

The experience of East European migrants in the UK suggests that there is racism towards newcomers regardless of racial difference

Jon Fox looks at the racialisation of migration in the UK. While immigration policy can be seen as managed to maximise economic benefits, it is also done in a way that seeks to minimise social disturbances. Migrants are often portrayed in the tabloids not as upstanding workers trying to eke out a living, but as dangerous social parasites preying on their well-meaning hosts. However, for tabloids, shared 'whiteness' is not enough; cultural differences operate as a criterion for exclusion.



In many ways, recent East European migrants to the UK look like past migrants to the UK:

they left poorer parts of the world in search of work and the better life in the UK. But in other respects, they look different: they are white. The link between migration and racism is well established. But what happens when the migrants are supposedly the same 'race' as the native majority? Evidence from the historical record suggests that shared 'whiteness' does not afford full protection from the deleterious effects of racism. Racism against the Irish immigrants to the UK would seem to be a case in point. [Evidence from the current East European migration](#) which I collected with colleagues Laura Moroşanu and Eszter Szilassy would seem to suggest that things haven't changed much. Our research, focusing on Hungarians and Romanians, has uncovered a number of ways in which these migrants have been subjected to different forms of racialisation.



Romanian busker, Omagh. Credit: Kenneth Allen [CC-BY-SA-2.0], via Wikimedia Commons

It starts with immigration policy. The door was opened (in the form of relaxed immigration controls) to East European migrants in 2004 for economic reasons; to fill gaps in the low skilled sector of the labour market:

'With an expanded European Union there is an accessible and mobile workforce already contributing to our growing economy, closing many gaps experienced by employers. In a changing environment where our European commitments provide many opportunities for the UK to benefit from this new source of labour (...) [o]ur starting point is that employers should look first to recruit from the UK and the expanded EU before recruiting migrants from outside the EU' (Home Office 2006, p. 6).

There's of course no hint of discrimination against East Europeans in these or other policy pronouncements. To the contrary, East Europeans feature as the beneficiaries of relaxed immigration controls that were designed to channel them into the low-end sector of the economy. But racialisation doesn't only degrade, it can also upgrade. Despite racist attitudes toward the Irish, they too were the beneficiaries of an immigration policy that viewed them as more racially desirable than New Commonwealth immigrants. As the door was being shut on 'coloured' immigrants arriving from the Commonwealth in the 1960s, a backdoor was being held open to the Irish by exempting them from all forms of immigration control (despite the fact they were neither citizens of the UK nor subjects of the

Commonwealth).

We might view East Europeans then as the next generation of beneficiaries of racialised immigration preferences. Of course there's no smoking gun in the current case (as there was back in the days of Irish migration). Now immigration policy is carefully layered with anti-discrimination laws that are explicitly intended to correct for possible racist biases. But this new approach to migration makes no mention of the 'race' of the migrants because it doesn't have to: by favouring migrants from the EU, immigration policy implicitly favours white migrants; those who are by extension unfavourable are non-white.

Whilst migration now as before is managed to maximise economic benefits, it's done in a way that seeks to minimise social disturbances. As spelled out by the [Home Office in 2005](#), 'migrants must be as economically active as possible; put as little burden on the state as possible; and be as socially integrated as possible.' The correlation of the A8 migrants' economic desirability with their European and racial affinities suggests that the logic of racism that was explicit in immigration policy in the past continues to inform current policy as well, albeit in subtler forms. This isn't to say that the architects of today's policies are racist. These East Europeans have been identified as neither desirable nor undesirable with reference to their 'race'. But institutional routines in the governing and administrative bodies that set and enforce immigration policy are making choices that at least implicitly reproduce these same colour-based logics of old.

In some sense then, these East Europeans may have benefitted from policies that favoured them for a combination of explicit economic rationales and implicit racialised preferences. But immigration policy is not the only source of racialisation. In our research we also examined the role of the tabloid media in proffering racialised interpretations of East Europeans. Here a different story emerges. If immigration policy favoured these migrants, the tabloids have been considerably less sympathetic to them. Some of that antipathy has had racialised undertones.

This is of course familiar ground for the tabloids. East European migration to the UK might be a recent phenomenon, but it is only a variation on a much older migration theme, one that has been a favourite whipping post of the tabloids. The tabloids have thus been able to draw on various plotlines from previous migrations to frame their coverage of the current migration. Recycled references to 'floods', 'invasions', and 'hordes' act as linchpins to past migrations: they evoke racialised understandings of migration by juxtaposing past migrations against their current versions. They also remind the British public that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Now as before, the tabloids present immigration as a problem. They oftent don't stop at criticising immigration policy, it impugns the integrity of the migrants themselves. Repeated associations of East European migrants with crime, benefit shopping, and a host of other unsavoury activities, particularly when those activities are sensational, portrays these migrants not as upstanding workers trying to eke out a living but as dangerous social parasites preying on their well-meaning hosts. Racialisation occurs when those migrants are collectively disparaged with reference to a combination of cultural, social, and/or biological traits. Here again we don't find the crude racism of epithets, slurs, and insults; rather, racialisation gets packaged as innuendo and inference.

The sort of racialisation found in the tabloids does not rely on somatic differences but instead invokes and valorises various cultural and social attributes of the migrants. This is a kind of cultural racism: criminal tendencies, uncivilised behaviour, and moral deficiencies are indiscriminately imputed to the migrants. Though even though cultural racism doesn't make explicit reference to somatic differences it can still contribute to its reproduction. Ideas like 'the west', Europe and modernity that are conveyed through these associations all carry unambiguous colour connotations. Those to whom membership is bestowed in these categories are lightened and those to whom membership is denied are darkened.

Our focus on immigration policy and the tabloid media has thus uncovered distinctive though ultimately complementary forms of racialisation. In current immigration policy, assumptions about shared whiteness operate as implicit criteria for racialised inclusion: East Europeans are desirable because they conform to racialised understandings of what it means to be European. In contrast, the tabloids have consistently if unevenly resorted to racialised framings in their reporting on these current migrations. However, for

the tabloids it is not shared whiteness operating as a basis of inclusion, but rather cultural difference operating as a criterion for exclusion. Our analysis shows how these distinctive logics of colour and culture combine to produce complementary effects: the dissemination and legitimation of public discourses on racialised difference.

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