‘States and Migration in Europe’ Podcast
Episode #19 ‘Understanding Anti-Immigration Riots:
A Conversation with Randall Hansen’

Enhanced transcript

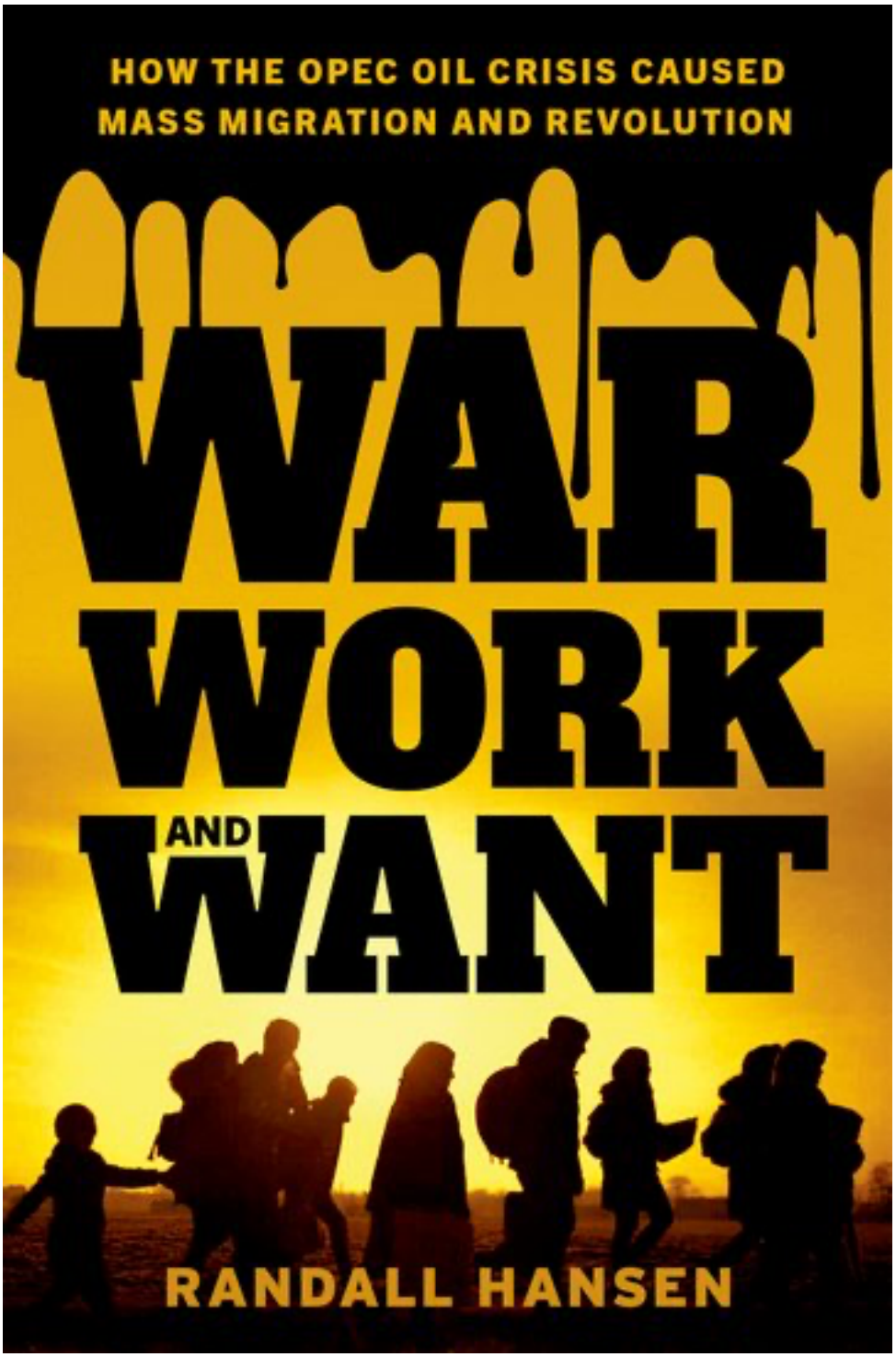
By Emmanuel Comte

Abstract: In this episode of *States and Migration in Europe*, host Dr Emmanuel Comte sits down with Professor Randall Hansen, author of the recent book *War, Work, and Want: How the OPEC Oil Crisis Caused Mass Migration and Revolution* (OUP, 2023), to unravel the layers of anti-immigration riots in the UK, including the intense unrest of last summer. Through a historical lens, they explore the roots of anti-immigrant sentiments and discuss whether Britain has a unique approach to immigration. Using examples from the past, they also delve into the question of racism – whether it is a cause of these conflicts or a symptom of deeper issues.

