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To cite this article: Anna Tuckett (2020): Britishness Outsourced: State Conduits, Brokers and the British Citizenship Test, *Ethnos*, DOI: [10.1080/00141844.2019.1687543](https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2019.1687543)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2019.1687543>



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Published online: 23 Feb 2020.



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Britishness Outsourced: State Conduits, Brokers and the British Citizenship Test

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of two different types of organisations which act as brokers on behalf of the British state in the citizenship test process. Situating these organisations' emergence within a neoliberal British state characterised by its 'dispersal', it shows that contemporary configurations of the state, market and third sector mean that new and sometimes unexpected actors take on state-like roles. The ambiguous position of these different organisations means that while the reach of the neoliberal state is more diffuse and opaque than ever, clear boundaries between state and non-state realms do continue to exist. Paradoxically, therefore, the blurring of boundaries which characterises the neoliberal state is also accompanied by the hardening of borders between state and non-state realms. This reinforcement of boundaries can appear both to increase state power and to challenge it.

KEYWORDS Anthropology of the UK; brokers; citizenship migration; neoliberalism; state

Since 2005, all migrants applying for Indefinite Leave to Remain (permanent residency) or citizenship are required to pass the Life in the UK test. While its original aim was to encourage active and participatory citizenship, when the test was revised in 2013 the then Prime Minister David Cameron claimed that 'British history and culture [would be put] at the heart of it'. As a result, in its current form the test requires migrants to rehearse an antiquated and idealised version of British history, culture and society. Based on 24 questions, topics include the Stone Age, the Roman invasion, the War of the Roses, 'Bloody Mary', Dolly the Sheep, pantomimes, the Scottish judicial system and countless others. While a report, which was commissioned before the test's introduction, recommended that Life in the UK should not be a test but rather a state-funded learning process, in its current incarnation it is an examination based on the government produced handbook – Life in the United Kingdom: a guide for new residents – and no state-funded support is available for applicants in their preparation for it.

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This article explores the curious absence of the state in the citizenship test process and examines the role of both official and unofficial private institutions who come to hold state-like positions in their delivery of citizenship test related services. The first of these are unofficial and unregulated private schools which, for a fee, offer migrants assistance in helping to prepare for the test. Usually run by migrants themselves, these schools – in the words of one teacher – ‘fill a gap in the market’, providing migrants with classes on British history, society, politics and culture. The second type of private institution discussed in this article are the official test centres, where the citizenship test is delivered. These centres hold a contract with the private company Learn-direct – an online provider of skills, training and employment services – which itself holds a contract with the Home Office (the ministerial department responsible for immigration, security and law and order) to deliver the online test. These centres, which exist across the country, vary greatly but all act as conduits for the Home Office which sets the test.

My aim is to explore the role of these two different types of organisations which act as brokers on behalf of the British state. Situating their emergence within a neoliberal British state characterised by its ‘dispersal’ (Clarke and Newman 1997) through outsourcing, I show that contemporary configurations of the state, market and third sector (Koch and James 2019), mean that various and sometimes unexpected actors take on state-like roles. The ambiguous position of these different organisations means that while the reach of the neoliberal state is more diffuse and invisible than ever, clear boundaries between state and non-state realms do continue to exist. The brokers presented here may hold state-like roles, but their day-to-day work frequently highlights their position outside of the official state realm. At times this is visible through their lack of access to the state and its resources, which points to the state’s impenetrability and power. At others, the subtle subversion of official government messages reveals the limits of the state’s influence. Paradoxically, therefore, the blurring of boundaries which characterises the neoliberal state is also accompanied by the hardening of borders between state and non-state realms in particular moments. At times this reinforcement of boundaries can appear to increase state power and its effect (Abrams 2006), and at others to challenge it (see also Griffiths 2013).

The Dispersed State

The involvement of private schools and outsourced test centres in the delivery of the Life in the UK test are characteristic of the contemporary ‘managerial state’ in Britain (Clarke and Newman 1997), in which public and private domains have become highly blurred. While the rolling out of the ‘managerial state’ began under the Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and continued during the New Labour years, the hybridisation of arrangements between the market, third sector and government institutions (Koch and James 2019) has also become characteristic of recent austerity policies. Rather than view the state as fragmented through processes of outsourcing, Clarke and Newman argue that the term ‘dispersal’ is more apt, as it does not imply that the process is disintegrative (1997:25). ‘Dispersal’ refers to the

variety of means through which the state ‘delegates ... its authority to subaltern organisations that thus are empowered to act on its behalf’ (1997:25). It highlights the relations and flows of power that underpin these processes as the roles of the private, voluntary and informal sectors are expanded (1997:25). For Clarke and Newman this dispersal does not necessarily signify the diminution of state power, since it can also indicate its expansion ‘through new and unfamiliar means’ (1997:26). This description of the British managerial state is in line with anthropological observations of modern Western states more generally which, Hansen and Stepputat argue, are ‘more diverse, more imprecise in their boundaries vis-à-vis other forms of organization, [and] more privatized or semiprivatized than ever before’ (2001:16).

