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Gender Equality+ Under Threat*

## RESEARCH

### **The intersectional politics of bullshit**

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The 'politics of bullshit' is the practice of rhetoric that communicates falsehoods, with little regard for the truth, and Hopkin and Rosamond (2017: 2) have argued that 'the rise of bullshit (and thus of austerity policies) is rooted in the broader hollowing out of Western democratic politics'. This article argues that seeking to understand bullshit without examining how it interacts with race and gender undermines this emerging research agenda, and weakens its ability to explain bullshit. It examines the role of bullshit in the Brexit campaign and highlights the insights that an intersectional analysis can bring.

**Key words** bullshit • Brexit • intersectionality • crisis • gender • race

#### **Key messages**

- The Brexit campaigns relied on gendered and racialized ideas.
- Addressing the crisis of post-truth politics requires understanding the role played by race and gender.
- Intersectionality helps to explain why some politicians can bullshit successfully.

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#### **Introduction**

How are we to understand the politics of our current moment? One response to this question has argued that we should conceptualise the contemporary moment as defined by post-truth politics, that is, by a political debate that has little regard for facts and evidence. Such a politics, described by some as 'the politics of bullshit', is related to, but distinct from, populism. While populist actors may very well use bullshit or post-truth tactics, it is not an approach exclusive to populists. While the extent to which bullshit is the defining factor of contemporary politics can be debated, it is clear that it has played a crucial role in the development and interpretation of recent crises. Understanding bullshit is, then, a key task in understanding these crises and our

current moment. While the specifics may vary, all politics is shaped by intersectional axes of privilege and discrimination. This article argues that seeking to understand bullshit without seeking to understand how it interacts with and is influenced by race and gender undermines this emerging research agenda, and weakens its ability to fully understand the role that bullshit is playing. This article takes the form of a case study, examining the role of bullshit in the referendum campaign on the question of European Union (EU) membership in the UK in 2016, referred to from here onwards as 'Brexit'. In doing so, it examines the intersectional politics of both the bullshitters themselves and the content of bullshit. Both are necessary to highlight how connected bullshit is with existing power dynamics within politics and society. However, it also points to the potential for engaging with a more intersectional analysis of bullshit in other contexts, both within Europe and beyond.

The structure of this article is as follows. I begin by introducing the concept of bullshit and the emerging literature around its role in contemporary politics. Next, I explore how the politics of bullshit can be understood through a feminist, and an intersectional, analysis. I then move to the case study of the article, the Brexit referendum campaign. I analyse the referendum campaign from three angles. First, I look at the role of specific characters in the referendum, focusing on two examples of 'bullshitters'. Second, I examine the content of the bullshit rhetoric of the referendum, focusing on the racist nature of several campaign claims in particular. Finally, I explore some of the consequences of the role that bullshit played in that referendum, and I highlight how these consequences are deeply gendered and racialised. The article ends with a conclusion where I restate the need for the emerging literature on bullshit to take account of existing structures of power within politics, and how these influence the politics of bullshit at various moments and levels.

## **An intersectional approach to the politics of bullshit**

In their article 'Post-truth politics, bullshit and bad ideas: "deficit fetishism" in the UK', Hopkin and Rosamond (2017) explore how rhetoric that seems disconnected from fact-based analysis and debate has come to dominate economic policy discussions in the UK. They argue that the rise of bullshit and post-truth political discourse is a result of the hollowing out of politics, in particular, through the decline of political parties. As Hopkin and Rosamond point out, the use of post-truth rhetoric, and of bullshit itself, is not new; indeed, it was already the subject of a short, but influential, study by Frankfurt (2005). What Hopkin and Rosamond (2017: 4) argue, however, is that 'bullshit as a mode of political expression has become a defining characteristic of recent politics in advanced democracies'. If such a claim is true, and this article will add additional support to it, then it is essential to understand this politics of bullshit through the lens of intersectionality, that is, with due regard to the role that gender, race, politics and other structures of privilege and difference play in our contemporary politics.