Introduction

Emmanuel Comte: Welcome to *States and Migration in Europe*. Today, we are diving into a critical issue gripping the UK and sparking global debate: the recurrence of anti-immigration riots. Recent violent protests have erupted across multiple British cities, fuelled by growing divisions over immigration policy.

Our guest today is Professor Randall Hansen, a distinguished migration historian and author of the recent book *War, Work, and Want: How the Oil Crisis Caused Mass Migration and Revolution*.



OUP, 2023.

His historical perspective offers insights into why these riots recur and what makes certain societies particularly susceptible to them. In this episode, we'll explore Randall's journey into migration studies and his approach to researching these topics. Then, we'll delve into the recent riots, tracing their roots back through British history – from the Notting Hill riots of the 1950s to the National Front marches of the 1970s.

We'll ask whether there's something unique about Britain's relationship with immigration and discuss the role racism plays – whether it is a core issue or a symptom of deeper societal concerns. Randall, welcome, and thank you very much for being with us.

Randall Hansen: Thank you for having me.

Commonwealth Migration to the UK and Hansen's Journey into Migration Research

Emmanuel Comte: To start, could you share a bit about your background? How did you come to study migration? You're a migration historian, but you've also published notable works on World War II. How did migration topics become part of your broader academic focus?

Randall Hansen: Well, as I mention in the preface of *War, Work, and Want*, it wasn't necessarily for the best intellectual reasons. When I was working on my doctorate at Oxford, I had a scholarship in international relations, but my primary field was comparative government. So, I needed to find a topic with an international angle, and I came to the somewhat obvious conclusion that since migrants cross borders, migration is inherently international, fitting within the scholarship's requirements. My initial motivation, therefore, was rather pragmatic. However, what genuinely intrigued me about the UK was this apparent contradiction: a country where public opinion was often sceptical about migration nonetheless kept an open door to the Commonwealth – what had once been the British Empire – for 14 years. That paradox became my entry point into the field.

Emmanuel Comte: Just to clarify – when you say '14 years,' which years are you referring to? Was that from 1945?

Randall Hansen: No, from 1948 with the British Nationality Act of that year, which created citizenship of the United Kingdom and Colonies. This open-door policy remained in place until 1962.

Emmanuel Comte: Understood. And during those years, you've mentioned that around 400,000 people came to Britain under that open policy, correct?

Randall Hansen: That's right. This influx continued for 14 years, allowing Commonwealth citizens a straightforward path to move to the UK.

Emmanuel Comte: Interesting. So, your interest in the UK's openness during that period led you deeper into migration studies. Could you expand on how you approach these topics from a historical perspective?

Randall Hansen: Absolutely. My approach is very much historical. I believe that contemporary issues are best understood when examined through a historical lens. In *War, Work, and Want*, for instance, I start with a puzzle: various factors in the early 1970s, like the end of guest worker programmes, restrictions on Mexican immigration to the U.S., and a global economic downturn, should have slowed immigration. Yet, immigration actually tripled in absolute terms. Why did that happen?

Emmanuel Comte: To summarize, your interest in migration stemmed from a need to study international issues, and that evolved into a more focused inquiry on Britain's openness to

Commonwealth migration. For those who might not know the field well, you've been writing on this topic for a long time. I still come across articles of yours from years ago that are highly relevant to understanding these issues today. You are essentially a reference point when it comes to understanding Britain's shift from openness to restricted immigration from the Commonwealth. Now, you continue to study migration, both to understand historical patterns and to inform present-day policy.

Randall Hansen: Precisely. I'm also deeply interested in current migration policies and how we can address them effectively. Europe, for instance, needs migrants, as I believe we both agree. Yet the far-right is currently capitalizing on anti-immigrant sentiments, creating a very precarious situation. Through the historical method, I aim to shed light on current issues. Historical context often reveals the potential for policy improvements.

Emmanuel Comte: That's a fascinating area of study. How do these topics fit into your broader body of work, given your interest in other questions within international relations?

Randall Hansen: Well, my engagement with Europe began in 1992, and that relationship has lasted over three decades. My focus has largely been on post-war European history and politics. I teach European politics at the University of Toronto. If there's a unifying theme across my work, it's an interest in outcomes that seemed unlikely – or even irrational – but happened nonetheless.

For instance, Britain kept its borders open to hundreds of thousands of people for 14 years, transforming the UK from a predominantly white society to a multicultural one. Why? Another example is my research on forced eugenic sterilisation, which didn't end with the Holocaust but actually intensified in some places after the war. My book on Germany explores the bombing of civilian populations in World War II, which escalated to its most intense levels even after the Allies knew it wasn't an effective strategy. And, as I've noted recently, immigration should have tapered off or even decreased around 1973, yet global migration has only increased. Those kinds of puzzles spark my interest, and the books follow from there.

Emmanuel Comte: Very interesting. So, your work centers on why things happened that shouldn't have happened.

Randall Hansen: Exactly.