In both Western and non-Western settings, anthropological work has documented the blurring of the public and private realms that characterise neoliberal state policy (Abram and Weszkalnys 2011; Bear 2011; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; James 2011b; Sharma 2006). Much of this work has taken a Foucauldian approach, arguing that the ‘rolling back of the state’ leads to ‘the transfer of the operations of government to nonstate entities’ (Ferguson and Gupta 2002:989). In practice, therefore, neoliberal reforms do not mean less government, as purportedly desired by those whom introduce them (Shore and Wright 1997:21). Rather,

the result has been an increase in more subtle methods of intervention and technologies of governance based on ideas of ‘freedom’, ‘enterprise’, ‘management’ and the market – all of which function to make the regulatory power of the state more diffuse and less visible. (Shore and Wright 1997:21)

In the ethnographic examples that follow, such evidence of the increase in government presence, despite its apparent absence, is palpable. In the case of the officially outsourced test centres, staff members, who are categorically not state employees, conduct Home Office authorised identity document verification and other security checks. This produces scenarios in which staff members such as Connor,¹ who did not complete his secondary education and has a history of youth offending, come to hold state-like roles monitoring the official citizenship test process. In the case of the unofficial training centres, meanwhile, migrants without British citizenship, but who are self-trained experts in the government produced Handbook, instruct other migrants on British values, history, society and culture. This involves individuals such as Adam, a Ghanaian teacher who is himself a migrant, instructing other migrants about roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, the history of British colonialism and the works of Jane Austen.

In both of the case studies that follow, therefore, the ‘etatization of society’ (Foucault 1991:103) or ‘de-statization of government’ (Rose 1996:56) is highly visible and takes surprising forms. Yet while this governmentality approach reveals the way in which state influence becomes more diffuse under neoliberal reforms (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Ong 1999; Sharma 2006; Shore and Wright 1997), its rather all-encompassing vision of state power exaggerates the state’s reach and obscures the separation between state and non-state entities that in many scenarios continues to exist. This both underestimates the power of the actual state (Koch and James 2019; Wacquant 2010:217) and obscures the ways in which its power is challenged in subtle and

unexpected ways. I argue that it is in the absence of the state – whether intentionally (in the case of lack of state funding for training) or unintentionally (when outsourced systems malfunction) – that its presence is most keenly felt.

Conduits and Brokers

A central characteristic of the dispersed ‘managerial’ state is the involvement of private and third sector organisations in the delivery and management of public services which, according to proponents of neoliberal reform, will produce greater efficiency and generate value for money. This arrangement exists across different areas including welfare and benefits (Forbess 2019; Patrick 2017), debt (Davey 2019; James 2019), housing (Alexander, Bruun and Koch 2018; Gutierrez Garza 2019; Wilde 2019), the prison and probationary services and many more. These third parties include large private companies which hold lucrative deals with the government to deliver public services, as well as charities, NGOs and the voluntary sector more generally. In addition to those who hold formal arrangements to deliver such services, also filling the gap in more informal and ad hoc ways are small businesses, activist networks (Gutierrez Garza 2019; Wilde 2019) and individual citizens who are continuously developing new and ever more innovative responses to the modern regime of austerity (Koch and James 2019).

Whether providing services officially outsourced by the state or opportunistically ‘filling a gap’ produced by the state’s withdrawal, in settings of neoliberal reform such as the UK, the role of the broker who mediates between different agencies, bodies and individuals ‘appears as a critical figure’ (James 2011a; Lindquist 2015a:9). As both ‘products and producers’ (James 2011a:335) of the societies from which they emerge, brokers simultaneously appear as state, market and third sector entities. Because they rely on the gap between individuals and the resources they need to access, brokers are often depicted as morally ambiguous figures (James 2011a; Lindquist 2015b; Tuckett 2018) who manipulate the multiple worlds they occupy for their own profit, ultimately entrenching and reproducing existing inequalities (Blok 1974; Boissevain 1974). The following ethnography focuses on two kinds of brokers who act as middlemen to the dispersed state. Both of these brokers tend to be demonised in scholarly, policy and media reports, and represented as unscrupulous. The first are the unofficial and unregulated schools which offer applicants preparation for the test, a service that is not available from any ‘official’ outlet. These migrant-run, high street organisations, which tend also to offer services in English language, training for professional licences (in security services for example) and other immigration-related issues, are often viewed by the formal charity and NGO sector as unscrupulous and under-qualified (James and Killick 2010:14).

The second are the officially outsourced test centres who hold contracts with the Home Office (which are mediated by another agency) and play an official role in the delivery of the citizenship test. They process candidates, check identity documents, monitor cheating and supply certificates. These latter organisations are part of the ever-expanding outsourced state. Since the 1980s the UK government has employed

third parties to provide public services, a process that has proliferated at both central and local government levels (Haslam 2015), particularly for immigration-related services and bureaucracy (see Griffiths 2013 on Immigration Detention Centres). In 2013, under the Coalition government, outsourcing was the third largest source of government expenditure (Rutter and Gil 2014), and the UK is now the second largest outsourcing market in the world outside the US (Plimmer 2015). Government spending on outsourcing has come under fire on several fronts for some time. Critics argue that a lack of transparency in relation to the contracts makes quality and value for money difficult to assess (Haslam 2015). And, further, that national and local government agencies are now dependent on these outsourced companies, as they ‘no longer have the operating capacity to deliver public services’ (Haslam 2015). These criticisms are accompanied by regular media stories relaying the serious errors and misjudgements of some of the larger outsourced companies who deliver public services. Overall, then, despite the claim that outsourcing increases efficiency and value for money, government outsourcing is often viewed as lacking in transparency, accountability and efficacy. The large companies which hold the contracts, meanwhile, are demonised as incompetent, money-grabbing baddies.