In a political context that reflects the declining power of political parties, and the increased individualisation of campaigning and political communication, Hopkin and Rosamond argue that bullshit has become a key feature of advanced democracies. The politics of bullshit is embedded within the power of various 'bad ideas' (Matthijs and Blyth, 2016; Schmidt, 2016; Hopkin and Rosamond, 2017). Beginning with an appreciation of the role that political speech and claims have in contemporary

politics, this line of analysis allows for the exploration of how bullshit may shape current political conflict and crises. Frankfurt's concept of bullshit has been usefully applied in other examinations of contemporary rhetoric and politics, for example, in looking at the role that bullshit plays in discourses around technology and education (Selwyn, 2016) or the power of conspiracy theories (Pennycook et al, 2015). For Hopkin and Rosamond (2017), bullshit as a concept is useful in disentangling this type of rhetoric from the wider phenomenon of populism. Indeed, they argue that bullshit reflects 'the diminishing importance of anchoring political utterances in relation to verifiable facts' (Hopkin and Rosamond, 2017: 2). In the course of this article, I will offer a further exploration of how bullshit is connected to existing political structures of power, as well as examine how it may be perpetuating or extending these same structures. This requires an appreciation of the intersectional nature of language and authority.

### **A feminist approach to the politics of bullshit**

Hopkin and Rosamond (2017: 2) derive their definition of bullshit from Frankfurt, succinctly characterising it as 'deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, which is indifferent to facts'. This indifference is a key aspect of bullshit, differentiating it from the outright lies that have their own long history in political rhetoric. Liars, in contrast with 'bullshitters', are deeply concerned with the truth. Their rhetoric, while disregarding the truth, is constructed in opposition to it (Frankfurt, 2005). Bullshit is often made up of lies, in the sense of being empirically false. However, this is not the defining feature, and, indeed, it is not a key concern of those uttering the bullshit. While some of the examples used throughout this article may seem to be obviously lies, it is not this aspect that is important for the analysis here. The overlap between lies and bullshit is an inevitable consequence of the nature of bullshit, and while it is also important to examine the role that lying itself plays in politics, that is not the purpose of this article. This distinction is important to appreciate when developing a more feminist account of bullshit. To identify and even critique bullshit is not to bemoan a rejection of some objective 'truth', or even a political context that reified such objectiveness. Bullshit is not an exercise in the development of a more pluralist public sphere; rather, it is simply a new form of privileged rhetoric and communication, and as this article explores, it both relies upon and perpetuates the discrimination and exclusion that previous feminist critiques argued against (Beneria, 1999; Chinkin, 1999).

Gender plays a role in constructing our shared language, and gender itself is simultaneously constructed through language (Fraser, 1989; Butler, 2011). The establishment and enforcement of gender categories, and the hierarchy between them, are clearly discursive practices (Clavero and Galligan, 2009; Pearse and Connell, 2015). Language forms part of the everyday expression of gender ideologies, whether through reinforcing a binary understanding of gender, or by denigrating concepts, actions and norms that are associated with the feminine (Lazar, 2007a, 2007b). Under this understanding of gender, gender is both something that people *do* and something that people *experience*. For example, a person running for election will perform their gender in their campaign, while the general response to them will be shaped by the understandings of gender held by the public (Kahn, 1992; Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993). Gender is present both in the performance of gender by

individuals and in the social understandings of gender that are discursively created and communicated. Clearly, then, it is possible to explore whether gender is playing a role in the deployment and reception of bullshit rhetoric. This is not to make a claim that men are more inclined to bullshit, or inherently more adept at its deployment. Instead, it is to explore whether the social understanding of gender can influence the success, or not, of bullshit.

Seen this way, gender is therefore a set of social relations and interactions. As such, it is clearly intertwined with power dynamics. Gender structures the social world and creates parameters for permitted actions, including speech acts, as well as shaping expectations and evaluations. The norms, qualities and behaviours associated with gender feed into politics at every level (Pearse and Connell, 2015). These norms both implicitly and explicitly structure political contestation, policy frameworks and wider philosophical ideas. Within political science, this approach to gender has allowed for the development of a nuanced understanding of political institutions such as parliaments and electoral campaigns, allowing feminist political scientists to uncover the gendered dimensions of a wide range of political questions (Mackay and Meier, 2003; Childs, 2004; Celis et al, 2008; Chappell and Waylen, 2013; Haastrup and Kenny, 2016). Interestingly, this work demonstrates how even when some women succeed in such gendered institutions, overwhelming barriers remain and gendered assumptions remain powerful. This suggests that even though some individual women may also be identified as bullshitters, this would not undermine the gendered nature of the practice itself.

