearly analysed. This means it is at once widely deployed and at the same time significantly underanalysed. Therefore, this article asks: what are the different articulations of the "economic migrant" in British political discourse and how might we understand them?

Drawing on work that conceptualizes the racialized dynamics of Man vs. the extrahuman and on migration scholarship, I argue that it relies on and reproduces varying forms of racialized economic logics. Though the term "economic migrant" can be used to refer to existing racialized groups, it is also a racializing, classed term itself that can be applied across racial categories and that gains meaning through ideas of economic progress and backwardness. In this, I recognize that how this functions is not static: the different ways it might be deployed and whether it is used to argue for exclusion or differential inclusion is shaped by the policy terrain of different governments. Ultimately, I argue it is distinct a migratory label that in shifting ways produces class-based forms of racialization that are grounded in ideas of economic otherness.

This article consists of four parts. Firstly, I analyse existing scholarship to show how states use labelling to help govern movement and how racialization and class hierarchies give such labels meaning. Yet in doing so I argue that the "economic migrant" is predominantly considered within the asylum debate, meaning that its potentially different meanings and its racialized and classed coordinates have not been sufficiently explored. Secondly, I turn to the theory that underpins my analysis, which examines the relationship between race and the economy through constructions of Man (Wynter 2003). Following this is the empirical analysis; drawing on Hansard and media data between 1983 and 2021,[1] I show how there are three dominant articulations of the term. With a particular focus on race, class and the economy, I then analyse how we might understand them, how they relate and differ from one another and how this connects to the wider policy

terrain they are situated within. From this, I argue that the "economic" in "economic migrant" plays a central to justifying inclusion and exclusion on classed, racialized terms.

Labelling and immigration: the underexplored case of the "economic migrant"

Over the past 20 years, the social, political and legal categories associated with movement have come under increased scrutiny from migration scholars. The basis of this work is that labels, which are altered and created anew over time, function as "a process of identification and a mark of identity" (Zetter 2007, 183; 185). They make people, changing "the space for possibilities of personhood" and conditioning, stabilizing or even creating "social reality" (Hacking 1986, 165). For migration theorists, this focus can draw attention to the ways that people who are labelled as "migrants" have their personhood "severely constrained" because they are "generally" made as "negative"; they are "aliens" that exist in a dichotomy with "natives" (Dahinden and Anderson 2021, 35–36; 37).

A variety of labels – "asylum seeker", "refugee", "illegal immigrant" – play a role in regulating and (de)legitimating movement and the "conditions of life post-entry" (Dahinden and Anderson 2021, 37). Often failing to correspond with or capture the complex experiences of migration, these labels continue to be deployed and create a shifting hierarchy of rights (Castles 2006, 8; Gupte and Mehta 2007; Zetter 2007, 182–183; Koser and Martin 2011; Collyer and de Haas 2012; Foster 2016, 233; Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Kunz 2020, 2147). The way they are used can be situated in and give insight into the political context in which they are deployed as they arguably reflect the "specific historical, political, and geographical" landscape they are embedded within. Interrogating them, then, can determine whose "interests such definitions serve" (Jones 2008, 762), how migrant life is "made valuable" (Martin 2020, 742; Erdal and Oeppen 2017, 983) and how states use labels to help control movement and govern lives.

Scholars have also drawn our attention to the role race and class play in giving labels meaning. Perhaps the most widely known argument is that "migrant" is not applied to everyone who moves; individuals who are wealthier and often racialized as white might be called "expats" (Koutonin 2015; de Genova 2017) while "'the immigrant' is frequently visualized as 'non-white', non-Western and low-skilled" in Europe (Guðjónsdóttir and Loftsdóttir, 2017, 792; Erel, Murji and Nahaboo 2016). This work highlights that although the co-ordinates of racialization and class-based distinctions are not steady or uniform – changing in relation to geographic or temporal shifts – they shape categories of movement in significant ways. Taken together, this scholarship makes a persuasive case for interrogating the

labels associated with migration. Yet despite this, the "economic migrant" continues to be underexplored.

Though providing a useful and necessary basis for this article, the work that does consider this label is somewhat narrowly focused on the asylum debate (Szmagalska-Follis 2011; IOM 2019, 61–62). For example, there has been an examination of the label "bogus asylum seeker" which rose in usage in Britain during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. This work tends to critically analyse the New Labour government's policies and the media coverage during this time (Sales 2002; Zimmermann 2011) and shows how the "bogus asylum seeker" and the "economic migrant" were deployed as asylum applications from the global South increased. It examines how these labels were used to suggest individuals were "abusing" the asylum system; they were represented as an economic and/or "criminal" threat to Britain and as individuals who wanted to "take something away from British citizens" (Innes 2010, 469). This was used to legitimate stricter asylum laws on the basis that "economic migrants" were economically-motivated individuals ostensibly posing as politically-motivated refugees.

