

# ‘Become a permanent migrant to the UK!’

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Since 2005, when citizenship tests were effectively introduced in the UK, the official guidance book *Life in the United Kingdom* has been a veritable battleground over identity, history and knowledge. ‘Could you pass a citizenship test? ‘Most young people can’t’, the media reiterate with each new edition.<sup>1</sup> Knowledge and ignorance are firmly placed at the heart of public debates about the test. Their distribution underpins moral economies of political capacity, action and credibility. Assumptions about knowledge and ignorance disqualify some from access to citizenship, or they trace a path for ‘earning’ citizenship that is equivalent to the journey from ignorance to knowledge. As many could not pass the test, what did this (un)acknowledged ignorance mean for citizenship?

Earlier this year I took the citizenship test in the UK. The supposedly ‘all new’ test introduced by the Coalition government in 2013 had generated a lot of controversy, as it replaced the Labour citizenship test, produced by Bernard Crick and his ‘Life in the UK’ advisory team. Yet it was not exactly new but rather a revised edition of Labour’s 2007 guidebook, which was deemed to bring back history and ‘British values’. The aims of the test remained the same: to cultivate the migrant ‘other’ into the virtues, duties and responsibilities of citizenship. The revised test was, however, criticized for being ‘unfit for purpose’, as it was enmeshed in ‘trivial pursuits’ and contained a ‘whopping 3,000 facts’, it reflected a ‘gender imbalance’ in the provision of information, and became quickly ‘outdated’.<sup>2</sup> Others questioned the professed aims of citizenship tests more generally and have drawn attention to the disciplinary and ‘illiberal’ means for Western states to ensure that immigrants internalize Western liberal values and acquire the basic skills and knowledge to become active and participating citizens in the receiving society and its job market.<sup>3</sup> Knowledge is here not part of a representational epistemology of accuracy, but is performative of neoliberal citizens.

As disciplinary techniques of power/knowledge, citizenship tests appear to ‘responsibilize’ and discipline citizens-to-be. They are hailed as productive of a whole range of political effects: from fostering knowledgeable and ‘active’ citizens who integrate into British society and adopt dominant cultural norms to revalorizing citizenship and identity. Yet, the temporariness of the test (a punctual event, even if a repeated one, preceded by a period of preparation) is fundamentally different from the exhaustive control of linear and ‘evolutionary’ time of disciplinary power. The distinction between the space of testing, often improvised and used for numerous purposes, and the forms of spatialized panoptic surveillance also go unnoticed. Disciplinary power, argued Foucault, ‘is not discontinuous but involves a procedure of continuous control instead. In the disciplinary system, one is not available for someone’s possible use, one is perpetually under someone’s gaze, or, at any rate, in the situation of being observed.’<sup>4</sup>

What do citizenship tests do if they are discontinuous rather than continuous techniques of power and if they are ineffective devices for imparting knowledge? I argue that the citizenship tests do something quite different. They actively produce what has been called 'nonknowledge': ignorance, opacity and uncertainty.<sup>5</sup> Nonknowledge is not an empty or void space, the reverse of knowledge, but a multiple and heterogeneous regime with its own rules of formation and intersections with power/knowledge. I read citizenship tests as productive of epistemologies of ignorance, of opaque circuits of power and of uncertainty, all of which obscure or reduce the possibilities of symbolic conflict.

### **Citizenship as contract of ignorance**

At first sight, citizenship tests proffer authoritative knowledge about British society and values. From purportedly factual statements such as 'There is no place in British society for extremism or intolerance' to lists of key political, historical and cultural figures, the tests draw on what is deemed to be a canon of knowledge about British society.<sup>6</sup> Established in 2005, and having gone through three contested editions, the test encapsulates the symbolic production of dominant knowledge that underpins the division between knowledgeable and ignorant citizens and citizens-to-be. Knowing the answers to the test had sparked highly visible debates, with David Cameron 'fluffing' it on national television, and members of the House of Lords doubting the capacity of 'most indigenous Britons' to answer questions included in the test.<sup>7</sup>

