



BREXIT BRITS ABROAD

Brexit Brits Abroad Podcast Episode 40: What's Britishness got to do with it (migration)?

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About the episode

If you have been listening to us for a while, you may have noticed our perennial preoccupation with the question of what's the British in British migration and as luck would have it, there is a new book that takes this question as a starting point. In this episode Professor Pauline Leonard (University of Southampton), one of the leading sociologists working in this field of research, and the co-editor of the new book [British Migration](#), joins Karen and Michaela in troubling the orthodoxies in how we understand the British citizens living abroad. Painting a multi-faceted picture of British migrants living all over the world, we talk about the multi-faceted ways in which Britishness is made and remade among its emigrants, reflect on who does and does not step forward into the space of this research (and how we might as researchers attend to this), and the importance of understanding emigration in the making of Britain.

*And yes, in my head is the tune of Tina Turner's 'What's love got to do with it?' is playing on repeat ...

You can download this episode of the podcast at <http://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com/ep040-whats-britishness-got-to-do-with-it-migration>

Transcript

MB Welcome back to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast. I'm Dr Michaela Benson, a reader in sociology at Goldsmith's University of London and the research lead for a UK in a Changing Europe funded project that's all about what Brexit means for British citizens living in the EU 27. Over the coming weeks and months you'll be hearing me in conversation with the rest of the team, with Karen O'Reilly, Catherine Collins and Chantelle Lewis. In today's episode we've got something a little bit different. Karen and I are joined by Pauline Leonard who's a colleague from the University of Southampton who also writes about British migration and is known for her work with British citizens who live in Hong Kong and in South Africa, but we're talking today with Pauline about a new edited volume that she's co-edited with Katie Walsh that's all about British migration and thinking about

who these British people are in terms of not only privilege but also precarity and vulnerability so welcome Pauline.

PL Thank you very much, it's lovely to be here.

MB So I wanted to start by just quickly asking a little bit about the book, I have read it obviously, was going to launch it later on today but tell me a little bit about the book and what you were, why you thought it was necessary to do a book like this now.

PT I think as with any social research and bit of writing, the motivations were both personal and political. Katie and I met I think in about 2010 at a conference in Sussex where we both separately were presenting our research on British migrants abroad, Katie was at that point working with migrants in Dubai and I was working with migrants in Hong Kong, and we realised that our approaches, our theoretical approaches and our interests were very similar, so we kind of immediately bonded and kept up communications with each other and then I have to admit that she approached me, probably in about 2016, it was quite a long time ago, certainly pre-Brexit when the book was initiated, and we were both struck by the fact that in discourses and popular discourses in the news there was so much about migrants and concern, they were framed in terms of concern over numbers, numbers pouring into Britain, and very very little acknowledgement that actually vast numbers of Britons travel abroad and are migrants themselves, so we wanted to turn that conceptual lens and readjust the political picture if you like.

MB I think that's really, that chimes very well with the stuff that we've been concerned about in relation to the discussions around Brexit in many ways and I'm sure we might get onto that towards the end of the episode. But I'm going to hand this microphone over to Karen.

KO Really nice to have you here Pauline.

PL Thank you.

KO My starting question's quite similar to Michaela's inasmuch as like what you motivated you to write the book but it was more driven by what motivated you to put together this particular collection, because I think there's something very special about this collection given what else has already been written about British people abroad, there's something extra special and added here.

PL Thank you. I think there were two kind of motivations that framed the selection of the contributors and first was the desire to feature what we felt was the very latest research, research that was often still being done when we initially approached people, so that it reflected the very kind of latest thinking but also the latest kind of daily experiences of migrants themselves, so there was a concern there to feature people at all stages of their careers from very early researchers, people still, some of the contributors were still doing their PhDs as well as people who were probably slightly more established. Secondly, and this might be particularly relevant to your interests as well, we were conscious of the fact that although there was a lot of research emerging about British migrants, out migrants, the actual question of Britishness was often not foregrounded. What was distinctive about British migrants, what did British as an adjective, as a national affiliation, if that's what it is, what was the place of that and how distinctive is it, that was one of our key questions.