As the following ethnography will highlight, however, in the actual delivery of these services a more complex picture emerges. In the case of citizenship tests, the test centres that provide the outsourced services are far removed from the private equity company, Lloyds Development Capital, that owns Learndirect, which holds the contract with the government. The test centres I visited included an Iranian community association providing free advice and support to the local community and a small business which traditionally specialised in adult education and support for youth offenders.

In different ways then, both official test centres and unofficial training centres or ‘schools’ fulfil the work of the state made necessary by its absence. In the case of the test centres, the power of the state is made palpable through its absence: it remotely controls everyday undertakings and cannot be held accountable for its administrative and technical errors. Meanwhile, as Life in the UK teachers relay the meanings of the government produced Handbook to hopeful citizenship candidates, they are transformed into state-like officials, inculcating their students with the current government’s view on ‘good citizenship’, as well as British history, society and culture. This extends the reach and power of the state as its immigration policies are delivered and enabled through the assistance of these brokers. Yet, as we will see, in its delivery the government’s message is altered and transformed in ways which subtly challenges the ideology upon which it is based.

The UK Citizenship Test

The introduction of the UK citizenship test can be traced back to the New Labour government’s 2002 White Paper *Secure Borders, Safe Haven*, which set out new criteria for citizenship. Firstly, language requirements would be taken more seriously by involving some form of test. Secondly, there would be a new requirement that individuals would need ‘sufficient knowledge about life in the United Kingdom’ to be granted citizenship.

While initially these requirements were only for naturalisation applicants, in 2007 they were also extended to those applying for Indefinite Leave to Remain. At the time, the introduction of the citizenship test reflected new policies on community cohesion that have been visible across Western Europe, where discourses of integration, social cohesion and national values are replacing those of multiculturalism and the politics of recognition (Kostakopoulou 2010:830). In the UK, particular events motivated this shift in policy and rhetoric. These included the riots which took place in a number of cities in Northern England in summer 2001, which were seen 'as signifiers of the existence of divided communities, the members of which led parallel lives and an almost complete segregation based on race' (Kostakopoulou 2010:832) and the bombings in London in July 2007. This later incident, perpetrated by 'home-grown terrorists', was 'viewed as a clear testimony of the failure of multi-culturalism' (Kostakopoulou 2010:832). In an attempt to increase national cohesion and a shared sense of belonging, policymakers resolved to 'thicken' citizenship through the introduction of more stringent naturalisation requirements (Kostakopoulou 2010:832).

When it was first introduced the test did not fulfil many of the commissioned Advisory Report's recommendations (2003). These included that the assessment should be based on progress and warned that a 'one size fits all' approach could discriminate against those who 'contribute to the needs of the economy through unskilled labour' (2003). Candidates were, however, given the option to take and pass a course for English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) combined with components from the Handbook, instead of taking the online test. Overall, the test in its early form was relatively easy to pass. This reflected the then New Labour government's attitudes towards immigration, which held that 'regular, large scale legal immigration is essential to the continued prosperity and international competitiveness of the UK economy' (Coleman and Rowthorn 2004:582).

Such sentiments are a far cry from the declared intention made 10 years later by then Home Secretary (now former Prime Minister) Theresa May, who stated the need to create a 'hostile environment' for 'illegal immigrants'. This 'hostile environment' is currently being created through the introduction of the latest immigration bill, which proposes to extend state borders deep into civil society through the introduction of mandatory immigration checks by landlords, banks and taxi companies (Vicol 2016). This change in public discourse panders to increased public expression of discontent with immigration and the perception that 'too many migrants' are to blame for struggling public services, lack of employment opportunities and decreasing wages. This narrative was strongly mobilised by the 'Leave' campaign during the UK referendum on its membership to the European Union, who sought to connect growing inequality and struggling public services with increased EU migration and a lack of control over borders (Evans 2017; Koch 2017). From 2011, reflecting a change in state immigration policy, the citizenship test became significantly more challenging. It included far more content on British history and the process became more restrictive with the removal of the possibility for applicants to undertake a course. This has led to a sharp fall in successful citizenship applications (Brooks 2016) with 118,152 people granted citizenship

in 2015, down 40 per cent from 207,989 two years earlier, before the changes were made (Brooks 2016).

It is within this changing political landscape that the UK citizenship test has evolved. While initially, it may have been an attempt to create more active and participatory citizenship, in its current content, process and delivery it is experienced by those who take it as a gatekeeping exercise. In the words of one student at a Life in the UK training school: ‘these people don’t want to give the red book [British passport] to nobody’.

Unofficial Brokers: Between Business, Altruism and the State

Despite the recommendations of the report commissioned by the New Labour government, there are no state-funded classes to help candidates prepare for the Life in the UK test and the Handbook must be bought at individuals’ own expense for £7.99. For many, however, reading the Handbook independently is not sufficient to pass the test. In particular, those with weaker English and/or literacy skills struggle to understand and absorb the Handbook’s dry and dense prose. Many individuals take the test several times (at significant personal cost) before passing, while others decide that they are unable to pass the test independently and seek out help to prepare.