A performative view of gender (Butler, 1997, 2002) captures how gender shapes both the actions and choices of individual agents, and the wider structure of society in which we all interact. Gender is something that individuals do: they perform their gender in how they behave and dress, but also in their desires, fears and emotions. However, gender is not just this individual act: gender exists in the wider structure as well, as norms and rules and expectations. Performativity captures the interaction between the individual and the wider social understanding of gender. Neither is prior: our performance of gender is influenced by how society constructs gender, but these performances also feed into how society understands gender. Put another way, an examination of an act of bullshit rhetoric should consider how such an act is entwined with the act of performing gender, and is received in a context with a pre-existing understanding of gender. This understanding of gender captures the power dynamics of the gender order without erasing the agency of individuals, or ignoring the capacity of gender to act as a site of resistance.

## **Towards an intersectional understanding of bullshit**

An intersectional understanding of gender requires moving beyond a binary understanding of gender (as male versus female, man versus woman, etc) and appreciating the complexity of gender, as well as viewing gender norms and gender knowledge as situational and context specific. Intersectionality as a theoretical approach does not seek to create a hierarchy between types of experience, or types of oppression, but instead brings a more comprehensive understanding of how contextual gender is. In this way, it allows for a much more nuanced and holistic engagement with questions of power and gender (Hancock, 2007; MacKinnon, 2013).

Intersectionality as an approach was developed by critical race scholars in the US, and emphasised the importance of centring the experience of black women (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins and Bilge, 2016). While intersectional scholarship has now been applied in various fields, for this article, I take up the impetus for paying attention to defaults within power structures and discourses (MacKinnon, 2013). This means paying attention to what, and who, is being presented as normal, or what is being presented as universal. For this article, it implies identifying who and what is normalised and defined as the default within the politics of bullshit. Beyond simply seeing this default as male, or masculine, intersectionality allows for a more nuanced analysis of norms on the basis of race, ethnicity, citizenship status, class, age and other categories. This will mean, for example, unpacking experience or desires presented as universal in terms of race, class, nationality or citizenship, as well as gender. In particular, this means that arguing that bullshit is gendered does not mean that I am arguing that bullshit is an inherently male trait, or that men are somehow more likely to disregard truth and facts. The argument being made concerns the different ways that bullshit is received, and how the success of bullshit is connected to the shared social assumptions about authority and competence, which are deeply infused with assumptions about gender and race.

An intersectional account of bullshit will involve not only an understanding of the role that gender plays in the deployment and reception of bullshit, but also an appreciation of how bullshit is operating within a broader political culture that is built on racist and classist assumptions. This makes it possible to understand bullshit in ways that gender-blind analyses miss, and also opens up space for a debate on the role of bullshit in our current moment that is more fully cognisant of the underpinning social dynamics. In the particular case of the Brexit referendum, the wider context of the campaign was dominated by tropes of white victimhood (Emejulu, 2016). Such tropes were deployed in the interest of mobilising and constructing a political constituency of the ‘working class’ (with the modifier of ‘white’ often unsaid but inevitably present). This demonstrates the complicated nature of an intersectional understanding of such rhetoric: while gender, class and race are always present, they are expressed in various ways, and I explore these connections in more detail later.

In responding to this challenge, this article structures its analysis around three approaches. It begins by looking at the ‘characters’ – at the bullshitters themselves. This section explores the role that the various privileges of the actors play in the deployment and reception of bullshit. The second approach looks at the ‘content’ of the bullshit. This enables an examination of the connection between specific expressions of bullshit and the wider political context, in particular, around long-standing and pre-existing social understandings of gender, race and class. The final approach looks at the ‘consequences’ of bullshit within the case of the Brexit referendum. This final approach is particularly important in developing an intersectional approach as it highlights how existing power structures shape the impact of bullshit. It additionally offers a focus on the experiences of vulnerable groups within society, where the earlier sections focus on elite actors.