KO I think that's really interesting, I think that's one of the things I really appreciated about the book was the fact it does focus on what Britishness means and especially on the diversity of not just the category of being British so I wonder if you want to talk a little bit about the types of British people that are included, because one of your subtitles is diversity.

PL Yes. We didn't really have strong preconceptualised ideas about what types inverted commas of people who would be included, we were more led by the contributions and what they revealed about diversity within Britishness. To be honest with some of them we had to go back to them and push and say okay this is a really interesting chapter, but you're not actually saying anything about what being British means, or how this is particularly distinctive, what's different about these British migrants in comparison to German or Australian for example, so we had to push people on that and people were able to play with that question in different ways and I think that comes out of the book. But I think one thing, and this may come back with a later question, is that we still struggled to find non-white British migrants as subjects of people to research.

KO But you managed to get one chapter that was very very interesting.

PL Yes it is, very interesting.

KO Talk about that again?

PL So Priya is a colleague of mine at Southampton and she's now actually left and got a policy job but I knew that Priya had done some really interesting research on BBIs, British born Indians, with other colleagues in gerontology which is actually where she worked. She's not a sociologist and so the chapter at that time was not about British born Indians migrating as such, it was about different forms of care and different patterns of caring for your relatives. But in conversation with Priya we were able to together think about how the aims of the book really could be pulled through and became the subject of her chapter, and I agree I think that's one of my favourite chapters actually.

MB I've been thinking quite a lot about the kind of inclusion of British people of colour into research on British migration more generally, partly because it does seem to be a major lacunae within the field of research and of course that field of research is focused quite extensively on questions of whiteness, and I just wondered if you had any methodological reflections on why it is that when you go out and you start a project on British migrants, the people who come forward are for the most part white British people because some people might say to us well it's just clear that it's only white British people who migrate but we know that that isn't actually the case.

PL I think that's a really interesting question and certainly when we have put out a call for people to be involved in our research, almost exclusively it has been white people that have stepped forward. Certainly in my research in South Africa and the chapter within this book is based on that broader research. Many of the people that wanted to be involved had a political agenda and that was that they felt ignored by the British state and they wanted to make a noise and they hoped that the book, and being part of the research, would be pipelined through to express their grievances to the British state perhaps in relation to pension or lack of access to health care etc. So whether there's something about white people abroad actually being involved in research as an expression of their sense of entitlement, I think that's a kind of really interesting question. In Hong Kong it was less so, that research is older and so now it's well over

10 to 15 years old, and at that time in Hong Kong there were less British migrants of colour in Hong Kong, and most of the migrants that I talked to had been involved in the Hong Kong administration and organisations before the handover and again I think that's a feature of the 1970s and 1980s and 1990s which is when they migrated. But I think increasingly as who migrates is itself becoming more diversified in terms of British national identities, this lacunae has to be filled.

MB I think that's a really helpful way of thinking about it in lots of ways, but the other thing that was occurring to me when I was talking is, when we were talking about British, is this shorthand for English, because one of the things that's become very very apparent to me through the project is, through our project is yes we're actually doing, we've managed to recruit people with Scottish origin, we've managed to recruit people of Welsh origin, notably the Northern Irish are absent for the large part from the research as well, so turning our attention to who is coming forward, who associates with that label British has become a slight preoccupation of mine and I just wonder whether that's also playing out in those other areas where we're looking at British migrants.