‘Filling the gap in the market’ are training centres across London, and the rest of the UK, which help migrants to prepare for the test. These Life in the UK training centres exist in various guises, but generally also teach English. While previously a much larger number of establishments acted as official test centres for the Life in the UK test, since 2011 the number of test centres has been greatly reduced. In part, this is due to the discovery of fraudulent practices taking place in some test centres. This has greatly curtailed the number of clients that some of these training centres receive, as their services are now restricted to preparing candidates for taking tests elsewhere, rather than preparing them and testing them on site. As a result, these centres have expanded and diversified their services to include, for example, training for professional licences (such as to become security guards), room rental for events and immigration-related advice.

These institutions, therefore, occupy a peculiar and ambiguous position in relation to the state. They are institutionally entirely separate from the state, yet they are forced to respond to the frequent changes in state regulations, protocol and funding arrangements. Government cuts mean that they are also forced to innovate in order to survive and for their clients’ needs to be met. Learning Exchange in West London, for example, had previously acted as an English language test centre and offered other immigration-related advice and support, but by the time of my fieldwork in summer 2016, it had become XChange, a money exchange service. As the two young British-Lebanese men who ran the establishment told me:

Yeah, we used to be a test centre for both Life in the UK and B1, but it’s all changed now. Before we were teaching Life in the UK and English and providing immigration advice, but it is all different now and it’s too hard.

As they explained, besides the latest restrictions on where citizenship and English exams could be taken, the introduction of stricter immigration rules mean that there are

increasingly few possibilities for individuals to actually apply for Leave to Remain in the UK. They also usually need the assistance of a qualified solicitor to do so. Thus, while previously these types of establishments assisted clients with basic form-filling, stricter immigration controls mean that the kind of assistance clients now require is beyond their capacity and capability.

Tougher immigration rules, however, mean that migrants are more in need of advice services than ever before. Funding cuts to both legal aid in relation to immigration-related services (James and Killick 2010, 2012) and to charities which offer advice and assistance to migrants, force migrants to become increasingly resourceful in the manner in which they seek out advice. The Life in the UK training centres where I conducted fieldwork, although mostly not officially providers of immigration advice (in the UK, immigration advisers must be registered with the Office of the Immigration Service Commissioner), they often do provide basic and ad hoc information on immigration rules and recent changes to the law on clients' demand. In large part, this is because the services they offer are so intertwined with the constantly changing immigration policy landscape that dispensing a certain level of advice with relation to applications is inevitable. This often involves providing students with information about the requisites needed to apply for applications and renewals. More generally, class discussions would regularly involve students exchanging their own personal stories in relation to immigration status and how the latest change in law might affect them. When these types of conversations took place in classes run by Adam, a Life in the UK teacher, he would dispel myths and project the Home Office website onto the whiteboard, warning students that they should regard only the Home Office website as a reliable source of information. Many students, however, struggle to independently browse, so Adam often helps his students after the class by looking at the website with them. Additionally, during his classes on the section about legal advice, Adam warns students about the dangers of unscrupulous solicitors: 'check what their area of specialism is before you tell them what your problem is. Otherwise, they'll just say they are an expert anyway'.

Emily, who had previously been a Life in the UK teacher at Learning Exchange before it became a money exchange service, was now operating Life in the UK classes from her home. She explained to me that she received phone calls daily from individuals who had come across her advertisement for Life in the UK classes on Google. They were seeking out information on the booking procedure and test more generally. Since there is no official helpline for the Life in the UK process, these schools and teachers become important points of reference for people to ask for advice about how to book the test, what to do if they have provided the wrong identity document information and other related queries. The shadow of the state (Shah 2010), therefore, looms large over migrants, who are acutely aware of how unforgiving the Home Office is with regard to incomplete or erroneously completed applications. At the same time, however, the state is inaccessible when such migrants need help or reassurance, thereby forcing them instead to revert to advice from unqualified teachers.

On the one hand, therefore, these schools disseminate free advice to migrants which is in high demand and in scarce supply given funding cuts to legal aid providers and

charities. They protectively warn migrants against the vagaries of unscrupulous solicitors and immigration advisers. On the other, however, these establishments are not charities motivated by the exclusive desire to help people. Rather, they are entrepreneurial businesses which aim to make a profit that may not always be aligned to the best interests of the client. Hussein, a Pakistani-British man in his early thirties who runs the Education Hub in East London, tells me how he has connections throughout the local area. The High Street solicitor two doors down the road makes referrals to the Education Hub when his clients need to sit the Life in the UK or B1 exam, while Hussein sends his clients to the solicitor when they need legal advice. Similar arrangements exist with various other local businesses. While he interprets this situation as 'win-win' for himself and his clients, I cannot help but wonder if such an arrangement is always to clients' advantage. High Street solicitors are renowned for charging high fees and providing inadequate immigration-related advice (James and Killick 2010:14).