This analysis provides a crucial basis for this article for two reasons: firstly, it draws attention to the ways ideas of "economic avarice" play a role in the formulation of the "economic migrant". Secondly, by considering how the label is deployed to justify restrictive policy, it encourages us to pay attention to broader policy changes that can be related to labelling.

Nevertheless, focusing predominantly on asylum risks – whether intentionally or not – privileging refugees by creating "a dichotomy which discriminates against 'migrants'" (Crawley and Skleparis 2018, 61; 60; Apostolova 2015), where there is consideration of how "asylum seekers" and "refugees" are being misrepresented or mistreated but less explicit engagement with how "migrants" may be too. That is, this work rarely considers the broader use of "economic migrant" beyond asylum nor how this might relate to processes of racialization more generally. Thus, this article seeks to analyse the "economic migrant" both in conjunction with and separate from asylum.

There is work that engages with the conceptualization of the "economic migrant" more broadly. This includes scholars who consider the possibility of recasting "economic migration" as a necessary and reparatory form of movement (Achiume 2017) and those who recognize that the label flattens the complex reasons that people might move, including the impacts of global capitalism (Apostolova 2015). Anderson's work provides critical analysis for this article as it examines different forms of value judgements contained in this label and how thinking related to it can change – moving from more "positive" to "negative" – depending on the political environment (2013, 48–70).

However, there has yet to be close, sustained examination of the label "economic migrant" specifically, meaning it has not been examined in all

its complexities. This matters because many labels have "conceptual multiplicity and malleability"; their meaning is not static or definite, it may be intentionally ambiguous (Kunz 2020, 2159). Tracing the content behind these different meanings allows us to consider the different ways "economic migrant" might be deployed to regulate movement and the changing power geometries that may impact this (Dahinden and Anderson 2021).

In addition, while we know class distinctions and processes of racialization play a role in giving meaning to different labels, the question remains if they do so with regards to the "economic migrant", and if they do, how exactly this functions. Relatedly, there has yet to be an explicit examination of how the terms "economic" and the "migrant" might work together. While there has been a general critique of exclusionary narratives based on the idea that migrants are an economic "burden" (Goodfellow 2019) and substantial discussion of how migrants are valued or devalued (Anderson 2013), what the significance of the "economic" is in this formulation has not been thoroughly explored. Thus this article considers whether thinking related to the "economic" helps give meaning to this label and if it does, how might this relate to processes of racialization and class-based distinctions.

Therefore, I am not primarily concerned with reframing the label, though this article may prove useful context for such efforts. Instead, I seek to examine different kinds of political meaning "economic migrant" has within Britain – namely if, and if so how, this term is racialized, classed and how this relates to the "economic". To do so, I look to work that considers the relationship between race, class and the economy in the context of "Man" (Wynter 2003).

"Man" vs. "the other": economy, race, class and the division of humanity

In the early pages of her panoramic essay *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom* Sylvia Wynter sets out her argument: the struggle of the new millennium (it was published in 2003) will be between securing the well-being of the "present ethnoclass […] Man" and that of the "human species itself". Central to this latter category are the poor, a group which at the global level is made up of the "refugee/economic migrants stranded outside the gates of the rich countries" (2003, 206; 261), and whose welfare risks being further neglected if we do not pursue a new conceptualization of the Human.

The forward stroke could perhaps be read as a way of implying that "refugee" and "economic migrant" are interchangeable terms, though it would be an overread to see this as Wynter's primary aim. Instead, it may be a way to highlight the commonalities between those excluded from the category of Man. While I do not dispute the importance of such connections,

I seek to examine the distinct meanings behind the label "economic migrant". Therefore, what is of interest for the purposes of this article is not whether Wynter sees "refugees" and "economic migrants" as synonymous with one another but that she mentions them at all in her consideration of the relationship between race, conceptualizations of "Man" and the economic inequality. This is arguably not a coincide; as this section will make clear, by making these connections, Wynter's work – and that which complements it – provides the theoretical space needed to analyse the different meanings behind the "economic migrant".

Charting the development of the idea of Man and its imbrication with race, Wynter examines the move from the Christian/Other construction to the political subject, Man1 (based on rational vs. irrational), in the late fifteenth to the eighteenth century (Wynter 2003, 292, 281; Gagne 2007). From the end of the eighteenth century to the present, a new dichotomy replaces this, which is of particular interest for this article. Based around a Darwinian bio-economic order related to natural selection and the rise of capitalism (Gagne 2007; for detailed overview see Thomas 2001, 112) is Man2, who is the "defined as a jobholding Breadwinner, and even more optimally, as a successful "masterer of Natural Scarcity" (Investor, or capital accumulator)". Man2 is "selected-by-Evolution" and stands in contrast with the racially inferior Other who is "dysselected-by-Evolution" and is "comprised of the jobless, the homeless, the Poor, the systemically made jobless and criminalized". The poor are economically condemned because they are unable to "master the 'ill'" of scarcity (Wynter 2003, 321). Therefore, the division between the two is based on racialized ideas of economic progress and backwardness tied to Darwinian notions of natural selection.