Emmanuel Comte: Taking the case of migration to Britain, I remember a point you made in one of your works: How could a country like Britain remain open to migration from a population base of about 400 million people across the Commonwealth, despite significant demographic and economic imbalances? You suggested that these imbalances necessitated restrictions on Commonwealth immigration to the UK, correct?

Randall Hansen: Yes, that's correct. You're taking me back to my first book. The core question was how a relatively small country – around 40 to 50 million people at the time – could keep its doors open to hundreds of millions from the Commonwealth, even when there was clear evidence that the British public and politicians were against it. For 14 years, Britain maintained an open border to people from what was once the empire and became the Commonwealth. That was the starting point of my research.

Emmanuel Comte: However, it's well-documented that attempts to close these migration routes often triggered influxes. There's a similar case with the Netherlands and Suriname, where stopping free movement led to a sudden wave of migration from Suriname, as people sought to enter before the policy changed. Likewise, you've written on the 1972 Ugandan crisis, where the UK's intention to close entry for Ugandan Asians led to a rush of people arriving before the door shut. So, do you think these migration surges would have happened regardless, or did British policy play a role in triggering them?

Randall Hansen: In a sense, both. The main factors were economic. There are three broad types of migration to Europe: family migrants, economic migrants, and asylum seekers or refugees. The most significant among these, and the one that often explains the other two, is labour migration. Across Europe – in the UK, France, Germany, Austria, Sweden, and the Nordic countries – migrants originally came to fill jobs and meet labour demand.

In my book *War, Work, and Want*, I argue that we often fail to recognise the extent to which the middle and upper-middle classes, not just in Europe but globally, rely structurally on a vast pool of cheap migrant labour for their standard of living. As of Commonwealth migrants came to the UK to work in construction, healthcare, transportation, and industry. Imperial citizenship was the formal mechanism that allowed their entry, given the open-door policy. However, it wasn't imperial citizenship per se that attracted them – it was the job opportunities.

But policies also had an impact. When you set a deadline, after which migration will no longer be possible, it often creates a surge as people move to secure their position before the restriction takes effect. The Ugandan example you mentioned is a clear case where setting a cut-off led to a last-minute influx.

When we talk about significant migration waves from the Commonwealth to the UK, like the 'beat the ban' rush in 1962 or the surge in 1968 when rumours spread about controls on East African Asians from Kenya, we see how rumours of impending restrictions often trigger increased migration.

Similarly, when continental European countries ended their guest worker programmes, they experienced an unexpected outcome: rather than reducing migration, the closure often led to more people staying permanently. When there are open channels for migration, people feel confident that they can return if needed, so they may go home temporarily. But if a country signals a policy change, like a firm 'no more entries,' you get a last-minute rush. Those already in the country then hesitate to leave, knowing how hard it might be to return. They're likely to bring their families, which is how France, Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, in the 1970s and 1980s, ended up with more immigration – not less – after trying to close their guest worker programs.

Emmanuel Comte: Yes, so you argue that while public authorities can play a role in controlling migration flows, managing human movement is complex. Often, attempts to reduce migration can lead to unintended consequences, as the policies applied to limit influx may end up increasing it, at least in the short run.

Randall Hansen: Exactly. And sometimes in the long run too. Once people manage to enter, they're far less likely to leave, understanding how difficult it is to get back in, and they also bring their families. This raises questions about the effectiveness of immigration restrictions over time.

Emmanuel Comte: On these issues, I recommend your recent article in the *Journal of Migration History* on Ugandan Asians in 1972. That case mirrors the broader challenges of migration management. It's indeed a complex issue, and I fully agree that economic factors are the primary drivers. Institutional mechanisms, like imperial citizenship, can facilitate entry. However, when policies shift towards restrictions, it's not a simple transition. The shift creates these unintended dynamics – you close one door, but others open as people respond to restrictions in unexpected ways.

Anti-Immigration Riots in the UK

Emmanuel Comte: This background serves to highlight the challenges surrounding anti-immigrant violence in the UK, especially this summer. We saw anti-immigrant riots triggered by a murder, though it later emerged that the main suspect, whose parents were from Rwanda, was not an immigrant himself. This incident still ignited anti-immigrant sentiment, and the unrest targeted Muslim sites and immigrant housing. It seems to me that this situation highlights a British specificity. Although other countries experience anti-immigrant violence, this pattern appears more pronounced in the UK. For example, in France, while there is some violence of this kind, it's less common or intense. In Germany, incidents are often more targeted, and the numbers remain relatively low. By contrast, the UK has seen full-blown anti-immigrant riots since the 1950s. Could you share some historical context? Do you agree that this is uniquely British?