This mixture of community altruism and entrepreneurial profit-seeking is also evident at Robertson College, a migrant-run establishment which, among other services, offers courses in Life in the UK, English, teacher training, business administration and professional skills. In some respects the 'college' seems to be run according to a philanthropic and community-minded philosophy. It provides students with free and informal advice on immigration matters and operates a flexible attendance policy for Life in the UK classes, which essentially allows unlimited access to lessons. This policy is very popular among students, many of whom hold irregular routines: those with unpredictable shift patterns, those on zero-hour contracts and those with young children are still able to attend classes. Yet at the same time, Robertson College is not a charitable enterprise and at times it charges students unnecessary fees which take advantage of their lack of awareness and computer illiteracy.

After passing her Life in the UK test, my respondent Veronica from Sierra Leone, who I met at Robertson College, needed to book the B1 English exam in order to apply for naturalisation. She in fact already held an English language certificate, but the kind she had was no longer accepted by the Home Office for naturalisation applications. To book the test we went up to the office of Prince (the partner of the woman who owns Robertson College) who, using a red Santander credit card which he selected from among others lined up on the desk, paid for the test online. The cost of the test was £200 plus a £50 booking fee for Robertson College, which Veronica gave to Prince in cash. Ironically, while filling in the electronic booking form for the English exam, Prince commented that the prices of the English test (£200) and the Home Office fees in general are 'too expensive'. This was a fact that Veronica was all too aware of. In the past month, she had spent £50 on the Life in the UK test, £250 on the classes, £250 on the B1 (including booking fee), and was soon to spend over £1200 for the naturalisation application itself. In theory the £50 fee includes helping the client prepare for the test, but given Veronica's fluency in English and the fact that the test is very easy to pass, Prince spent only five minutes non-committedly helping her to prepare for the oral examination. 'You're from Sierra Leone?', he asked her. 'A woman from your country recently chose to talk about the differences between Sierra Leone and the UK for her topic, you could do that too?' 'Ok, I'll do the same', Veronica responded

hesitantly. Prince then told her to come up with some differences between the countries and gave her a sheet of paper on which she could write notes to take with her to the test. As we left I felt guilty that I had not booked the test for her myself. Since she did not need any assistance in preparing for the test, £50 seemed a high price to pay for a simple online booking which she could have done with my help.

Like brokers in general, therefore, these centres are ethically and morally ambiguous spaces (James 2011a; Tuckett 2018). They offer advice and support to migrants free of charge and warn them against unscrupulous immigration advisers or solicitors who may charge high rates or give out incorrect information. Yet, they also profit from migrants' need of assistance and even take advantage of them. Responding to government changes in administrative protocol, laws and funding cuts, they cobble together 'patchwork' (Forbess and James 2017) arrangements which merge together altruistic do-gooding with entrepreneurial opportunism (see also James 2011a; Tuckett 2018). In doing so, they come to hold an unexpected role within the 'managerial state' that points to the diffusive and penetrative nature of contemporary governance, as well as to the limits of state power and its control over who acts as its brokers.

Teaching and Learning 'Life in the UK'

It is not only these institutions' structural position which places them in an ambiguous relationship with the state. Through the teaching and learning process, these teachers and institutions simultaneously come to act as handmaidens for the government and its official message, as well as providing the means for which such a message can be questioned and challenged. As we will see, in addition to the official line of the Handbook on British values, principles, history and society, contemporary ideological views about good citizenship, welfare dependency and modern austerity regimes are also imparted through the teaching process (Patrick 2017). At the same time, however, through the process of interpretation, official government messages are also adapted, hybridised and subtly challenged during the classes.

In general, the Life in the UK courses cost between £200 and £300 for approximately 12–24 hours of classes. Most establishments allow students to continue to attend classes until they are ready to pass and take the test without paying extra. In some schools the classes are taught one-on-one and in others they are taught in groups. Students attending these classes hail from diverse parts of the world, although the location of the classes does reflect the population make-up of the local area to some extent. Additionally, pass rates can vary widely by nationality. For example, Americans and Australians pass 98 per cent of tests while Bangladeshi and Turkish nationals pass only 45 per cent (Brooks 2016). In general, those who attend classes tend to be from relatively poor countries and the students generally – although not entirely – have relatively low levels of education and many struggle with literacy.

Of the Life in the UK training centres I attended during 12 months of fieldwork in London between 2015 and 2017, Robertson College (introduced above) was the most popular. In large part, this was due to its visible location on a High Street next to a

busy bus stop. A sandwich board sits in front of its entrance displaying a picture of a British passport, offering 'Immigration, Documentation, Life in the UK, English Classes, Exam Bookings and English B1'. Word of mouth about the effective teaching style also attracts students from further afield. Lastly, the school's flexible policy, which allows students to drop in and out of classes without notice, is extremely popular.

Having received permission to sit and observe the classes from Henry, a smartly dressed young German–British–Nigerian man who co-manages Robertson College with his twin brother, I attend my first class. The class takes place in a long room with windows at the back which are cloaked with red velvet curtains that hide the view onto the busy High Street outside. Tables are pushed vertically together to form a long narrow strip around which students sit. They turn their heads to look at the front of the class where there is a whiteboard upon which the teacher is preparing to project his PowerPoint. Adam, the teacher, is a 30-year-old Ghanaian man. He is immaculately dressed, wearing a dark suit, white shirt and red tie. He jokes with his students while he turns on his laptop and projector, and tells them that they will do a quick revision test while they wait for more students to arrive. The classes start at 10 am and run until 2 pm, and students tend to drop in and out depending on their work schedules and family commitments.