This construction of Man2 as the masterer of scarcity shapes how those outside of this category are treated. Man2 is taken to be representative of humanity, even though this figure represents "the Western and westernised (or conversely) global middle classes" (2003, 313). To protect "humanity", those outside of Man – who are understood as "extrahuman" – are "excluded from norms of ethical treatment" (Tilley and Shilliam 2018, 537–538). Thus, the dysselected must be managed in such a way to create and protect the "economic progress" that is essential to and imbricated with humanity. Ultimately, this division between humanity and the extrahuman is reliant on and naturalizes interwoven social, economic and racial hierarchies that are central to the mistreatment of the latter group.

Though Wynter's work pays specific attention to blackness, this racializing distinction can have a transracial property, applied across supposedly static racial boundaries to those who constitute the global poor and who are constructed as unable to master the ill of scarcity. This will be important for considering the variety of groups that "economic migrant" can be applied to and how its meaning is rooted thinking about the economy.

However, as Wynter's own analysis indicates, there are different groups within the "extrahuman", including the jobless and the poor, and their may be subgroups within these categories. These, I suggest, might gain their meaning from varying forms of racialized logics. Thus when analysing the label "economic migrant", it is essential to consider the different forms of racialized "extrahumanity" and how they relate economy. To do this, we can look to scholarship that complements Wynter's.

Firstly, there is a vein of work that considers the "undeserving poor"; people who are not economic contributors and are constructed as a race apart, even if they are "phenotypically white" and British "citizens" (Shilliam 2018). They are imagined as lazy and licentious, and it is thought these degenerative characteristics are produced by welfare which promotes an unfreedom and lack of self-regulation usually associated with the racial "other" (Shilliam 2018). This is relevant for thinking on migration because migrants' experiences do not exist separately from the rest of society (Wimmer and Schiller 2002) and existing work highlights how undeservingness was constructed in Britain under New Labour and generally applied to the "undeserving poor", including, in a specific way, to the asylum debate. In this, asylum restrictions were rooted in the idea that "bogus asylum seekers" were undeserving because they were posing as refugees (Sales 2002) and motivated by economic gain, including a desire to take from the welfare state. Drawing on Wynter's work (2003), we might argue that "bogus asylum seekers", specifically, are thought to be "dysselected by evolution"; a threat to British stability because they are inherently unable to master the ill of scarcity and thus driven pose as refugees to take what they can.

Second is the idea of victimhood. Examining humanitarianism and refugee camps, Agier (2010) suggests that in these spaces refugees are conceptualized as a "wounded, suffering or dying humanity". They become "the 'absolute victim,' who are humanity 'diminished, incomplete or unexpressed'" (2010, 32) and it is their inherent victimhood, not global inequalities, that produces their "helpless" situation. Though the "extrahuman" (Tilley and Shilliam 2018) is not necessarily present here, we might depart slightly from Agiers' analysis and see the figure of the victim as deriving meaning from an assumption that the refugee is unable to help themselves; they cannot master scarcity because of an inherent deficiency. This will prove useful later for considering how "extrahumanity" is produced through notions of victimhood that can be deployed beyond the figure of the refugee.

The final relevant formulation of the "extrahuman" is the highly exploitable migrant subject who may be incorporated into the labour market on specifically unequal terms. They are imagined as having the endless capacity to work, which is situated in ideas of racial distinctness (Goodfellow 2019; 2022); they are akin to commodities that can be transferred in and out of

the country (Tilley and Shilliam 2018). But at the same time, though "useful", they must also be kept temporary because it is feared they will undermine Western nation and civilization, including the economic stability of the capitalist nation, that is embodied in Man2. Thus, for this group, their "otherness" can be utilized for the purposes of capital accumulation while concomitantly being seen as a threat, all of which shapes how they are treated.

This is fruitful ground on which to begin analysing the different conceptualizations of the "economic migrant" because it allows us to analyse how extrahumanity might be produced in relation to the economy, race and class. In addition, given the different ways this extrahumanity might be constructed, it creates space to consider the multiplicity of meanings this label might have. I will now proceed to set out the key framings before analysing these in relation to the theory outlined above.