Randall Hansen: Yes, this summer the UK did come close to pogrom-like actions. During these riots in Belfast, there was an incident where a Sudanese café owner was specifically targeted. Right-wing groups chanted, demanding to know, 'Where is Mohammed?' He managed to escape, but his café and the flat above it were burned down. It's fair to say that, had they found him, he might not have survived. This occurred during a week of riots across the UK.

The two most notable anti-immigrant or racially targeted riots in the UK were in 1958, in Notting Hill and Nottingham, and then this summer in 2024. But there have been other notable riots as well. In 1981, there were riots in Brixton and Liverpool. These were primarily responses to police brutality, reflecting the frustrations within racialised communities rather than anti-immigrant riots. In 2001 in Bradford and 2005 in Birmingham, there was gang-related violence – ethnic tensions between white and Asian communities in Bradford and black and Asian communities in Birmingham.

If we broaden the view, France had significant riots in 2005, and Hamburg saw violent protests during the G20 summit in 2017. Since 2015, Germany has seen thousands of attacks on refugee centres due to the influx of refugees. So, while I understand the idea of a 'British specificity,' it may be more complex. The UK has had two major racially motivated riots in 1958 and 2024, but we see similar issues in other countries. Some of the harshest actions against North African populations in France, where they were police-led rather than spontaneous public violence.

Emmanuel Comte: When in France?

Randall Hansen: It was the early 1960s when some Algerian protesters were forced into the Seine. At one metro stop, around October 1961, people were killed.

Emmanuel Comte: Yes, October 1961. It was during the Algerian War, and it was a demonstration in support of the FLN. The police responded violently, and bodies ended up in the River Seine. We don't know the exact number of deaths, but it was, if I may say, somewhat of a special case. It was less anti-immigrant violence than a response to a politically charged demonstration within the context of a war. This event was directly linked to the war and the Algerian situation. It was not an endogenous reaction against immigration, per se.

In France, you have incidents involving immigrants, but it's not common to see organised riots targeting them directly. By contrast, some riots in the UK, like those this summer, reflect direct tensions between locals and immigrant communities, with large-scale riots occurring explicitly against immigrant groups. Germany is somewhere in between; riots tend to be targeted attacks on specific buildings rather than widespread unrest.

Randall Hansen: I see your point. You're absolutely right about France. In Britain, we do have a few prominent examples – in 1958 and recently in 2024 – where gangs attacked people of colour across regions. In 1958, some of these attackers openly called it 'n-word hunts.' But those examples are limited. We shouldn't lump all riots together. The 1981 riots in Brixton and Liverpool in the UK were, in a way, similar to France's suburban unrest in 2005.

I tend to be cautious about arguments focusing on national specifics. There's a flip side in the UK, where people often boast about how multicultural the country is and how it has 'defeated racism.' This self-congratulatory narrative implies it's better to be a racial minority in London than in Paris or Berlin. I was on a panel in London in June where many were lauding the UK's success with diversity. Yet, six weeks later, we saw terrible riots. That's a stark contrast.

It's clear the UK isn't necessarily a better model than other European countries, despite what some might say. There's little basis for claiming the UK has succeeded more than other countries. But I wouldn't say the UK faces a unique problem. It might just be that the UK has more public incidents of thuggish street violence. Germany, for example, has also faced severe attacks on refugees, asylum seekers, and people of colour, including a series of murders of Turkish Germans in the 2010s that went unaddressed by the police for years.

The UK's issue is the specific form of aggressive street violence. Here, it intersects with the football hooligan demographic, which seems to overlap significantly with anti-immigrant rioters. That's a problem in the UK that isn't seen as commonly in other parts of Europe.

Emmanuel Comte: Let me bring forward a photo from the 1970s, precisely during the time when there were significant movements of Asians from Africa. This particular image shows a National Front march, near London. You can see their slogan, 'Britain for the British,' which references Enoch Powell and his stance on immigration.

National Front march against immigration in Smithfield during the Uganda Asians Crisis, 5 July 1972. Getty Images.

Now, while this demonstration isn't an example of direct physical violence, such events certainly laid the groundwork for hostility and contributed to an atmosphere where violence could later take root.

In France, during the 1970s, there was undeniable xenophobia, but I don't think it escalated to the same level of open demonstrations as in the UK. That's why I see Britain as somewhat unique in this regard.

Randall Hansen: Ah, I see you're not willing to let the British off the hook here. Let's dig into this. The period you're describing connects back to April 1968, a critical moment. I'm glad you raised this because there's an important link between 1968 and 1972.

Enoch Powell listens to two demonstrators in Canada in April 1968, reading a petition that describes him as a racist. Associated Press.

In 1968, during the Kenyan Asians crisis – not to be confused with the Ugandan Asians crisis of 1972 – many East African Asians with British passports and legal entry rights were fleeing racism in Kenya. Enoch Powell seized this moment to deliver a highly inflammatory speech.