### **Bullshit in Brexit: an intersectional analysis**

Both during the referendum campaign and in the commentary afterwards, many observers writing on the vote that decided the future of the UK’s relationship with

the EU noted the role of falsehoods, exaggerations or even outright lies in the campaign discourse (Suiter, 2016; Hozic and True, 2017; Rose, 2017; Virdee and McGeever, 2017). This account, which identifies particular aspects of the campaign's rhetoric as a key example of the rise of 'post-truth politics', argues that Brexit, and the surrounding campaign discourse, marked a new departure for post-truth politics (Ball, 2017). These accounts say that it signified a substantial advancement in the impact that lies played in the shaping of politics. Using the conceptual lens of bullshit to examine this rhetoric allows for an appreciation of the specific dynamics at play in such claims, beyond simply categorising them as false. In selecting the examples for the argument that follows, I began with a selection of two key actors and then selected key examples of bullshit connected to the referendum campaigns. This does not mean that the individuals selected were unique in relying on the bullshit claims discussed later; indeed, other key actors could also be identified who engaged with similar claims. However, the point is not whether or not Osborne or Johnson are the worst offenders, or that the particular claims discussed later are the only or most important examples of bullshit in the Brexit campaign. Instead, the aim is to select key and emblematic bullshitters and bullshit claims, and then to make the argument that subjecting both to an intersectional analysis reveals additional and crucial dynamics at work in their success and impact.

While many of the key examples cited in this account come from the side arguing that the UK should leave the EU, closer analysis indicates that actors on both sides showed a relaxed attitude towards truth and fact. Instead, and certainly not uniquely, the campaign was a contest of competing visions, and competing narratives about both the past and the future of the UK and, to a lesser extent, the EU (Watson, 2018). The contest did not turn on the accuracy of these narratives and visions, as demonstrated by the lack of impact that disproving or 'debunking' several such claims had on voters' intentions. Rather, I argue, the influence of these narratives was dependent on their position within the broader political system that has been shaped by gender, race and class. In claiming that the British people had 'had enough of experts' (Clarke and Newman, 2017), campaigners for the Leave side had, perhaps unwittingly, identified the shift towards post-truth politics. That many predictions have been shown to be so false, both during and in the aftermath of the referendum – for example, the Leave side's account of the process of exit, or the Remain side's warnings about the immediate and dramatic economic consequences – does not seem to have impacted on the authority, or indeed careers, of many of the individuals who, loudly and repeatedly, made such claims.

## **Brexit campaign characters**

In order to examine the role that particular personalities, and their particular positions within social hierarchies, played in the politics of bullshit that has often been associated with the Brexit referendum (Ball, 2017; Rose, 2017), I have chosen to examine two prominent bullshitters involved in the Brexit referendum. I have chosen one from each side of the question, a 'Leaver' and a 'Remainer'. This is not in the interest of presenting an argument that bullshit was equally prevalent on both sides, it most likely was not. However, it was certainly not the exclusive preserve of either side, and so an analysis of an actor from each side shows that the power of bullshit is not limited to either Eurosceptics or Europhiles. There are other factors, removed

from the actual question of the referendum, that enable and empower bullshit as a political tactic. This section is not necessarily about analysing the truth or otherwise of the statements made during the referendum campaign. Rather, the relationship of bullshitters and bullshit with social structures of power is the focus. As such, this section will place the analysis of the claims within an intersectional framework. The structures that are analysed in this pursuit – race, class and gender – are, indeed, real, in that they shape individuals’ lives, experiences and opportunities. However, they are also social constructs that are often themselves premised on assumptions that often bear no relation to the truth. This is an additional reason for bringing the debate over the politics of bullshit into conversation with an intersectional analysis of politics.

I will first examine the bullshit of Boris Johnson, a prominent Leave campaigner, who was appointed as Foreign Secretary in the aftermath of the referendum. Johnson was previously the Mayor of London as well as a Member of Parliament, and he served as a leading campaigner for the Leave side, appearing at major rallies and representing the position in major debates. Second, I will explore the bullshit of George Osborne, a prominent Remain campaigner. At the time of the referendum campaign, Osborne was the Chancellor of the Exchequer. He is now editor of the *Evening Standard* newspaper, a fellow at the McCain institution, a professor at the University of Manchester, an advisor to the investment management firm Blackrock and a regular feature on the public-speaking circuit. During the campaign, he appeared at many major Remain events, and focused his contribution on a prediction of economic crisis should the UK vote to leave. The similarities between the two men are striking. Indeed, apart from their difference on the referendum question itself, they share a remarkable amount. Both are long-standing members of the Conservative Party, both received education at elite schools and universities, and both, to somewhat varying degrees, fit the stereotypical image of a successful politician. Put quite bluntly, in their gender, their race and their class position, both men experience a comparatively easier time in politics (Kahn, 1992; Piston et al, 2018), in particular, in how voters view their rhetoric and their authority.