Shifting formulations of the "economic migrant" in British political discourse

In Spring 2018, the "Windrush scandal" garnered much attention in the UK, as well as further afield, and became a subject of significant discussion in the Houses of Parliament. "The Windrush generation are people who responded to our invitation to come to this country as British subjects, to help us rebuild our country in the years after the war", said the Conservative MP, Steve Double, during one parliamentary debate on the topic. "They are not economic migrants or asylum seekers. Theirs was the generation that helped us build the NHS" (HCDeb, 30 April 2018). There might seem to be little objectionable about this argument – in fact, it may appear progressive. By describing the "Windrush generation" as British subjects, a Conservative MP was implicitly, and perhaps unconsciously, recognizing the country's imperial past; the "outside history" that is "inside history of the English" was fleetingly acknowledged as such (Hall 1991, 49).

However, Double did not describe the "Windrush generation" in isolation, they were explicitly positioned against "economic migrants" and "asylum seekers". What exactly did he mean by this? Was he imagining "economic migrants" and "asylum seekers" as interchangeable labels? Or were "economic migrants" different from the Windrush generation in a distinct way? If so, what was the supposed basis for this: was it that they come to Britain uninvited, that they do not sustain public services, or both?

These are not questions that we can answer by comparing Double's statement to a randomly chosen reference to this label because it has multiple meanings, not all of which are explicitly negative. Arguing for relaxing the rules for international students, Liberal Democrat Baroness Smith of Newnham, for instance, distinguished between this group and "economic migrants", describing the latter "as people coming to work and taking

jobs […] That may be a good thing or it may be bad but it is very specific" (HLDeb, 25 January 2017). Here the negativity or positivity of this label was variable, not constant.

Therefore, exactly how the label "economic migrant" is used, the meaning behind it, and the different political work it might be doing is unclear. The following two sections set out to explore this puzzle. Firstly there will be a brief overview of the three common ways the label is used in political discourse. Secondly we will examine the political environment that might shape the different way these terms have been used and crucially analyse how they gain their meaning from forms of racialization and class distinctions that are structured by thinking about the "economic". [2]

Duplicitous

The "economic migrant" vs. the "asylum seeker" framing offers a useful starting point for thinking about the different meanings the former label can carry because, as the existing work suggests, it has regularly been used is in this way. Importantly, though, this formulation of the "economic migrant" falls broadly into two camps.

Firstly, as established, it is regularly used to argue that many people seeking asylum are disingenuous "economic migrants" and must be prevented from exploiting the welfare state, thus asylum rules must be further hardened to identify and/or discourage them (Sales 2002; Innes 2010; Zimmermann 2011). This was one of the main justifications for early asylum laws (for example see HCDeb, 14 November 1989) and was also used repeatedly during the 2015 "refugee crisis" (1,507 times[3] across media coverage and Hansard debates in 2015 and 337 times in 2016).

Secondly, and less well-documented but also less common, are instances when the label is used to argue against the above characterization. More likely to be deployed by left and liberal political actors, the distinction between "economic migrant" and "asylum seeker" is accepted but it is argued that the people entering the asylum system are "genuine"; they are *not* "economic migrants" and on this basis they should be admitted (see HCDeb, 28 January 1993). Therefore, though these two different usages are arguably used to advocate for somewhat different asylum laws, they share a similar logic: it is valid to describe some people as "economic migrants" and to argue or suggest they can be denied entry to Britain while "genuine asylum seekers" should be allowed into the country.

In both, the implicit or the explicitly stated motivations of "economic migrants" are paramount here; the basis of this distinction is that "economic migrant" come to take advantage of Britain. An intervention made by Conservative Peer Earl Attlee is a prime example of this: "economic migrants from outside the EU […] apply for a visa, start working in the informal sector of

the economy" and to an extent depress "the market rate for legitimate workers". Then "if they are found they might suddenly remember that they are asylum seekers" (HLDeb, 26 June 2014). The multi-stage process set out here stresses the duplicitous motivations of the individual in question. Though this draws on the "economic migrant" vs. "asylum seeker" dichotomy, this does not necessarily have to be present; the "economic migrant" carries this negative meaning on its own (see HLDeb, 14 March 1996). Whether posing as an "asylum seeker" or not, "economic migrants" are those who come to deceitfully "take" from Britain.

In addition, whereas in the two subsequent formulations nationality is rarely mentioned, in this instance it is: it is applied to a variety of nationalities and across a range of groups. The above quote refers to "economic migrants from outside the EU" but this is not the only way it is used – for example, in 2008 in two separate *Guardian* pieces "economic migrants" were described as "from the world's poorest, often conflict-ridden, regions such as Africa" (Gow 2008) and "from the eight accession states of eastern Europe, such as Poland, Hungary and Lithuania" (Gould and Wearn 2008; also see Hickman 2001; Burleigh 2015; Allen 2016). Thus, even though nationality might be mentioned, we can see that "economic migrant" it is not used exclusively in relation to one group, showing its relative malleability.