In that speech, Powell used deeply racist language, accusing Black people of hostile acts, and ending with the now-infamous line: 'I, like the Romans, see the river Tiber foaming with much blood,' predicting that immigration would lead to civil unrest. Powell was dismissed from the Conservative Party, but his words ignited massive protests from the white working class, along with incidents of violence. Black and Asian individuals were afraid. It was a truly dreadful time.

So, what's the connection to today? In both eras, politicians who should have known better deliberately stoked fears. Powell's case is an obvious example. Today, the phrase 'stop the boats' was popularized by the Conservative Party and Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, who, ironically, is Britain's first Asian Prime Minister.

The Conservatives have inaccurately created the impression that those arriving by boat are illegal migrants. They are, in fact, asylum seekers, and it's perfectly legal enter the country in whatever manner to claim asylum. The issue isn't their legality upon arrival but rather how their cases are processed. Instead of facilitating efficient processing, Sunak created a political crisis that fuelled far-right rhetoric.

Enoch Powell is no longer here, but Rishi Sunak and the Conservative Party should feel a sense of responsibility. Unfortunately, I doubt they do.

Emmanuel Comte: So, you consider that if there's something specific to Britain, it might have to do with how some politicians approach these matters, perhaps in a more direct or blunt manner than in other countries?

Randall Hansen: I hesitate to call it a national specificity, as I'm not particularly fond of that idea. What we see linking the cases, though, is a pattern where political elites, senior politicians – respectable, often upper-middle or upper-class figures – essentially signal to racists that their views are acceptable.

But Helmut Kohl did something quite similar. So, yes, I believe it's a pattern, especially among prominent centrist politicians across Europe. It's almost expected that far-right figures like Nigel Farage or Marine Le Pen will spout racist rhetoric, but it's more concerning when mainstream, centrist politicians start echoing these views. When they do, it can encourage violence, as we've seen with attacks in Germany on Turkish immigrants – the burning of houses, assaults, even deaths, as well as attacks on asylum hostels.

And these attacks coincided with the intensification of anti-immigration rhetoric from politicians, such as Kohl, who infamously said, 'The boat is full,' suggesting there's no more room for immigrants. Rather than addressing the underlying issues, these leaders deflect blame onto minorities, inciting racist sentiments and then feign shock when violence erupts.

Explanatory Factors

Emmanuel Comte: Yes, and this brings us to the heart of the discussion. How do we explain this violence? Considering what happened in the UK last summer, what are the main explanations? Is it simply a matter of racism – people are racist, and that's that? Or is there something more, such as policymakers actively stoking hatred or resentment between racial groups?

Randall Hansen: Racism is certainly a significant factor, and these acts often involve people shouting racist slogans, threatening violence, or trying to burn down mosques and hotels where asylum seekers are housed. However, that's not the whole story. Political responsibility plays a role, but there are other contributing factors too.

Rumours also play a huge role. Social media has amplified rumours exponentially. Last summer, it was falsely spread that a Muslim asylum seeker had committed a murder when, in fact, the perpetrator was a British Christian. Similar rumours have fueled violence in the past – take Brixton in 1981, for instance. When Michael Bailey, a Black resident, died in police custody, a rumour quickly spread that he had been killed by the police, inciting widespread unrest. Similarly, in Liverpool, rumours of police brutality against a Black man led to clashes.

Rumours act as a trigger, often turning simmering tensions into outbreaks of violence. Today, social media accelerates this phenomenon dramatically. False rumours can spread like wildfire on platforms like Twitter, or X. When Elon Musk bought it, I decided to leave the platform. It's baffling that any progressive still uses it, considering how easily misinformation spreads there.

But there's another factor we need to consider carefully. There's a fundamental difference between the situation of oppressed minorities – Black people in Britain in the 1980s or Black people in France in 2023 – who were rebelling against racism, and the actions of white people, who hold privilege as a majority, when they attack Black individuals. These two scenarios are not the same and can never be compared.

Just as it was essential in 1981 to examine the deprivation in places like Liverpool and Brixton, I believe it's equally necessary now to look at socioeconomic hardship, poverty, and deprivation in some communities. While this doesn't fully explain issues in cities like Bristol or London, it's a significant factor in northern areas like Newcastle and Southport, where poverty, unemployment, and a decline in services are prevalent. Addressing these issues is crucial, as these frustrations certainly play a role in broader social tensions.

Politicians have been exceptionally irresponsible in their approach. For instance, they house asylum seekers for extended periods in hotels located in some of the poorest parts of the country. This is a twofold failure – not only do they fail to process asylum applications promptly, but they also place these people in areas already struggling with economic challenges. Housing asylum seekers in hotels creates a perception that they're getting a 'free ride.' Many locals think, 'I can't afford a hotel for my holiday in Mallorca or even in Blackpool, but asylum seekers are staying in hotels here.' It's an incredibly shortsighted approach.