PL Yes I think that's a really interesting question. One of the chapters in our book actually centrally addresses that question, the chapter by Katie Higgins, which I find really interesting, where she did notice a very strong identification of Welsh and Scottish people, and a less strong affiliation with the notion of being English, so in my experience it's not that the Welsh and the Scottish people are not there and in fact a particular feature of Hong Kong migrants is that many of them are Scottish. There was a huge migration from Scotland to Hong Kong but what I have noticed is that there's a shying away from aspects of colonialism and imperialism which actually the Scottish and Welsh were just as complicit in, but that is dumped on the door of being English, so it seems that your national identity is quite ephemeral, sometimes you cling to your local or regional identity and at other times you're happy to be conflated within the broader term British. So I'm not sure that I totally agree that Britishness is conflated with Englishness in people's consciousnesses, and people's identities, but I think it is in much of the migration studies research on British migrants.

MB So it's probably a time to start disaggregate that a little bit more.

KO Yes, I really enjoyed Katie Higgins's chapter for that reason, it's something that I've been aware of with the British in Spain ever since I've been studying it, aware that it's something that I haven't focused on and it's not that they don't focus on it, we can only do so much in each project that we do, but it's something that when, the very first piece of research I did, people would say oh does that include me and focus much more and say well of course I'm Scottish or, and even well I'm Irish, are you going to include me or not, so those really interesting questions came up really early on but I wasn't able to take that on board just lack of time really, and so it's really nice to see Katie focus on that, and that's one of the, see I think there's a lot more diversity in your book than is immediately apparent because so you've got the British-born Indians as one example of people of colour and in Katie's chapter talking about Scottish and Welsh, but I think the other diversity that comes out you draw attention to in your introductory chapter is this typology that you've developed to help think through about who the Brits abroad are in terms of types of migration I suppose.

PL Yes, obviously typology is, and here we owe a legacy to you Karen, because typologies are a really useful way of just thinking through almost where are we now, and I think what's interesting about the typologies is how they're expanding all the time and maybe in another few years the typologies will have grown from five to seven to nine, and I

think that's really interesting and it's a useful framework for all understanding who it is that migrates, but also reminding ourselves of the very long-standing history behind migration and that some people with that very long legacy probably don't even think of themselves as migrants at all anymore, the settlers, so actually Katie and I had quite a conversation because she started with number two and I said how about the settlers, how about people who've been there for generations and so we had a bit of a discussion as to whether they are migrants or not, and one of the reasons we put them in, and I think this is what's interesting about migration research is self-identifications isn't it, and as you're saying Michaela about people stepping up and into the space of the research, and one thing that Dan and I found with our research in South Africa is that people were stepping forward. One of our categories was that they were British born but they were stepping forward and they had multiple associations with people who'd been in South Africa for hundreds of years so it's often quite blurred the boundaries isn't it of who is a migrant and who isn't and self-identification comes into it.

KO Another thing that comes to mind when you're talking about that is, I don't think Michaela will mind me saying that over time we've been incensed by the tendency to stereotype British people abroad and on the part of the media, politicians, and this is one thing that's really featured a lot for us in this Brexit project and been a strong passion for us to draw attention to this diversity of British abroad including for us, and we're working very hard to include people of colour in the project and talk about what identity means and what nationality means and so it's great that you've got that in this book. Can I go back to care, because another thing, so I'm thinking about your subheading, your subtitles diversity, privilege and vulnerability, that's something else that really drew my attention, this focus on vulnerability in some of the chapters and starting obviously with Priya's, with the British-born Indians but you've got some others in there as well I think that do draw attention to the fact that everybody isn't absolutely privileged.

PL No absolutely and I think this is one thing that as a group of writers we all have in common is this real interest to deconstruct the notion of privilege. Yes, you know, on one hand it's orthodoxy, that almost by definition British migrants carry some degree of privilege and I don't think any of us are denying that, but it's how that plays out and articulates itself as well as how people position themselves and are positioned by that, so I was almost thinking earlier today that privilege is perhaps not an adjective but a verb, it's something you either do or do not do, so you do privilege or you choose not to do it, and although by choosing not to do it in many ways is a privilege in itself, and you may still be doing it in part, then it gets over the diversities of positions in relation to privilege. But I think care, yes brings out the real realities of migration, especially perhaps quite long-term migration, that what can start out with one set of contexts and situations, that can all change, and very few of us probably really think what it means to be at later life without good health, and that turns privilege on its head a bit because at that point some of the privileges that you maybe have taken for granted can seem to be out of your grasp, and I think that makes links with your research in Spain as well.