Sympathetic

Secondly, there are the sympathetic portrayals of the "economic migrant" as a compassionate character who is fleeing poverty and coming to Britain to "seek a better life" (see HLDeb 30 January 1996). This features across newspaper coverage and Hansard data and throughout the timeframe examined. Yet importantly this framing is rarely used to suggest these individuals should be admitted to Britain. This formulation of the "economic migrant" usually refers to individuals outside of the country and even if this is not the case a similar argument remains; there is the repeated assertion that it is impractical to either admit every one of these individuals or allow them to remain in the country as there is too many of them.

Therefore, there is an overlap between the sympathetic and rapacious framing; both result in arguing for a tightening of the immigration rules. The difference lies in how the "economic migrant" is constructed, here they are admirable individuals fleeing poverty but who nonetheless cannot be accommodated and must be excluded.

Contributor

Finally, in contrast to the previous frames is the construction of the "economic migrants" who are essential to the labour market and who should be

admitted to the country. This was a regular argument made in the early years – late 1990s to mid-2000s – of the New Labour government by a range of political actors. For example, *The Guardian* reported on new proposals in 2002, stating the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, confirmed a new scheme will "allow unskilled economic migrants to come legally into the UK" (Travis 2002; HCDeb 8 July 2004). At particular times, the prefix "highly skilled" was added to indicate that these were the individuals the government would permit to enter the country but it was largely used to refer to those who are "unskilled" or "low skilled" who were "wanted" for the economy. Coinciding with governmental policy announcements, *The Guardian* contained a significant number of references to the positive benefits of "economic migrants" to the economy, although there was an emphasis on the necessity of the short-term basis of their admission.

During this time, this framing was also periodically deployed by *The Sun* and more conservative politicians, including with reference to "unskilled migrants". This formulation of the label was also at times positioned against "illegal immigrants" (Sillars 2001; The Sun 2002) and contrastingly, in some instances, it was accompanied by the term "illegal" itself – in this latter case the meaning aligns with the previous duplicity framing. The pattern of this usage tends to both highlight that the idea of the "economic migrant" as a contributor is largely deployed when movement is permitted by the government and/or the public and that it can sit neatly alongside the more negative framing.

Yet it is not only in this timeframe that this conceptualization of the "economic migrant" has been used. It is has also been deployed in this way by liberals and left-wing politicians post-New Labour; such actors focus on the positive contributions "economic migrants" make and it is often used to counter arguments for exclusion (for example see HCDeb, 24 April 2002), although in contrast with the above, there is less emphasis of short-term admission.

Regardless of the different ways this label might be used in relation to the idea of economic contrbution, in this formulation, the "economic migrant" is a necessary part of the labour force, and on these grounds should be permitted to enter Britain. Who is an "economic migrant", then, is decided by the needs of the labour market and thus liable to change.

In sum, this section has shown that the "economic migrant" is conceived of in conflicting ways and that at different times, shifting articulations are used to advocate for exclusion or specific forms of admission. How exactly should we understand this? Namely, what is the relevance of the "economic" in each of these formulations and how, if at all, does this relate to race and class? In the following section, it is to these questions, and their answers, we now turn.

"Economic migrant": race, class, the economic and the human

We will begin with the formulation of the "economic migrant" that gains its meaning from ideas of duplicity. Here "economic migration" is "assumed to be voluntary" for the purposes of economic gain (Szmagalska-Follis 2011, 124) – and within this there is a judgement on motivations and the moral character of the individuals it refers to. But as Anderson (2013) has previously encouraged us to see, in British discourse this functions in slightly different ways.

The changing policy environment has played a role in how and when this label is deployed in this way and to whom it is applied to. As outlined, from the late 1980s and then under New Labour, the "economic migrant" was regularly used to legitimate stricter asylum rules (Sales 2002; Zimmermann 2011; Back et al. 2002; Schuster and Solomos 2004). This framing assumes "economic migrants" pretend to be "asylum seekers" to take advantage of Britain as a supposedly welcoming country and this is part of the widely contested (Mayblin 2016) "pull factors" thesis. This argument was also present during the 2015 and 2016 "refugee crisis" and the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union (EU). Crucial to this is the ostensible underlying motivation of the individuals in question – as Anderson argues when comparing the depiction of "economic migrants" with victims of trafficking, the former is supposedly "self-interested" and thus identifies "appropriate rational (sensible) course of action" (2013, 140) for their own gain. This also applies to the positioning against "genuine refugees" (Sukhwant and Forkert 2015), they are economically-motivated "economic migrants" pretending to be politically-motivated refugees. Thus to justify stricter asylum rules, at different times, this framing of the economically untrustworthy migrant is deployed.