Germany, which isn't significantly wealthier than Britain, manages to build refugee hostels for a larger population. The British government has utterly failed to establish a similar system. And, of course, no German would wish to live in a refugee hostel, so there's no sense of unfairness in that setup.

Emmanuel Comte: Yes, and we're seeing a broader picture here. Of course, there are racists. Racism is essentially the attribution of a negative characteristic observed in a few individuals to an entire group based on phenotypical traits. This is undeniably at play.

I'm still on Twitter, and while quality seems to have decreased recently, it helps me to observe things closely. There are certain accounts dedicated to reporting criminal acts committed by immigrants or people of colour, and their focus is quite clear-cut. They report every atrocious crime committed by someone from an immigrant background, and in the comments, you can see blatant racism emerging. It's unmistakable. Some people follow these accounts and conclude that every Black person, every migrant, is potentially a criminal. This pattern is quite clear, and it highlights a deep-seated anthropological response.

However, there's also a historical aspect to consider. The same kind of stereotyping could apply to other groups; for instance, most criminals are men between the ages of 16 and 35, yet no one suggests being anti-men of that age group. It doesn't make sense, and it's similarly irrational when applied to skin colour or ethnicity.

The issue is that people who adopt this mindset are genuinely convinced that these foreigners are a threat, much like how Enoch Powell expressed concerns. They genuinely believe that these people pose a danger. In any conflict, both sides view themselves as victims. They believe they're threatened and fear they might be massacred. Ironically, the strongest incentive for a massacre is the belief that you yourself are about to be massacred.

So, people expose themselves to violence, and eventually, some become perpetrators. But the deeper question here is whether something fundamental is wrong. You mentioned socioeconomic issues – is there something structurally problematic? I'll take a position based on my understanding of the French case. I do believe that there is a specific type of criminality among immigrant communities in France, and I've seen it firsthand. Many young people, particularly late teenagers, are driven to fit into a certain model or pattern.

For example, in the early 1980s, there were interviews conducted in certain French projects. One young man, originally from the Maghreb, remarked that if you were 16 years old in those neighbourhoods and had never stolen anything, people would think there was something wrong with you – that you weren't 'normal.' This behaviour, along with violence, was somewhat normalised. I'm not saying everyone behaves this way, but it's clear that for some late teenagers, particularly in certain suburbs where criminality rates are high, it's hard to resist the

pull. This involvement then feeds into broader stereotypes and categorisation of these individuals.

So, my main argument is that markets, particularly labour markets, aren't regulated in ways that support immigrants in most European countries. They're regulated for insiders, especially when it comes to employment. Many immigrants arrive with limited networks or skills and face two options: the first is the illegal route, which, though risky, can provide a comparatively high income. The second is a fully legal route, but in many cases, there simply aren't jobs available.

This alternative is a tragic reality in certain areas of France. For some, making a living involves becoming a dealer or stealing cars. If you want a nornal job, it's an uphill battle. You might send out a hundred applications in vain. Some come to think that their name, for example, 'Mohamed,' might be a reason they aren't hired. This is not, I believe, the primary explanation because some employers are Arab themselves. Rather, the labour market isn't regulated to integrate these individuals effectively.

We know that large-scale unemployment often drives people towards criminal activities. For late teenagers, who feel strong and are looking for adventure, the risks can be tempting – they might decide to steal or become involved in dealing. This leads to the difficult situation we see today.

Let me add one final thought. I believe that this is the root cause of the problem. Social media and platforms like Twitter may amplify issues, but focusing on the root cause is more effective than simply trying to control the consequences.

Randall Hansen: That's a lot to cover, Emmanuel. I'm just taking a few notes here. Do you think this phenomenon is primarily related to migrant criminality or minority criminality?

Emmanuel Comte: I think the root cause here is unfavourable market regulation, which pushes some immigrants into the criminal sector.

Randall Hansen: Yes, I see that. But first, let me address your defence of staying active on Twitter. Years ago, I wrote a book called *Disobeying Hitler*, which examined the German resistance. After the war, many people questioned those who continued working under the regime. Their response was often that resigning wouldn't have achieved anything – they felt they could resist more effectively from within. Your stance reminds me of this logic, and it's not wrong. The problem with leaving a platform is that you'd leave all the nonsense there unchallenged.

Now, about criminality. I'm not familiar with French data, but I've recently reviewed the German statistics. The data shows that people with a migration background in Germany do commit more crimes, but the difference is small. About 10% of native Germans commit crimes, while the figure is around 15% for people with a migration background. You could frame this as a 50% increase, but the reality is that it's still a relatively small percentage in both groups.

Domestic violence, for example, is prevalent everywhere in Europe. Almost every other woman faces the harsh reality that her biggest risk comes from her partner or husband. In Italy, this issue is particularly rampant, yet we don't see a broad narrative framing it as a crisis of masculinity or white men – unless we look at perspectives on the far left. How we present these

facts is inherently political, driven by particular agendas. Often, when white Europeans commit crimes, we call them 'freaks' or 'losers,' suggesting these are individual failures. But when people of colour are involved, suddenly it's labelled as a structural problem.