Boris Johnson was one of the Leave campaigners who supported the claim that leaving the EU would enable £350 million a week to be spent on the National Health Service (NHS), rather than sent to the EU (Rickard, 2016). Johnson appeared in a photo opportunity with a campaign bus (which has now become infamous) that had the claim painted on the side. He performed an act of burning a fake cheque to represent the money to the EU (Ball, 2017). This claim, which was combined with broader Leave campaign rhetoric that presented migration as a key threat to the NHS (Rickard, 2016), found great traction with the voting public despite being disputed by several key figures, including the Chief Executive of NHS England (Gulland, 2016). Johnson, and others, did not engage in these debates directly, but simply continued to campaign using the slogans. This highlights the bullshit nature of this campaign strategy. Its success highlights how powerful such bullshit can be, supporting Hopkin and Rosamond’s (2017) claim that bullshit presents a key threat to democratic politics. Part of the success of the claim may lie in the response strategy of the Remain campaign, which was primarily focused on disputing the specific amount that EU membership was preventing from being spent on the NHS, or on the extent to which migrants were ‘straining’ the health service, rather than disputing the underlying assumptions. However, this only highlights just how dangerous bullshit can be, and connects back to a key factor of bullshit identified by Rosamond and Hopkin and

others exploring post-truth politics: it is often not easily disputed, regardless of its falsity (Blyth and Matthijs, 2017; Hopkin and Rosamond, 2017). The NHS claim was successful then not because it was true or false, but because those using it did not care which it was. Indeed, key actors in the Leave campaign subsequently admitted that the number was probably inaccurate (Ball, 2017).

The lack of a factual basis failed to prevent this claim from being repeated throughout the campaign, and has not led to any repercussions for Johnson and others who did the repeating. Indeed, in a YouGov/*Sunday Times* poll taken towards the very end of the referendum campaign, a plurality of respondents identified Johnson as the politician that they believed would do the best job in negotiating a Brexit deal (WhatUKThinks, 2016). Perhaps the preceding examples are unsurprising for those familiar with Johnson's history as a politician and journalist. Indeed, this disregard for the truth may be the defining feature of his career (Cassam, 2018). While Johnson was removed from a journalistic position as a result of his lying – or, we may now say, his bullshit – this history did not impact his credibility with voters, and has not seemed to harm his political career as he has achieved various high offices. What is interesting, then, is the authority that he maintains even in spite (or perhaps even because of) this history. It is this lack of consequence that particularly highlights the need for an intersectional analysis of the actors involved in bullshit. The combined material and symbolic privileges of someone like Johnson enable bullshit because the incentives to try to tell the truth, such as fear of seeming ignorant or incompetent, do not apply to someone who is perceived as knowledgeable, competent and authoritative because of their race, class and gender.

One of George Osborne's key interventions in the referendum debate was to claim that an 'emergency budget' would be needed to restore stability after the vote in the case of a leave result. Viewed as both a threat and prediction, this claim continued Osborne's approach as Chancellor, where he oversaw the implementation of a broad programme of austerity (Clarke and Newman, 2012; Blyth, 2013). Osborne's tenure as Chancellor involved the reification of a concern with eradicating the deficit (a focus that has led some commentators to talk about 'deficit fetishism' [Wren-Lewis, 2016]). In pushing this narrative, and policy, of austerity, Osborne relied on a consistent appeal to authority as a certain type of actor – one that is rational, expert and somehow above politics (Watson, 2017). This positioning clearly played a role in enabling his promotion of an economic programme widely criticised by groups such as anti-poverty campaigners, feminist groups and even, eventually, International Monetary Fund (IMF) economists (Blanchard and Leigh, 2014; Brancaccio and Saraceno, 2017). Crucially, this is a distinctly gendered position, to the extent that his policy programme, and his personal embodiment of it, has been described as 'machonomics' (Watson, 2017). Watson argues that Osborne performs a particular type of policymaker who embodies rational expertise, and that this performance is inherently masculine. Indeed, the entire ideological project of austerity relies on gendered assumptions about the economy, in particular, around the expectation that women can step in to replace state services that are cut as part of that project (O'Dwyer, 2018).