When it is not a marker of incapacity, ignorance becomes acceptable if particular modes of knowledge are rendered irrelevant to questions of citizenship. Ignorance is rehabilitated only to the extent that it can be subsumed to a class-mediated knowledge, as highlighted by the intervention by Baroness Smith of Basildon in a parliamentary debate:

perhaps I may direct noble Lords to the report from Dr Thom Brooks of Durham University, which makes it quite clear that the citizenship test is not fit for purpose. The Prime Minister failed it on national television. I am sure I would fail it, and I regard myself as a very loyal and committed citizen of the UK. It is more like a pub quiz or a game of Trivial Pursuit.<sup>8</sup>

Critical readings of the citizenship test attend to the amount of detail and trivial information that the official guidebook contains. I argue that, rather than knowledge and its unequal distribution among categories of citizens and non-citizens, it is ignorance that is the key product actively produced through the *Life in the UK* test. It is through the test that citizenship is revealed as a contract of ignorance. In Charles Mills's often-quoted formulation, the racial contract relies on a white epistemology of ignorance:

The Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.<sup>9</sup>

As articulated by Mills, an epistemology of ignorance reverses Jacques Rancière's rendition of the educational endeavour. In Rancière's emancipatory reading of ignorance, it is not the ignorant pupil who needs to learn from the master-educator in order to understand.<sup>10</sup> Ignorance can morph into emancipatory intellectual equality when it upsets and disrupts hierarchies of knowledge. Contra Rancière, there is hierarchy in ignorance inasmuch as there is hierarchy in knowledge, as the parliamentary debates about the citizenship test have made clear. Although assumptions about citizens' incompetence and ignorance underpin discourses of elite democracy and hierarchical expertise, citizenship tests reveal a different production of ignorance. For Mills, it is the master-educator who necessarily must embrace an epistemology of

ignorance. The citizenship test relies on a fictional ‘ignorant schoolmaster’, who does not assume either knowledge or incapacity in the students, but who must incessantly produce and reproduce a dominant epistemology of ignorance. Ignorance is not an inversion or temporary lack of knowledge, but is actively produced through the obscuring, suppression, selection, erasure or limitation of knowledge.

In the section on the UK’s ‘long and illustrious history’, the slave trade occupies less than one page out of the 180-page book. After setting out the existence of the slave trade overseas, the reader is told that

There were, however, people in Britain who opposed the slave trade. ... In 1807, it became illegal to trade slaves in British ships or from British ports, and in 1833 the Emancipation Act abolished slavery throughout the British Empire. The Royal Navy stopped slave ships from other countries, freed the slaves and punished the slave traders.<sup>11</sup>

The 2007 edition assessment of slavery as an ‘evil side to this commercial expansion and prosperity’ had been excised from the third, 2013 edition. The work of excision and insertion from the second to the third editions reveals the contours of an epistemic space where ignorance needs to be actively produced.<sup>12</sup> The reference to British ships transporting slaves to America and the Caribbean is removed, while a reference to the Royal Navy interventions to stop slave-carrying ships is newly inserted. Both editions of the guidebook present the abolition of slavery as a white initiative, where there is no mention of the role of slave resistance or revolt.

When the third edition introduces a reference to the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is to emphasize that the ‘British armed forces have been engaged in the global fight against international terrorism and against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, including operations in Afghanistan and Iraq’.<sup>13</sup> In conflating terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, Afghanistan and Iraq, the citizenship test produces an ‘epistemological privilege of unknowing’,<sup>14</sup> which simultaneously erases the possibility of symbolic conflict about history, culture and politics.

### **Datified citizens, opaque state**

In 2013, the *Life in the UK* test was contracted out to Learndirect Limited, a company that provides online ‘learning and assessment’ technologies. Alongside the provision of the online testing system and running the tests across the country, Learndirect also claims that it is responsible for maintaining the ‘accuracy, currency and quality of each question used to ensure that each test represents a fair and reliable assessment, as set out in the current handbook’.<sup>15</sup>

What is not mentioned, neither on the website nor in the information packages candidates are offered, is the intense production of data around the test. The test centres are also data centres and the citizenship test becomes a device of data production. Yet this data production is quasi-invisible, flowing across opaque circuits that remain unspecified. Learndirect is required to provide a plethora of data about those taking the test and to export it on a daily basis to the Home Office; it is also explicitly named in the contract with the Home Office as a ‘data processor’. None of this information is available to the candidates, and no disclosure is made about the data collected. This data is not limited to personal identification data. Data is also collected through the whole infrastructure developed around citizenship testing. Alongside the *Life in the UK* guidebook, study guides, e-books, and iTunes apps are available, whose acquisition instigates further data collection and processing and enlists non-citizens within new alliances between private and public actors.