That being said, I agree there's an issue here. You're getting to the crux of it. One factor is the structure of labour markets and economies in France and Southern Europe, where insiders are prioritised over outsiders. Southern Europe, for example, has a layer of well-paid, unionised jobs with generous pensions that are accessible only to a specific group, leaving others locked out. This includes many young Italians, Spaniards, and Greeks – but disproportionately impacts people of colour, migrants, and their descendants.

The second issue, which I explore in *War, Work, and Want*, is Europe's denial of its structural dependence on low-skilled migrant labour. If you come to Europe informally or as an asylum seeker, you're generally excluded from the formal labour market. This exclusion forces people to work informally in sectors like meatpacking, domestic care, and construction. Alternatively, they may end up in criminal activities. When I spoke to NGOs in Rome, they confirmed that Italy's restrictive policies leave migrants with few options beyond jobs in the informal sector – or even riskier avenues like sex work or drug dealing.

Europe needs low-skilled migrants, and we should open legal labour channels for them. The EU and member states must address this issue by improving working conditions. If we enhance the quality of jobs across Europe – something the British are currently attempting – we can mitigate the trade-off you've highlighted between poor work conditions, low pay, and criminality.

Last, one key point to consider is that a major cause of riots and general violence can be attributed to toxic masculinity. If you observe the rioters, they are predominantly white, working-class men exhibiting hyper-masculine behaviour. They don't strike me as very 'fluid' in terms of gender dynamics. There's often an element of alcohol-fuelled, testosterone-driven in-group solidarity, which can contribute to the enjoyment some men seem to find in destructive behaviour. This dynamic helps explain instances of violence we saw in 1968, the G20 protests in Hamburg, and other similar events, including more recent occurrences in 2024.

Emmanuel Comte: While we may have some areas of disagreement, we also have common ground, particularly regarding the tragic alternative that some young immigrants, or even descendants of immigrants, face. We both recognise the difficult choice they often encounter: jobs difficult to reach due to bad regulation on the one hand, and the lure of the criminal sector on the other.

Randall Hansen: Exactly. Often, it's informal or illegal work that becomes the easiest option for many of these individuals.

Emmanuel Comte: I also agree, to some extent, that the issue lies in the actions of certain politicians who have deliberately orchestrated violence against immigrants. I would go further and argue that some politicians are even cynical about this. They understand that framing these issues in terms of race or 'dangerous' groups serves as a convenient way to avoid discussing politically challenging reforms.

Consider also that we have various programmes tackling different issues. If we were to actually resolve those issues, we would eliminate the need for some bureaucracies. In the same way,

certain regulations, if removed, would disrupt entrenched interests. Some policymakers may be deeply cynical, or perhaps just unwilling to engage with politically sensitive issues. Instead, they focus on narratives that are politically safe and ignore alternative explanations that might provide real change.

So, there's a tendency to channel these complex problems into simplified narratives, which conveniently skirt around potential reforms. This deflection tactic is why certain policymakers in the centre or on the left might deny or minimise the problem of distinct immigrant criminality. If they acknowledged it, they'd be forced to address its root causes and, uncovering those causes could challenge existing policies and frameworks that, for the most part, are designed to protect insiders.

Extending rights to workers, for instance, tends to benefit insiders but can make employment harder for outsiders. An employer faced with hiring a newcomer from, say, Sudan, for 2,000 pounds per month, would likely consider whether that individual has the necessary skills, and may hesitate if there's any doubt. While I know some cannot accept this reality, it's a fact many employers encounter. Providing certain protections for workers can unintentionally disadvantage those outside the system.

Acknowledging distinct immigrant criminality, then, might force policymakers to confront the unintended consequences of their policies, and addressing them would require challenging significant aspects of the current political framework.

Last, there is the matter of free speech in all this and the role that so-called 'rumours' play. I don't believe being on Twitter equates to staying in the Nazi Party in the 1930s, even though I strongly disagree with some content. Also, it would be pointless to confront this content directly by calling out racist views because, in the end, those concerned wouldn't care about my response, and it wouldn't lead to any meaningful change. I've tried engaging on platforms like Twitter, but it's not productive; those accounts attract followers who already share similar views. Direct confrontation doesn't reach them.

However, I do think that if we want to address these issues, we need this echo chamber. Suppressing speech isn't effective. In settings like our current discussion, we might actually reach people who are open to listening.

If we want to understand the concerns of these individuals, we need to listen first, in spaces where they feel free to speak. Silencing them outright not only prevents us from understanding their arguments, but it also limits our ability to address the underlying problems.