Yet as discussed previously, it is also used in a similar way beyond asylum and again the supposed duplicitous economic motivations are central to giving this formulation meaning. This was evident under the Coalition and Conservative governments; although the "asylum seeker"/"economic migrant" framing did not disappear, there was increasing attention on immigration beyond asylum (this had also begun under New Labour and will be discussed in a moment). Immigration was, to an even greater extent than before, presented as a destabilizing force and further restrictive measures were introduced, such as minimum income thresholds and policies focused on limiting access to social security, including through the hostile environment (Consterdine 2022). As the nature of the restrictions indicated, "economic migrants" referred to those who were ostensibly motivated by their desire to come to take from the welfare state or illicitly enter the labour market for their own gain, all to the detriment of Britain (Innes 2010). In this instance, though, they were not necessarily framed as "bogus asylum seekers".

There is, though, arguably a class distinction within this. Although restrictions on accessing welfare were increasingly applied to a variety of immigration statuses, there was a predominant thinking that those who could not meet minimum income requirements and those who were classed as "unskilled" or "low skilled" were "economic migrants" and needed to be discouraged from coming (see Anderson 2013, 52 for discussion of the "disjuncture" between the migrant in law and in politics).

It is in this context that we might understand Double's quote; "economic migrants", along with "asylum seekers" (potentially intended to symbolise "bogus asylum seekers"), are unwanted. Though their duplicity is not explicitly stated it is arguably present in the way they are positioned against the "good migrants"; the "useful", giving and wanted "Windrush generation".[4] The "economic migrant" is unwelcome and out for what they can get.

These shifts between New Labour and the Conservative and Coalition government demonstrate that this formulation of the "economic migrant" can be deployed in slightly different ways and to different policy ends. It must, then, be understood in relation to the wider political terrain in which it is being used. Nevertheless, in both instances, it is underpinned by ideas of duplicity.

To make sense of this framing, we might understand this formulation of the "economic migrant" as a particular articulation of the undeserving poor, a group that has been racialized and reracialized throughout history as lazy, licentious and unable to contribute economically (Shilliam 2018). Though this relates to thinking on welfare which assumes state support encourages these degenerative characteristics among a "white underclass", for the "economic migrant", these qualities are ultimately depicted as an innate: they are inherently duplicit and rapacious and that is why they wish to take from the (welfare) state (Sales 2002). Unlike the "genuine refugee" or "high-skilled migrant" – who though treated with caution, contain with them the possibility of redemption, though this is conditional – there is no hope for this group because their economic untrustworthiness is a product of being "dysselected by evolution" (Wynter 2003); they are inassimilable into the context of the British capitalist economy and the welfare state because they will "take" all they can. This depiction of the "economic migrant" is achieved by stripping away the context of the capitalist economy within which people move (Apostolova 2015), they are cast as extrahuman, morally degraded deceivers and their access personhood (Hacking 1986) is severely constrained.

This can draw meaning by attaching the label "economic migrant" to a specific racial grouping. As noted previously, this formulation of "economic migrant" has been used in relation to a variety of nationalities, including those from Eastern Europe – for example, this was a focus under New Labour and during the EU referendum, alongside "non-EU economic migrants" – the African continent and perceived Muslims (Erel, Murji and

Nahaboo 2016; de Genova 2017). Exactly which groups are identified and on what grounds might depend on wider political debate, as the EU referendum and the so-called 2015 refugee crisis showed. But each carry their own, historically-anchored racializing connotations. For instance, it has been repeatedly suggested that "economic migrants" who pose as refugees are specifically young men (for example see Martin 2016). This reference to gender and age is a racializing move; it is intended to denote untrustworthiness and is reliant on colonial logics of the racialized, gendered threat men of colour supposedly pose to white women (Gray and Franck 2019). Thus, exactly which racial groups are referred can thus help to give this label salience. This can also be important to consider given the way particular groups might be specifically exposed to certain policies and how the figure of the "immigrant" is often still elided with race. Indeed, when each form of racialization is examined, it can highlight how the "economic migrant" as duplicitous can and does certainly gain meaning through existing, constructed racial categories.

Nevertheless, it is also a racialized and classed category of its own that can be transferred and applied to different groups, and this is constructed through racialized thinking rooted in inherent untrustworthiness, as outlined above. It can work with existing forms of racialization but does not need to be tied to one nationality or group; to be this form of "economic migrant" is enough to warrant exclusion. Therefore, this formulation of the label might be used in slightly different ways at different times – to advocate for varying restrictive policies – and may be applied to different groups, but that it is itself a racializing term helps it to function in these shifting ways.