The similarities shared by Osborne and Johnson can help to explain their respective successes as bullshitters. First, both share a background of privilege that enabled their rise to positions of power. Moreover, this privilege, while undeniably economic, was also deeply gendered and racialised. Both attended private schools that do not

admit women, both were members of private clubs at university that are similarly male-only and both have studied and worked in institutions that are historically, and even currently, overwhelmingly or exclusively white (Younge, 2018). These collections of opportunities culminate in their respective positions of privilege that have enabled them to engage in bullshit. An illustrative counter-example can be seen by looking at the treatment of Diane Abbott. Abbott is the first black woman MP in the UK, and was involved in the referendum campaign on the Remain side. In spite of having a similarly elite educational background to Johnson and Osborne (having attended Cambridge), Abbott's time as an MP has been marked by significant racist and sexist abuse in the media, online and even in Parliament (Cole, 2017; Gabriel, 2017). When Abbott made a statement that was proven to be false in an interview discussion about police staffing numbers, it was described as a 'car crash' interview<sup>1</sup> and damaged her credibility and authority. It is difficult to imagine her engaging in bullshit to anywhere like the same extent as Osborne or Johnson and suffering such limited consequences. It is because of their respective privilege that such actors have the ability to speak without regard to the truthfulness or accuracy of their statements, which is an essential prerequisite to being able to engage in bullshit.

Additionally, the false claims repeated by Johnson, even though they were identified as false during the campaign itself, seem to have only had a positive effect for the Leave side (Rose, 2017). It is this lack of any negative consequence that makes the use of such bullshit claims so worrying in contemporary politics. While politicians have surely been lying for quite some time, there is something different about statements that have no concern for the truth, as identified by the emerging bullshit literature. Moreover, while politicians have perhaps always had little regard for the truth, it seems that they face diminishing consequences for such behaviour. However, while relation to the truth seems unimportant, it is important to appreciate that both the speaker and the content of the claim are significant in avoiding any negative repercussions.

While they were on different sides of the campaign and there are some clear differences in how they utilised bullshit, such differences could potentially form the basis of fruitful future work in increasing the nuance and precision of bullshit as a concept. For example, it may be that Johnson's style of rhetoric and bullshit is more 'emotive', while Osborne's is more 'rational', which would open up additional space to explore the gendered dynamics at play.<sup>2</sup> However, in this case, the differences perhaps only highlight further the importance of their privilege in enabling bullshit in both contexts. As well as these historical facts of privilege, studies of voter perceptions have highlighted that both race and gender play a significant role in shaping how voters evaluate the authenticity and the authority of politicians. For example, a recent study of the impact of race on voter perceptions in the US showed that white male candidates who spoke in vague generalities caused voters to 'fill in the blanks' by projecting their own policy positions onto the candidate, and therefore increasing their likelihood to vote for them. Conversely, black male candidates who delivered vague comments were punished by their voters for this behaviour (Piston et al, 2018). Additionally, there are studies which show that voters tend to stereotype candidates based on their gender, bringing gendered assumptions about competence and authority into decisions about who to vote for (Kahn, 1992; Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993).

While the research just discussed often points to the unfairness of such perceptions for candidates who do not fit the expected mode – either white, or male, or both – it

is also worth noting that these results suggest a premium connected with such identities as well. This is the additional privilege that Osborne and Johnson benefit from – along with the networks and opportunities that would not have been available to a black woman. Such inequalities are not new, as highlighted by the various empirical studies mentioned earlier. However, within the context of the politics of bullshit in advanced democracies, they become perhaps more dangerous. At the very least, they are a crucial factor in explaining the success of some politicians in engaging in the politics of bullshit. In the particular context of Brexit, the male-dominated, and overwhelmingly white, nature of the campaign indicated this necessity even further (Guerrina and Murphy, 2016). Such questions of representation have profound implications for questions of democracy and public debate. They also interact significantly with the content of the debate itself – the overwhelming dominance of a particular debate by a particular group will serve to shape the content of that debate, and it is that content that I explore in the following section.

### **Brexit campaign content**

In developing an intersectional understanding of bullshit, it is also important to explore the content of bullshit. It is clear that, in particular, the central bullshit claims of the campaign were deeply racialised. The claims of the Leave campaign that conjured up the spectre of migrants straining the NHS or other services, and those referring to a broader economic and social crisis that conjured up the image of a victimised white working class, rely on pre-existing racist tropes within public discourse. In this section, I explore the connection between these campaign strategies and bullshit claims, as well as aspects of the racial politics of the UK, in order to highlight further how bullshit is not produced in a vacuum, but is embedded within pre-existing power dynamics.