Randall Hansen: May I jump in on that? You've brought up quite a few thought-provoking points, and I think some of these issues require more nuance. For instance, the labour market challenges you mentioned aren't just about wages; they're about the excessive job protection in some places.

In highly regulated labour markets, where it's nearly impossible to dismiss a worker once hired, companies become hesitant to hire permanently. This is exactly what we see in France with the division between *contrat de travail à durée indéterminée* and *contrat de travail à durée déterminée* – permanent and fixed-term contracts. A straightforward solution would be to make it easier for companies to let workers go, which has had positive effects. Take Emmanuel

Macron: despite being a polarising figure, he has managed to lower unemployment in France by implementing relatively modest reforms.

While the left-wing perspective in parts of Europe criticizes these policies, they often overlook examples like Denmark. There, companies can dismiss workers relatively easily, but there's a strong obligation to retrain these workers with considerable state support. This system helps them quickly reintegrate into Denmark's highly dynamic labour market.

On minimum wages, we've seen that raising them doesn't necessarily lead to unemployment as many economists once believed. But there are trade-offs. In my book *War, Work, and Want*, I argue that middle-class lifestyles are structurally dependent on affordable migrant labour. Real wages have stagnated since the 1970s, as economists like Piketty have shown, but the prices of goods have fallen dramatically.

This price drop is partly due to outsourcing, automation, and technology, but also because labour-intensive sectors that can't be outsourced, such as construction and meatpacking, have achieved lower costs through suppressed wages. In Europe, for instance, the textile industry in places like Prato, Italy, relies on low-wage labour. Consequently, we're all benefiting from cheaper goods because the wage component of these goods has been reduced.

However, if we decide to raise these wages, consumers will inevitably feel the pinch and need to adjust to higher prices. This is an argument my friends on the left often dislike because it shifts some responsibility from governments to individual consumers. Yet, it's essential to recognise that states play a role, but consumer behaviour is also a significant factor in maintaining these low-wage structures.

On your point about cynicism – especially regarding the far right – that's exactly it. For parties like Alternative for Germany or the National Rally, and even for Reform in the UK, they have no genuine solutions to any of the issues. Their approach to gaining power is simply to exploit all the significant problems we face in Europe – unemployment, inflation, stagnant growth – and then blame everything on immigrants.

It's also worth noting that some centre-right politicians, who surely know better, tend to enable this scapegoating. Some of them realise that addressing these issues would require offending certain powerful clients by making tough changes, or they believe that in an era of low growth, those changes simply aren't feasible. Yet, they don't have the courage to be honest about this, and instead, they too allow immigrants to be blamed.

And regarding free speech, I don't fundamentally disagree, but there's definitely a middle ground. For instance, the EU's efforts to regulate big tech – demanding they flag disinformation or restore some basic warnings when misinformation is posted – can be effective without infringing on free speech. However, the warnings on X were removed by Elon Musk, who dismissed such efforts. This could be managed sensibly without undermining free speech. Censorship wouldn't be feasible anyway in the age of social media; everything would just move to encrypted platforms like Telegram.

And I also want to be clear: I would never suggest that the white working class is the root of Europe's issues. We're talking about a minority within this group.

Emmanuel Comte: I think we're aligned on the key structural issues and the role of cynicism in politics. Within the far-right spectrum, there are certainly individuals who genuinely believe in their rhetoric. But there's also a layer of cynicism – where some of them understand that they're not offering real solutions. Instead, they're choosing the easy route, saying what resonates best with their voter base.

Their strategy seems focused on retaining all constituencies that could potentially support them, excluding only those who don't vote. It's almost a calculated pathway that leads us to question the kind of political system and institutions we want. These are broader issues about representation and governance. I believe we should continue exploring these shared viewpoints, and perhaps we can delve into the rest during a future episode.

Conclusion

Emmanuel Comte: So, Randall, I appreciated the opportunity to discuss these topics with you, especially regarding the British case and broader immigration challenges in Europe and North America. Any final thoughts, or would you like to say something about your work so people know where to follow you?

Randall Hansen: Well, I'm relatively easy to find online. If anyone Googles me, they'll find me, but my website is also accessible at randall-hansen.squarespace.com. The main point I want to leave everyone with is that we cannot give up on this work. There are times when it feels tempting to retreat, especially with the far right rising across Europe, and even with the possibility of Trump returning to power in the U.S. It can feel like the best option is to focus on our own intellectual work and stay out of the political fray.

But we must remain engaged. We have to leverage our research on immigration, make it accessible, and counter the current dominant narrative. Anti-migrant sentiment has reached an alarmingly hysterical level in Europe precisely when Europe needs migrants more than ever before.

Emmanuel Comte: Perfectly stated. Thank you, Randall, for joining us. And to everyone listening, stay tuned for another episode of the *States and Migration in Europe* podcast, which will be released soon.