The contract between the Home Office and Learndirect itself was only made public in March 2014 under a Freedom of Information release, while sections of the contract have been blacked out. According to the contract stipulation, the data collected ranges

from data about the location of the test centre to personal data, date and place of birth, but it also includes data such as the start and end time of the test, or the exact score achieved. None of this information is available to candidates, who receive only a pass/fail result. The circuits of the data collected by Learndirect, its uses, flows and potential impact on citizenship applications remain opaque. This opacity of data collection and processing is neither secrecy nor invisibility, but a variable density of unknown, unavailable and undisclosed information. How is the data put to use, by whom, to which purposes? How does it flow across private–public alliances? The contract with the Home Office requires Learndirect to process data in accordance with data protection legislation in the UK:

13.2 The Contractor will process the Authority Personal Data only in accordance with the Contract (as amended from time to time) and the Authority’s instructions and will have taken steps to ensure the reliability of its employees who are used to process the Authority Personal Data.

13.3. The Contractor warrants that it has appropriate technical and organisational measures in place to safeguard against any unauthorised access, loss, destruction, theft, or disclosure of the Authority Personal Data.<sup>16</sup>

Circuits of data flows are set in place, whose contours and effects remain unfathomable. What is the purpose of gathering the start and end time data for all test takers, when the duration of the test is not a criterion in citizenship or permanent residence applications? The test has already an allocated standard time of 45 minutes for a total of 24 questions.

At the centre in North London where I took the

test, it was followed by an ‘obligatory’ survey – another form of data production and collection about the centre. These discontinuous moments of testing and surveying need to be placed within a terrain of increased datafication of governance, which is largely invisible, unacknowledged or secret.

Learndirect is the UK’s largest online learning provider<sup>17</sup> and has held government contracts for the provision of online learning and other educational services since its establishment in 2002 as the online learning brand for the government company Ufi, set up two years earlier under the Labour government’s ‘University for industry’ programme. In 2006, the Public Accounts Committee conclusions to their twenty-eighth report captured the extent of this project:

In seven years Ufi has provided over 4 million courses to 1.7 million people up to July 2005, two-thirds of whom had not done any learning in the previous three years. It now provides around 500,000 learners a year with an opportunity to improve their skills either at one of 2,400 learndirect centres, at work, or from their home computer.<sup>18</sup>

Neither then nor later on is data mentioned. In 2011, Learndirect was acquired by Lloyds Development Company, the private equity arm of Lloyds Banking Group, for an estimated £40 million.<sup>19</sup> In 2013, building upon its earlier work with *Life in the UK*



Joseph M'Belolo Ya M'Piku in Vincent Meessen's *Personne et les Autres*, Belgian Pavilion, 56th Venice Biennial, 2015

testing, Learndirect won the contract for the provision of computer-based testing across the UK government.<sup>20</sup>

Citizenship tests enter a broader epistemic terrain where datafication produces opaque circuits of knowledge and nonknowledge. Citizenship is now a datafication machine, where moments of differential inclusion and exclusion become opportunities for data collection and processing. Datafication does not simply quantify people and things by decoupling data from their physical presence and enabling liquid infrastructural circuits that allow for the quick manipulation and circulation of data. It makes possible the enrolment of citizens and non-citizens into renewed processes of accumulation, where data has become both a commodity and an asset. The citizenship test is not simply decelerating and temporalizing access to citizenship – it constitutes the infrastructure and the timespace of data collection, processing and connection. These circuits of data, its uses and retention by public and private actors, rely on the production of opacity: neither total secrecy, nor complete invisibility.

