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Contact or threat? The 'white working class', immigration and the far right in England and Wales

What does history have to say about the 'white working class'?

As entrenched it has become in recent years, it is hard to remember that the phrase 'white working class' as a focus of public anxiety and as a target of policy-makers is a relatively new phenomenon. At yet, it is in fact only over the last ten to fifteen years, that the phrase 'white working class' has become common currency and indeed shorthand. This shorthand however, is often used in two rather separate ways, what we might call the 'chav' phenomenon, and that of the 'beleaguered native'.

The 'chav' phenomenon – this is the characterisation, indeed caricaturing, and writing off of sections of Britain's population – often white, often living on council estates and nearly always poor. The term is strongly derogatory and has connotations of anti-social behaviour, limited cultural capital and social aspirations. Widely used in everyday conversation and in the media, the use of 'chav' produces an image of a white working class that is socially undesirable and culturally inept. It is also racialised – producing the idea of white working class people, especially poor people among them, as an inferior 'race' and plays into understandings of poverty as caused by individual behaviour rather than structural inequalities. And often, the 'chav' is set up as 'too white', failing to keep up with (post) modern Britain, implicitly in opposition to the culturally sophisticated multicultural savvy middle classes.

The 'beleaguered native' – which encapsulates the representation of an 'indigenous' English 'white' working class by well-off journalists, politicians, some academics, as well as people on the street, as a tribe in danger of extinction, one which needs protecting from new diversity. The idea of the 'beleaguered native' has been voiced across the political spectrum. One example can be found in the comments of Margaret Hodge, MP for Barking. In 2006 she caused an uproar when she commented that eight out of ten white working class voters in her constituency may be tempted to vote for the BNP because 'no one else is listening' to their concerns over unemployment, high house prices, and the housing of asylum seekers in the area: 'They can't get a home for their children, they see black and ethnic minority communities moving in and they are angry'. Later retracted, this statement reflects a 'beleaguered native' discourse in which immigration is mixed up with issues of 'race', faith and ethnicity.

What both these narratives have in common is the way in which class and 'race' are constructed so as to present the problems either faced or posed by the 'white working class' as being separate from those from ethnic minority groups: fixed in place rather than mobile; foregrounding issues of identity rather than inequality between classes, so that, ethnic minorities are simultaneously assigned a 'race', while with-holding from them a class identity. Engrained within both these depictions is a 'taken-for-granted', fixed and ahistorical view of both the meaning of working classness, and that of ethnic identity.

If history is invoked, almost invariably it is done with reference to the Second World War, often deploying the iconic and plucky East Enders of the Blitz. The extent to which this is a key part of popular imagination was revealed in a recent small study of elderly 'white working class' residents in Dagenham. The cohort had moved from the East End in the post-war period. Interviews revealed the iconic role of the war in their memory. [And I should say

that in all cases in this study the responses were unprompted – the interviewer had not expected that the war would be such a focus of people's identity and memory and had not planned to cover it in the interviews]:

> Well, to be honest, the way we survived the war... I get really annoyed with these politicians these days, and not only them but people in the street... they walk into you, they cut in front of you as if you're not even there. And when you think, we saved the world for them! Well, maybe not the world... although we did really! I mean, if we hadn't stood up to the Germans like we did... and nobody would believe, if you'd seen, the night they sent a load of incendiary bombs and London, the whole of London, was alight. It's a wonder anyone survived, actually, when you come to think of it. Buckingham Palace is still standing, and St. Paul's... if we'd given in like the French did, you know, the world would have been taken over by Germany. We saved England, anyway. Yes, we saved the British Isles (Eileen Carter)

The 'we' Eileen is referring to here are East Enders – commonly constructed not only, as is the case here, as heroic defenders of freedom, but also as the archetype of the working class.