KO Mm, and certainly the research we're doing at the moment as well. Shall we put a few real stories in here? D'you want to tell listeners a little bit about the chapter that you've written with Stan Conway? Going back to this, what you said about doing privilege or not doing privilege that made, that brought your chapter to mind for me.

PL Yes. We both talked to some really amazing people. One of the most extraordinary people that I talked to was the man that's featured in the chapter who, as his story unfolded, I literally could feel my jaw hitting the ground, and I've had to be a bit careful in how I wrote that chapter in terms of identifying exactly who he was talking about, but he was very very unusual in terms of his motivations to go to a very politically contested and abhorrent country at a time in the 1980s when, certainly in Britain and across the globe most national contexts were very much turning against South Africa and the hardened regime, so he was motivated to go out and find out more about it, and being an engineer that was a vehicle, it was certainly mixed motivations in terms of both work and to explore the political reality of apartheid. So as his story unfolded I could see that he was contesting all the very very hardened and grounded assumptions about how British migrants at that time behaved and what they were supposed to and what they were supposed not to do and who they were supposed to relate to and have social relations with, and he was resisting and contesting all of that, often with I think quite physically brutal consequences to himself. His story reveals multiple complexities in terms of a real sense of entitlement, well I can go anywhere I can go to Soweto if I want to and no-one's going to stop me, but also I think it's interesting how as your life course unfolds your positions constantly shift and change, and so his relationship with the black South African family and his fathering of the child who wasn't actually his own but he became very much the father of the child, completely changed his understanding of the politics of South Africa and his position in relation to his whiteness and the relationships to blackness and what those all meant, so I'd always wondered about how I was going to feature that chapter and the ethics of whether I should and how should I do it, but then through obviously doing the research with Dan, Dan also talked to me about this really interesting woman Caroline that he had met and we just kind of realised, because we'd written a book already and we thought we wanted the chapter to go off in a new direction, we just realised by just focusing on these two participants it allowed us to say some quite different things, which was interesting to write.

MB I think one of the things that I really liked about that chapter or really thought was very insightful about that chapter is how you talk about these people who are engaged in mixed race relationships because I think that that's another thing that people don't automatically think about. British people who might live abroad who are in dual national relations or in mixed race relationships and how that then interplays with and articulates with that privilege or not and so teasing that out through that chapter I thought was a really important intervention in many ways. And again, in a setting that people wouldn't necessarily think about and a group of people who would not automatically come to mind when thinking about South Africa I think. So for me that was really important and it kind of takes me back to that question of who is the British and British migration because very often I think a lot of the research has been about couples or about British families, and it might be that that kind of lens is also leaving out a lot of people who've been involved in quite different types of families, quite different types of relationships which might again trouble that idea of who is British abroad.

PL Yes, I think that's really interesting and one thing that I've been exploring is the way that the political context of Britain and the social and political history of Britain and how that's changed particularly perhaps over the last twenty years, frames people's behaviour and attitudes when they do migrate and I think through much of the literature there's a tendency to assume a conservatism about British migrants, which may

actually in fact not be the case. It's certainly true through all our research that we all talked to participants who said they were fleeing the multiculturalism of Britain and Britain is not the Britain that they once loved, but it's also true to find participants who are the opposite of that and who are really embracing and enjoying the multiculturalism of Britain and then get quite surprised in a new context and that might be a new migratory bubble that they end up in, but that is not as multicultural or as mixed or as open looking as what they're used to at home. So I think it comes back to Karen's really brilliant kind of binary dichotomy about good Britain bad Britain and we assume that the bad Britain is the multiculturalism but for some people the good Britain is the multiculturalism and I think we do have to hang onto that really multi-faceted picture and that not all migrants are raging Brexiteers.