The second formulation, where "economic migrant" means the sympathetic figure who is understandably moving because of poverty, bears some common ground with the first. Though it is dissimilar in that it is used in a fairly consistent way across the time-period examined, like the former, the movement involved is often seen the result of a voluntary decision: "defined by a fair degree of political agency, and motivated primarily by the desire for a better life" (Achiume 2019, 1513; Szmagalska-Follis 2011, 124). Yet in this formulation of the "economic migrant", there is not a negative judgement on the individuals' morals: accusations of duplicity are largely absent and they are instead seen as defensible and sympathetic. This is, at least in part, arguably because it is often used to refer to individuals not in Britain; their "outsiderness" allows their moral standing to be recognized.

This sympathy, then, does not amount to a recognition of their humanity, instead it is rooted in an inhumanity that is also used to justify exclusion. The specific causes of the need to move, such as the impacts of global capitalism (Achiume 2017; Apostolova 2015), are obscured and sympathy is detached and decontextualized. This erasure allows for a construction of the "other" through "'cutting off' of figures from the social and material relations which

overdetermine their existence" (Ahmed 2013, 7): this is a function of racialization, which naturalizes social inequalities and constructs them as "derived from common kinship and shared ancestry" (de Genova 2017, 1770). The reasons for the sympathetic construction of the "economic migrant" is that their movement is often assumed to be a product of poverty, a poverty that is produced internally by their home countries and separate from Britain. Similar to people in refugee camps (Agier 2010), the "economic migrant" becomes the ultimate victim, "dysselected by evolution" (Wynter 2003) both through the poverty they sprang from and their inability to improve their lot. They are the diminished or incomplete human, desperately moving around the world to seek a better life but their poverty is treated as natural and thus, to an extent, the product of an internal "uncivilised" failing.

At the same time, though, due to their supposed numbers and nature, these one-dimensional victims are like the rapacious "economic migrant" in that they are represented as threatening to overrun Britain and its economic stability if admitted. They are lower class, deriving from the "uncivilised", inherently impoverished world and could upset Britain and the coherence of the capitalist state. "Humanity", then, becomes symbolized through Man2 which is Britain and is also represented by British political actors, whose emotional response is foregrounded while their arguable connection to the capitalist context that means people have to move is obscured – all of which positions them on the moral high ground. Therefore, the "sympathetic" "economic migrant" must be denied entry to protect "humanity" (Wynter 2003).

Throughout the period examined, this logic was used by different governments to justify exclusion. This can work in tandem with the former articulation of the "economic migrant", to justify stricter policy targeted at those inside and those outside of the country.[5] Yet unlike in the previous framing, here, nationalities are far less regularly mentioned, it can be applied to a variety of groups who do not qualify for entry. Therefore, although as with before it can draw meaning from and work with forms of racialization tied to constructed racial groups, it is arguably also form of class-based racialization itself, rooted in ideas of inherent poverty, helplessness, uncivility and threat.

This highlights that even in the more "positive" framing, the "economic migrant" label is underpinned by a process of racialization that devalues human life, particularly those who might be considered lower class. In varying ways, it is racialized conceptualizations of economic threat and (un)worth that help to give the "economic migrant" meaning in political discourse. Indeed, in both formulations the need to protect the nation-state, the economy and thus a narrowly conceived, racialized "humanity" is essential.

How, then, does the contributor framing relate to this? When politicians use "economic migrant" in this way, they could be including this group in Man2, the "regular jobholding Breadwinners and Investors" (Wynter 2003,

321). Yet here, work is related to the extrahumanity of the "economic migrant" and their exclusion from "norms of ethical treatment" (Tilley and Shilliam 2018); their admission and ability to stay is dependent on the needs of the labour market.

The broader policy context matters for understanding this label. It was regularly deployed during the early years of the New Labour government when temporary "low skilled" migration was permitted – and was part of exploitative and racialized systems of immigration control (Goodfellow 2022) – as part of the government's Third Way strategy (Consterdine and Hampshire 2014). The "economic migrants" were depicted as those who were needed to fill job vacancies and who were good for economic growth and thus "citizens". At the same time "bogus asylum seekers" were stigmatized (Back et al. 2002; Schuster and Solomos 2004; Consterdine 2020) and at times, as outlined above, these "bogus" individuals were seen as "economic migrants". Thus, the two existed alongside one another and which formulation was used depended on if the groups in question were seen as economically useful and were thus admitted under the immigration rules or not. This highlights how ideas of the "economic" were central to (de)legitimating admission (Anderson 2013) and that this played a central role in giving the label "economic migrant" different meanings.