The claim that Brexit would lead to a significant increase in funding to the NHS is embedded within a wider discourse about the British health system. Both before and during the Brexit referendum, the spectre of ‘foreigners’ exploiting the NHS system of free-at-the-point-of-use health care was a common trope, embraced by both the tabloid media and several politicians (Rickard, 2016). This trope connects to a wider racialised rhetoric about ‘benefit tourism’ – an early example of bullshit as it plays on a fear of large numbers of migrants travelling to the UK in the interest of accessing generous welfare systems despite substantial empirical work showing little evidence to support such fears (Castronova et al, 2001). Therefore, the regularly repeated claim on the bus that leaving the EU would serve to bring money back to the NHS is also deeply connected to this trope of migrants – specifically, in this case, European migrants – taking advantage of the NHS through the free movement of people enabled by EU membership. That such a trope is embedded in racist stereotypes about migrants is key to its success as a rhetorical device.

As Emejulu (2016) has argued, the Brexit referendum involved the construction of a particular understanding of Britishness, or, more accurately, Englishness. This involved the construction of a particular type of victimhood around the working class. The modifier of ‘white’ is implicit but essential here. This construction of white victimhood was carried out ‘in order to make particular kinds of claims to victimhood which would highlight economic inequality without challenging neoliberalism’ (Emejulu, 2016). Instead of addressing the austerity politics discussed earlier directly, migrants and people of colour were cast as the villain, and Brexit as

the solution. This enabled the successful Leave campaign to frame itself as a vote by the working class against the elites. In this way, it is a campaign strategy arguing for isolationism. While this may seem contradictory with another campaign strategy, that of reinvigorating ideas of empire, or Global Britain, these contradictions did not hamper the campaign (Virdee and McGeever, 2017).

The economic arguments of both sides can also be explored in this way. Both rely on a conceptualisation of crisis that defines ‘normal’ only with regard to a lack of suffering for certain groups, accepting, often implicitly, that for vulnerable groups and minorities to suffer does not count as a ‘crisis’ (Strolovitch, 2013). This can be seen in Osborne’s rhetoric, which made the argument for austerity based on the supposed threat that the deficit created for certain groups in society, and that relied on gendered assumptions about the economy in order to make the policy of austerity both legitimate and coherent (O’Dwyer, 2018). In doing so, such claims also shaped the debate in the aftermath of the referendum, with some groups’ experiences and concerns significantly sidelined. I explore this sidelining in the following section.

### **Brexit campaign consequences**

In the aftermath of Brexit, there was a rise in racist violence in the UK (Gayle, 2018). The connection between this and the racist construction of the campaign discussed earlier has been highlighted (Burnett, 2017), demonstrating that the very real consequences of the politics of bullshit are not universally experienced. Further, there is a clear threat that the act of leaving the EU will have significant consequences for gender equality (Guerrina and Masselot, 2018). These consequences follow a pattern of austerity politics (and, indeed, a pattern that goes back much further) of the burden of such politics falling disproportionately on women, and on women of colour in particular (Karamessini and Rubery, 2013; Strolovitch, 2013; Bassel and Emejulu, 2017; Cavaghan and O’Dwyer, 2018). What is of particular relevance for the argument of this article, however, is how the power of the bullshit claims of the campaign continues to have impact after the referendum. As discussed in the earlier sections, the content of the bullshit engages in racist politics, and the referendum debate itself excluded the voices of women to a great degree (Guerrina and Murphy, 2016; Guerrina et al, 2018). This has continued in the aftermath, where both the racial and gendered, and indeed intersectional, consequences of the referendum are sidelined. Instead, the key bullshit claims discussed earlier, both from Johnson and other Leave campaigners, and by Osborne and other Remain campaigners, continue to structure the debate around Brexit, to the exclusion of consideration of these consequences. This highlights not only the power and danger of bullshit, but also the danger of ignoring the intersectional aspects of the politics of bullshit.