MB I'm glad that you've brought that round to Brexit. One of the things that I was thinking was also of course for those people who are long-term settled, Britain has changed, so I mean I think back, and I have a particular preoccupation with dual national and mixed heritage families, because my grandfather left Britain in the 1950s, he moved to Hong Kong, he married my grandmother who was Hong Kong Chinese, and they didn't come back to Britain and I found myself thinking a lot, well they didn't come back to Britain until he retired so my mum was, both my mum and my aunt were brought up over there, and I found myself thinking well what was Britain like at that time for mixed race families, and it probably wasn't a very nice place so the decision to stay in Hong Kong may very well have been influenced by precisely what the reception of these mixed race children would have been in coming back to Britain, so I think that there are those kind of ...

PL Although I think that may be the case but also what Andrew's story, my participant from South Africa, revealed was that they, and I didn't dwell too much on this in the chapter because time and space but he and his black wife, when they were unable to live together legally in South Africa, came back to Britain for a spell of about ten years before they then returned to South Africa and he said that was the happiest time of her life in that she was amazed how welcome she was made to feel, she was the only, they lived in a northern town, she was the only black woman in the street but she said the sense of community, the sense of welcome that she got, was the first time that she'd ever experienced that from white people in her life and so actually the couple did end up by splitting up but she carried on staying in Britain because she said it was a much happier context for her than to go back to South Africa at that time. So again I think we have to really kind of unpick these views of what Britain, not only is like but was like.

MB And look at the comparisons that people are drawing themselves as well between one place and another.

PL Yes absolutely.

MB Because that's always part of that.

PL Exactly.

MB Before we close I thought I'd just pull it back round to the initial point which was you explained at the outset that what you wanted to do in the book was to really talk about what's peculiar I suppose about British migration or particular about British migration, and I wonder whether we could close with you reflecting back

on that a little bit, what comes out of the book about the particularity of British migration?

PL I've really thought about this a lot and obviously it's difficult to answer that because I do not have a proper feel of what it means to be French or what it means to be German or what it means to be Chinese. For me what comes through from these real killer question of okay so what does it mean to be British today, and the answer seems to be that is fluid, that is always under process, that's a dynamic, never-ending entity, there is no essentialist answer to that, but that Britishness is constantly in the making and the remaking. And whether that's distinctive to Britain, part of me feels yes it is because if we think about how we view some other nations, their sense of nationality might feel more coherent to us, but then are we stereotyping other nations, are we stereotyping the Americans as either Trumpists or not Trumpists or whatever, are we stereotyping the Australians, so I think in order to answer that question really well you ought to get a completely multinational group in the room and you almost need non-British people to reflect on that as well, so I think that would be a really interesting thing to do.

MB I suppose really what comes across then is really this sense of how Britishness is remade abroad in multiple ways and lived in multiple ways. So thank you very much Pauline.

KO Thank you from me too, it's been really enjoyable.

PL Thank you, thank you very much Karen and Michaela.

MB You've been listening to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast, hosted by me, Dr Michaela Benson, and produced by Emma Houlton at art of podcast. The series is part of a UK in a Changing Europe funded research project, Brexit Brits Abroad, that's all about what Brexit means for UK citizens living in the EU 27. We're really keen to hear from you about the issues and concerns we address in the programme, so please do get in touch with any thoughts, queries and questions. You can find our contact details on our web page [brexitbritsabroad](https://www.brexitbritsabroad.com), or get in touch via social media, we're on Twitter @brexpatseu and we have a Facebook page Brexitbritsabroad. Finally, in case you're not already subscribed to the podcast, you can do so on both iTunes and Google podcasts. Thank you for listening, and I'll be back in a couple of weeks with the next episode.