'Question One', Adam reads out from the projected screen. 'The first people to live in Britain were Hunter Gatherers in what we call the Stone Age? True or False?'

'True', answers one student. 'False', shouts out another.

'Why, why?' Adam questions his students, challenging them to explain their answers.

'Question two', Adam shouts out, 'Charles II was interested in science. During his reign, the Royal Society was formed to promote "natural knowledge"? True or False?'

After the recap is finished and the class has filled up, Adam carries on from where the students had finished the previous day. The class is a mixed group. Among others there are two Eritrean women both in their 30s, a 45-year-old Jamaican man, an elderly man from Senegal, a Nigerian woman, a middle-aged Ghanaian man and woman, a 40-year-old Peruvian woman, a young Indian woman, an older Turkish woman and a young Cypriot man.

'OK, British inventions. These you just have to remember, but I'll try to give you some tips. G-O-O-D-F-E-L-L-O-W', Adam writes on the whiteboard, while the class highlight the name printed in their handouts. 'This was a *Good* man with *Good* ideas, Goodfellow! What did he invent? The ATM machine. The first ATM machine was in Enfield.'

These kinds of mnemonic tricks are Adam's speciality.

'What was the Battle of Bosworth Field? A battle to be King'. 'Boss', he says as he underlines the letters Bos, 'like a King, yes?' 'Worth' he says as he underlines the second section of the word. 'You see, Bos-worth field. They both thought they were *worthy* of being the boss, the king. You see!' He exclaims, visibly pleased with himself.

'Ha, ha,' some of the students exclaim out loud. 'That's a good one teach, that's a good one.'

This eclectic mix of information is representative of the contents of the Handbook, which covers chapters on the values and principles of the UK, its ‘long and illustrious history’, its ‘modern, thriving society’ and the ‘government, the law and your role’. In his teaching materials, Adam has summarised these chapters into three sections and condensed the information so that ‘it flows’. ‘The book’, he tells me, ‘can be very hard for some students to read. They can’t read well and the ideas in the book do not flow naturally. Information relating to one particular thing will be on all different pages’. He sees his role as a ‘facilitator’, helping those who would otherwise fail the test to both understand and memorise the material. While the history section is Adam’s favourite part to teach, in his view the first section, on the fundamental principles of British life, is the most important.

He regularly emphasises to his students why ‘they’ (the government) make ‘them’ (the migrants) do the test:

This is to help you fit in. As human beings, we don’t live in isolation. So we all need to go in the same direction. As a British, there are things we believe in, which you need to know, especially if you’re going to change your citizenship. After you’ve learnt them, if you don’t like those beliefs, you can say ‘no thanks, I don’t want your passport’, and go back [to your country of origin].

In these classes, Adam and other Life in the UK teachers, instruct migrants on how to be a ‘good British citizen’ and about the values, principles and historical events that, according to the Handbook, Britain cherishes. In doing so they take on a state-like role, reiterating the government’s view on ‘good British citizenship’ and ensuring that new citizens toe the line. For example, in relation to the ‘responsibilities and freedoms’ granted in British society, Adam tells the class: ‘one of the responsibilities is “Look after yourself and your family”, so that means get a job, don’t take benefits’. Teachers such as Adam, therefore, become unexpected brokers of the state, providing services to help migrants prepare for and undertake government required tests, as well as imparting and inculcating ‘British values’. Presented as generalised norms, these values in fact reflect contemporary political discourses that demonise and stigmatise welfare benefit recipients (see also Patrick 2017). This is particularly paradoxical, given that Adam, and many other teachers like him, are migrants themselves without British citizenship. Transformed into state-like actors, they mediate between the state and migrants, translating and instilling the ‘fundamental values of British Life’ as prescribed by the Conservative government. In doing so, they facilitate the functioning of an immigration policy that acts as a hurdle for migrants in their efforts to obtain secure residency or citizenship.

Yet while such exchanges suggest a somewhat insidious process in which migrants are co-opted by the state to provide a highly ideological take on ‘good British citizenship’, the picture is more complicated. Through the process of teaching the Life in the UK Handbook, in subtle ways the government’s message is altered and challenged. Firstly, teachers do not cleanly impart the government’s message as prescribed in the Handbook; rather, it is refracted in complex and contradictory ways. Adam interprets and explains the information in a way he thinks is understandable to his students and,

in doing so, creates a hybrid version of the Handbook in which the teacher's and students' interpretations merge with its prescribed views. The plague, for example, is likened to Ebola, while Adam jokingly wonders if Queen Mary performed voodoo on Edward VI. Meanwhile, the devolved parliaments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are explained in terms of how a family in Africa might make decisions: 'You don't need to tell your parents everything, like what you are eating for dinner. But if, for example, you get married, you have to say, otherwise they will not give their blessing.' Secondly, despite the self-celebratory tone of the Handbook, at certain times discussion of it provides space for students to level criticism at British society. For example, when discussing the section in the Handbook on literature, Adam tells his class:

They [British people] always want to read books. This is one of the problems with British culture, they always want to read even in congestion time [he acts out someone reading on a busy tube].