Further, the politics of bullshit of the Brexit campaign have broader consequences for politics itself (Guerrina and Murphy, 2016; Rickard, 2016). The core issue arising from the earlier comparison is that only some people can bullshit without consequence. Only some people are equipped with the prestige and authority which means that when they make pronouncements that bear little or no relation to the truth, it does not impact their credibility. Others who make similar statements, such as Diane Abbott, as discussed earlier, are judged to be liars, either dishonest and untrustworthy or incompetent and ignorant. This is far from the only bias in the reception of speech acts within the political sphere and elsewhere. Earlier work

has explored how men, in general, are viewed as more authoritative in politics, in business and in the classroom or lecture hall (Bennett, 1982; Smith, 2002). However, it is probably best not to bemoan the poor reception to bullshit by women, people of colour or anyone else who does not fit the ideal type of bullshitter discussed earlier. Normatively, it is not really desirable that bullshit should be an equally available rhetorical tool. Rather, we should bemoan the confluence of privileges that enable certain white men to bullshit successfully.

## **Conclusion: understanding the politics of bullshit – bullshit in a burning Europe**

The existing literature on bullshit and its related topics of post-truth or post-fact politics identifies the role that this type of political rhetoric is playing in the overarching era of crises that we seem to inhabit. The breakdown in trust between the public and their representatives, along with the degradation of norms around political discourse, seem inherently connected to phenomena such as the rise of ‘outsider’ parties and the increased aggression in political debate (Suiter, 2016; Hopkin and Rosamond, 2017; Rose, 2017; Marsh, 2018). However, the major books and articles in this emerging field have ignored the role that gender and race are playing. Some previous attempts to draw a connection between these trends and race or gender have put forward a story that blames liberation politics for their emergence. Too much focus on equality, on ‘political correctness’, this story contends, created a ‘backlash’ (Lilla, 2017). This version of the story often focuses on a cohort of ‘the left behind’ – conceptualised as the working class, with the modifiers of ‘white’ and ‘male’ again implicit. However, perhaps this story misses the point. A greater focus on equality, a greater momentum towards political correctness and the dismantling of intersecting systems of privilege and oppression could have removed the protections that enable bullshit to be espoused without consequence. At the very least, understanding how privilege operates in the politics of bullshit and post-truth is an essential step in understanding why bad ideas prevail, and will be crucial to any attempts to move away from these tendencies in our politics. As such, the research agenda for understanding the role that bullshit plays in our current politics must take account of the various ways that bullshit is informed by and acts within existing power structures. This article has offered an example of such an approach in exploring the role of bullshit in the Brexit referendum.

In this article, I have explored how race and gender influence the successful deployment of bullshit in politics and policymaking. I have shown how it is important to examine the actors who are central to this type of political rhetoric, and identified how they speak from positions of material and symbolic privilege, which is a key explanation for their success as bullshitters. I have also shown how the content of bullshit is often gendered and racialised. I have explored how key examples of bullshit rely on racialised or gendered stereotypes and assumptions, and how this reliance is also important in explaining the impact that such bullshit has had on our politics. Finally, I highlighted some of the major consequences of these particular examples of bullshit, and highlighted how one of the powers of bullshit is in continuing to sideline any appreciation of the disproportionate impacts of the policies that result from it.

In times of crisis such as that which we are currently experiencing, concerns with gender and racial equality are often pushed aside, through silencing and the invocation of the ‘duty to yield’ (Skjeie, 2006). What this article shows is not only that to ignore

these concerns is morally problematic, but that such sidelining hampers the analysis of our current crises, and therefore undermines any attempt to address them. Not only should discussions of racial and gender politics take account of the role being played by bullshit, but the emerging research agenda around bullshit needs to explore how some people have easier access to the rhetorical tool of bullshit, how bullshit connects to wider tropes and gendered and racialised assumptions within political discourse, and how the consequences of bullshit can often be obscured by failing to take account of the existing power dynamics. This article offers a starting point for such engagements, but if bullshit and post-truth politics continue to play such a substantial role in the politics of advanced democracies, then this is an engagement that must continue.

### **Conflict of interests**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> See: [www.lbc.co.uk/radio/presenters/nick-ferrari/diane-abbotts-agonising-interview-over-policy-cost/](http://www.lbc.co.uk/radio/presenters/nick-ferrari/diane-abbotts-agonising-interview-over-policy-cost/)
- <sup>2</sup> I thank one of the reviewers for this insight.

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