### **Uncertain citizens**

At the same time that the UK introduced the citizenship test, new changes to immigration and nationality law were being proposed. I want to place the citizenship test in relation to these other techniques that rearticulate citizenship through deprivation. After two subsequent modifications that extended the remit citizenship deprivation, in 2014, a new clause on citizenship deprivation made it possible to deprive a naturalized citizen of British citizenship, even if deprivation rendered them stateless.<sup>21</sup> The reason for citizenship deprivation is now, alongside fraud, ‘conduct that is seriously prejudicial to the vital interests of the UK’. As recognized by the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee in its legislative scrutiny of changes to citizenship deprivation, ‘one of the principal purposes, and possibly the only purpose, of the new power is to enable the Secretary of State to remove from the UK individuals who are deemed to be dangerous and therefore a risk to national security.’<sup>22</sup>

Citizenship testing and deprivation are symmetric devices for managing uncertain citizens and anticipatory security. The extension of testing from citizenship acquisition to permanent residence is paralleled by an extension of citizenship deprivation to naturalized citizens. Citizenship testing and citizenship deprivation speak to a simultaneous dilemma about uncertainty. They aim to filter those who are potentially dangerous by reading their future actions from present beliefs and past conduct. Thus, citizenship deprivation has been extended from those who were found to have acquired citizenship fraudulently to those who might engage in ‘seriously prejudicial’ action. The target of citizenship deprivation is not the convicted terrorist, but the potential or suspect terrorist whose actions in the future meld into the uncertainty of possible dangers. From unexpected and potentially catastrophic futures, uncertainty becomes a marker of nonknowledge that underpins dispersed suspicion and the production of uncertain citizens. In the UK, citizenship deprivation has been recently supplemented by passport seizure powers and temporary exclusion orders, which render citizenship statuses increasingly more uncertain. All that is required is that the Home Secretary ‘reasonably suspects’ that citizens might be involved in terrorism-related activities.<sup>23</sup> Even though they have not been convicted, these ‘uncertain’ citizens will be unable to return to the UK if deprived of citizenship while abroad. Moreover, they can become the objects of pre-emptive targeted killing. The management of uncertainty develops yet another cartography of nonknowledge, in which the uncertain future danger is translated into uncertain citizen-subjects. As Rebecca Lemov has noted about the Guantánamo detainees, they appear ‘as sources both of vigorously active knowledge creation and intensively crafted areas of uncertainty’.<sup>24</sup> The more data is extracted and intelligence is gathered about the citizen-suspect, the more

uncertainty is produced to the extent that citizenship itself becomes uncertain. These devices of testing, deprivation, seizure and exclusion perform the limit of knowledge, the inability to address the uncertainty of the future except by translating it back into ever proliferating uncertainty about words, actions and subjectivity.

The injunction contained in the first pages of the *Life in the UK* guidebook – ‘Become a permanent migrant to the UK!’ – ultimately gains its meaning as neither a mistake nor the truth of citizenship, but as the symptom of a fundamental uncertainty about citizenship today.<sup>25</sup>

## Notes

1. ‘Can you pass a citizenship test? Most young people can’t’. Available from <http://i100.independent.co.uk/article/can-you-pass-a-uk-citizenship-test-most-young-people-cant-gjov-H6BQx>.
2. Thom Brooks, ‘The ‘Life in the United Kingdom’ Citizenship Test: Is It Unfit for Purpose?’, Durham University, Durham, 2013.
3. Oded Löwenheim and Orit Gazit, ‘Power and Examination: A Critique of Citizenship Tests’, *Security Dialogue*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2009, p. 147.
4. Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1973–1974*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008, p. 47.
5. Matthias Gross proposes to use ignorance as the cover term, with nonknowledge as one of its sub-categories, referring to the ‘type of knowledge where the limits and the borders of knowing are taken into account for future planning and action’. I take ‘nonknowledge’ as the overarching term in order to trace a series of distinctions between ignorance, uncertainty, secrecy or opacity. Matthias Gross, ‘The Unknown in Process: Dynamic Connections of Ignorance, Non-Knowledge and Realized Concepts’, *Current Sociology*, vol. 55, no. 5, 2007, p. 749.
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8. House of Lords, ‘Immigration: UK Citizenship and Nationality’, *Hansard*, col. GC 125.
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10. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoomaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1991.
11. Home Office, *Life in the UK: A Guide for New Residents*, p. 43.
12. Home Office, *Life in the UK: A Journey to Citizenship*, TSO, Norwich, 2007, p. 19; Home Office, *Life in the UK: A Guide for New Residents*.
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17. [www.learndirect.com/business/products-and-services/more-services/learndirect-in-schools](http://www.learndirect.com/business/products-and-services/more-services/learndirect-in-schools); accessed 17 September 2015.
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