Still, admission into the country does not equate to positivity or recognition of humanity. The contributor framing is bound up with a process of capitalist accumulation (Rajaram 2018) whereby certain groups of migrants are seen to represent specific form of value as (under)paid labour that plays a crucial role in the economy. They are not necessarily guaranteed full rights upon entry and short-term visa regimes means they are often kept in a state of temporariness and precarity (Anderson 2019). It is possible to admit them on this basis because they are conceived of as racial others who are hyper-exploitable and have the capacity to work endlessly (Goodfellow 2022). The racialized economic exploitation embodied in this use of the "economic migrant" is not immediately visible because it is framed as an argument for admitting individuals, and thus assumed to be positive. Underlying this appears to be an assumption that what is good for Britain and the economy, which in this instance is Man2, is good for humanity.

Nevertheless, the ability to keep "economic migrants" temporary is also produced through racialization. Migrants are monitored because they are seen to carry the risk of being inherently incompatible with Britain, they may no longer useful to the economy and may become the rapacious "economic migrant" if they overstay their welcome or if they are no longer useful. The division between different groups of workers is relevant here; existing work shows the "skilled", "unskilled" and "low skilled" are not simply technical terms but are "bound up with social status and social relations" (Anderson 2013, 61). With regards to "economic migrants" who were contributors

under New Labour, this is generally applied to the "unskilled" and "low skilled"; though they may be admitted, they are also not masterers of scarcity, their extrahumanity makes them both hyperexploitable and a threat.

Therefore, although immigration controls impact people of different classes and statuses, albeit in slightly different ways, the formulation of the "economic migrant" that is centred on "positive" economic contributions tends to be applied to those who are considered lower status or of a lower class and who often experience the most extreme forms of mistreatment. At the same time, though rarely is it applied to individuals from wealthier, Western countries (Guðjónsdóttir and Loftsdóttir 2017, 792), it is not necessarily tied to a national or racial grouping, so can be used across a range of different people and is thus, arguably, a racialising term itself.

This helps explain why the "contributor" framing receded from government usage under the Coalition and Conservative governments when there were further restrictions on "low skilled" labour migration as part of the net migration target, which was at least partly politically-motivated and not simply decided by immediate labour market needs (see Goodfellow 2022). "Economic migrants" began to be seen as more of a threat to Britain; the duplicitous framing became the predominant focus. In fact, the contributor frame began to be less commonly used in this way when the rules focused on "migrants" became more hostile under New Labour post EU Enlargement in 2004 and when they introduced a points-based system. This highlights how the broader policy environment can shape the way this label is used and the specific meaning it carriers; the "bad asylum seeker"/"good economic migrant" of the 2000s becoming "bad asylum seeker"/"bad economic migrant" (Anderson 2013, 57).

Yet the contributor framing is still present in the liberal and left critique of restrictive immigration policy, namely through the idea that "economic migrants" should be admitted because they are necessary for the economy. The above analysis should show that even if temporariness is not highlighted, arguments for admitting "economic migrants" based on their economic usefulness ultimately reinforces economically-grounded, classed and racialized framing.

Conclusions

I have argued that the label "economic migrant" is deployed in different ways and in the context of changing policy environments to argue for admission of migrants as well as exclusion. Structuring each of these articulations is a racialized, classed understanding of the "economic migrant" that is determined by notions of the "economic". Thus, bringing together "economic" and "migrant" buttresses capitalist logics of extraction and expulsion, sieving out the "useful" from the "useless". The "economic" in this, then, is key: examining

the "economic migrant" draws attention to the way the economy, class and race are imbricated with one another and used to justify different restrictive immigration rules.

Therefore, this article warns against using the label "economic migrant". What is at stake however is not simply a question of stigmatizing language. Such labelling is part of a broader political, cultural and economic architecture that vulnerabilizes, exploits and excludes. Denaturalising the labelling related to this is the start, not the end point of understanding and challenging regimes of exclusion and exploitation.

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Notes

1. 1983 is the earliest recorded use of the label "economic migrant" in Hansard; in newspapers consulted, it was 1988 in *The Guardian*. *The Daily Mail*, *The Sun* and *The Guardian* were analysed 1983–2021, however analysis of *The Sun* began in 1999 because online databases do not exist prior to this. Newspapers were chosen based on circulation figures and to capture varied political leanings. Multiple sources were consulted because the effects of political discourse are cumulative (Fairclough 2013, 45). Data collection consisted of a three-step process. First: references to "economic migrants" were collected. Second: a close reading of each reference was conducted to downsize the data based on relevance. Third: the data were processed to establish dominant categories.
2. In data analysed it had other uses that were less regular. It was also used beyond the British context.
3. This is the number of articles and number of debates it was used in, not the total number of uses in each.
4. This is achieved through nostalgic reimagining, erasing the negative ways the Windrush generation were treated when they arrived (Taylor 2020).
5. Though the sympathy-focused formulation tends to be applied to those outside the country, both this and the duplicitous framing can be applied to groups within Britain.

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