Female student: 'Yes, because they don't want to look at each other.'

Or in discussion about the TV licence and pub-going:

Female student: 'Lots of white people don't even have TVs.'

Adam: 'Yes, because they spend all their time in pubs. They go to work. Go to the pub and then go home to sleep. So there's no point.'

At other times, the grandiose version of Britain presented in the Handbook is directly challenged. 'Did they [the British] really invent that or did they just steal it from someone else?' is a frequently made comment by students in discussions about the Handbook's section on great British inventions. Overall, therefore, while much of Adam's instruction falls in line with the Handbook's pompous and puffed-up portrayal of British history, culture and society, at times, his and his students' reflections on Britain also challenge this representation.

Finally, while Adam often echoes dominant anti-immigrant rhetoric, such as the notion that migrant numbers are too high, occasionally he also challenges this view. For example, while teaching about the hunter-gatherers who lived on what is now the British Isles, he regularly tells the students:

If someone says to you: 'you're an immigrant.' You say: 'you're an immigrant too.' God gave us legs and so we move. If there is no water in this place then you go and find water somewhere else.

The inclusion of hunter-gatherers in the citizenship test helps to create the impression that British nationality has, in some capacity, existed since the Stone Age. Although implicit, Adam's comparison of all modern-day immigrants with hunter-gatherers challenges this primordialist view of British nationality and legitimises migrants' place in contemporary U.K. society.

Through teaching the Life in the UK Handbook, therefore, its meanings shift from those originally intended. This happens in contradictory and conflicting ways. Sometimes the Handbook's message is bolstered and at other times it is undermined. But

in both cases, these Life in the U.K. classes bastardise and adapt the Handbook's dominant message and enable alternative worldviews and explanations to emerge.

Test Centres

Unlike the Life in the UK training centres, which are entirely separate from the Home Office, the test centres are registered institutions that hold contracts with Learndirect, which in turn holds a contract with the Home Office to deliver the online citizenship test. While the environment of the Life in the UK classes is educational and collegial, the test centres feel tense. Security around the tests themselves is tight, and the atmosphere inside feels closer to that of the Home Office.

Michael, a 40-something-year-old British-Caribbean man who runs a Life in the UK test centre in London, has given me permission to spend the day with him in order to observe the procedures and to talk to candidates before and after their tests. I am sitting in the room where candidates are registered. The candidate for the 10.30 am slot has arrived and Michael politely but brusquely asks her to sit down and retrieve her identification document and booking form. He carefully scrutinises her driving licence, holding it up to her face. 'Name, place of birth and date of birth?' he asks her while verifying the information on the screen in front of him. 'And what is the reason for your test today?' These are security checks to verify the candidate's identity and to make sure that somebody else is not completing the test on her behalf. Having stowed her bag, watch and other personal belongings in a locker, the candidate is accompanied down the hall to the test room itself.

Things do not go so smoothly for the next candidate. Michael asks his usual questions and then at one point asks the young man if he made the booking himself. 'Yes, I did', he answers anxiously, peering his head at the computer screen which is angled away from him. 'I'm afraid you are going to have to re-book your test for another day sir'. Michael now turns the screen towards the young man and shows him that when booking the test the man selected 'Biometric Residence Card' from the drop-down menu but entered his Passport details. Michael is sympathetic and advises the man to check the e-mail that the automated system sent in order to ensure that it is not a system error. When the man leaves, however, Michael tells me that it is most certainly the candidate's mistake and is a very common one. I witness three more such cases that day. As Michael explains to me, there is nothing he can do because, if the details the candidates have entered into the system are incorrect, the test cannot be generated from the Home Office system. The test centre which Michael runs is merely a conduit for the Home Office, so if a candidate makes a mistake on the booking or arrives late the test cannot be generated.

After the candidates are processed by Michael or a member of his staff, they go through to a waiting area until the time of the test: a room which is quiet with nerves and anticipation. Shortly before their tests are due to commence, candidates are then ushered into the test room which is lined with desktop PCs individually separated into booths with visible CCTV cameras peering down from the ceiling. After completing the online multiple choice test, candidates return to the waiting room

and wait for their name to be called by Michael or a member of his staff. Back in the registration office, the results of the tests appear on the desktop PC. After printing, signing and stamping the certificate, a member of staff, collects the candidate from the waiting room to inform them privately of their results. The day starts well with four consecutive candidates passing the test and being warmly congratulated by Michael. Later in the day, however, there is a stream of fails. Candidates are told the results by staff, who try to be as sensitive as possible: 'there's just a little more to do on this section', Michael says, pointing to the section of the test where the candidate has received the most incorrect answers. If the candidate has passed, Michael emphatically tells them they must look after their pass certificate as they will need it for their application. If they lose it, they must contact the Home Office directly, not the centre.

Test centres are not part of the Home Office, but the Home Office does operate through them via the private company Learndirect. Some Life in the UK test centres are Learndirect centres themselves, while others are private companies which have a contract with Learndirect to deliver the service, such as Michael's company. As well as a Life in the UK test centre, his company also acts as a test centre for Professional Skills Tests for new teachers, and runs courses on literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. The business has always been involved in education and training, previously being a 'Connexions Centre'. This was a government information, advice and support service for young people on topics including education, housing, health, relationships, drugs and finance. The scheme was dismantled under the Coalition government.

Although centres such as Michael's are highly diverse, in terms of their role as citizenship test centres they follow a strict protocol. Staff are required to attend regular training sessions on security, which focus on areas such as how to check identification documents using UV lights or the danger of candidates using Bluetooth devices to cheat. Centres themselves are subject to spot checks by both Learndirect staff and Home Office officials. While Michael tells me that his staff have never experienced any problems with these checks, Adel, the manager of another test centre, explains that following one spot check his staff were told that they need to check documents more carefully. The centres are also surveyed by the Home Office through CCTV cameras in the waiting rooms and testing rooms, which are monitored at the Learndirect offices, 'although I tell them [the candidates] that it [the CCTV footage] goes straight to the Home Office', Melissa, one of Michael's employees, tells me. Although staff in test centres that I have visited do not object to the CCTV, the cameras are monitoring their behaviour as much as that of the candidates: the well-publicised discovery that some test centres were involved in fraudulent schemes (Yorkshire Post 2010) resulted in a tightening of government surveillance.

Michael and his team strictly follow the protocol, which at times leads to a peculiar mixture of warmth and bureaucratic hostility. Overall, however, they create a friendly and supportive atmosphere. As Michael tells me: 'candidates are already very stressed, there is no need to be rude to them'. Other test centres, however, can be more intimidating places to visit. 'It's just like going to the Home Office', Barbara told me while describing her most recent test, which she failed. 'I was so nervous and then I just

went blank'. In fieldwork I conducted in other test centres, I noticed a more hostile atmosphere, characterised chiefly by the severity and coldness with which candidates were treated by staff members. In Michael's opinion, test centres which are less friendly are often those with no earlier histories as places of training and development.

These test centres which hold contracts to deliver the citizenship test act as conduits for the state. They check documents, verify candidates' true identities and prevent cheating. They also print and stamp official pass certificates, which are essential documents for Indefinite Leave to Remain and citizenship applications. In many ways, therefore, these organisations perform key bureaucratic functions of the state without being part of the state. Indeed the centres' delivery of the citizenship test could be terminated if spot checks perceived them as underperforming. As noted above, the CCTV cameras function to monitor members of staff as well as the candidates. Moreover, while they are fulfilling crucial state-like roles, members of staff are powerless beyond their limited remit. During my visit there were several instances in which the centre staff, having no control or access to the online system, were unable to help candidates. This was the case when candidates arrived with different identity documents to the ones they had selected on their booking form, when candidates arrived after the time of their test or when the online system stopped working and all those affected were required to re-book the test. Because the centre has no access to or control over the centralised online system, staff are unable to alter anything. 'You have to contact the Home Office directly', was a phrase repeated throughout the day. Thus, on one hand, the continual reminder of the absence of the state and the difficulties in accessing it directly points to its withdrawal or diminishing role. Yet on the other, it is through this very absence that its power is reproduced and the 'state effect' conjured (Abrams 2006).

Paradoxically, therefore, while the production of the 'managerial state' and accompanying market-based initiatives are purportedly designed to increase the new public goods of 'fiscal austerity, marketization, consensus, transparency and decentralisation' (Bear and Mathur 2015:19), in this instance of outsourcing the opposite effect is achieved. The state appears as large and powerful but inaccessible, meaning those who have been commissioned to carry out its everyday workings are rendered largely impotent even as they act in its name.

Conclusion

Focusing on two different kinds of brokers who, in the absence of the state, deliver services in relation to the UK citizenship test, this article has provided an alternative perspective on both official and unofficial outsourced providers and how they embody the reconfiguration of state, market and third sector relations produced through recent shifts towards austerity, fiscal policies and financialisation (Koch and James 2019). The neoliberalisation and managerialisation of the state have not exclusively led to outright privatisation with the delivery of state services being always only profit-oriented. In the case of those who hold contracts to deliver outsourced services, it is not only large companies who are involved in this process but small third sector organisations traditionally involved in education and development who have come to hold different roles in the light of

changing funding arrangements. In the case of the unofficial organisations, meanwhile, the individuals operating the services are themselves often in precarious and vulnerable employment situations offering valuable services which are in high demand.

Foucauldian accounts of the neoliberal state emphasise how state power becomes more diffuse and totalised while also less visible (Shore and Wright 1997:21). In the case of the Life in the UK classes, non-citizen migrants imparting contemporary government ideology to fellow migrants is certainly evidence of this. Yet, at the same time, these migrants also alter and transform the government's message, subtly challenging the ideology upon which it is based and providing a space for its critique. In the case of the test centres, meanwhile, the CCTV surveillance, identity checking and other security measures highlight the ways in which non-state actors come to play roles largely indiscernible from state officials. Nonetheless, the test centre's ultimate distance from the state – manifested here through the online system – emphasises the clear boundaries that do still exist between the state and non-state realms (see also Bear 2011; Wacquant 2010). Whether official or unofficial, therefore, the outsourcing which characterises the neoliberal state simultaneously produces a hardening and loosening of the boundaries between the state, market and third sector.

Note

1. All names and places – excluding public figures – have been changed in order to protect respondents' anonymity.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/M003825/1].

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