Crucially, it is not only populist thinking which encourages us to visualise the East End as divided between true 'cockney', i.e. white, East Enders, and 'strangers from the Third World'. Succour is given to such a position from both sections of the press [refer to slide] and crucially more scholarly quarters too. For example, in their book *The New East End: kinship, race and conflict*, Dench, Gavron and Young examine relations among working-class people in the East End (white people and people with Bangladeshi heritage) and relations between working class and recently arrived middle-class residents (mostly white). In their book Bangladeshi residents are not ascribed any class, while any idea of a non-homogenous heritage of 'white' residents remains undiscussed.[1]

De-historicisation in this vein is common to many who conveniently forget the crucial role played by Britain's colonies in both world wars, the legacy of colonialism in producing the global inequalities which form the context of much post-1945 migration, as well as the long history of migration to the UK itself.

But – and here as a professional historian I naturally have a vested interest – let's just take a moment to explore what a more rounded historical perspective might bring to the debate. For the purposes of simplicity I will focus here on the 'whiteness' aspect of the 'white working class' – but am very happy to talk about class later if that is helpful. What I want to suggest is that the use of 'white' hides far more than it reveals, being used as a shorthand for indigeneity, homogeneity and 'natural' belonging to a place [often then with the consequent assumption of certain rights being tied to that].

For sake of ease and because of the use to which is it put, let us also focus on the East End. What do we see? Well, most strikingly that central to the growth and identity of the East End, from the late eighteenth century at the very least, was migration. From a population of just under a million in 1801, London mushroomed to 2.3 million by mid-century before peaking at around four and a half million just before the first world war. The main driver of this increase was migration rather than simply natural population growth. Migrants were attracted to the capital from across England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland; but also from

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1 Dench et al (2006)

further afield, from the empire, as well as from mainland, largely Eastern, Europe, most infamously perhaps by Jewish refugees from the 1880s. These migrations themselves built on other migrations to the area, with the Huguenot weavers in the late seventeenth century. What this means of course is that both the East End and its 'working class' formed alongside and as part of this migrations and not separate from them. We get something of this sense of profound level of the migrant and churning of the population – between the countryside and the city; between the far reaches of the United Kingdom and London, and the empire; between one district, or one street and the next – through contemporary sources.

In these while commentators may have expressed concerns about these foreign influxes, depicting them as alien intruders, the reality was far more complex:

> The Block of streets between Gale Street & Furze Street are the worst in the District, worse than in almost any district in London. Three policemen wounded there last week. This block sends more police to hospital then any other in London. 'Men are not human' they are wild beasts. You take a man or a woman, a rescue is always organized. They fling brick, iron, anything they can lay their hands on. All are Irish cockneys. Not an Englishman or a Scotchman would live among them. The group is known as the "Fenian Barracks." The streets have all the appearances of semi vicious poverty. Hatless women, uncleaned doorsteps, two or 3 women drunk, shoeless and stocking less children in great numbers… At the corner of Hawgood St. the doors leading to a fat [unclear word]. Not only are the inhabitants savage ['inhuman' crossed out] they think nothing of taking human life.[2]

We can see here how the writer here – a social investigator for the Booth surveys of the late C19th visiting an area of Bethnal Green in the company of a constable – viewed the Irish as animal-like, threatening and very much 'other'. And at the time remember their Catholicism as well as their Irishness marked them as unassimilable others – skin colour is not a marker of belonging. And yet the phrase 'Irish cockney' very much signals an acknowledgement that the Irish constituted a long-standing and embedded part of the East End population.

Similarly we see something this movement and mixing of populations, and what has far more recently been termed 'visceral multiculturalism' – the everyday getting along, falling in love, and creating new families, between people of different backgrounds – through working class autobiographies across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The classic autobiography of the criminal and East Ender, Arthur Harding, spanning the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, for example, reveals the presence of Irish, Jewish, Gypsy Traveller families living alongside those from the countryside, other parts of Britain, and indeed the wider world. And although contemporary newspapers often carried lurid accounts of the dangerous and exotic nature of areas inhabited by ethnic minority groups, careful research has shown that Chinese immigrants, for example, although constructed as a danger by the British press actually 'consisted of two Chinese shops and three resident Chinese men, plus the English wife and child of one of them and a number of sailors temporarily ashore."[3] The point here is that being an East Ender, in much the same way as 'being a Londoner' now, could have multiple meanings: with a population that doubled in fifty years, a key feature of the area was migration and heterogeneity.

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[2] Booth, pp.33-4.
[3] John Seed, 'Limehouse Blues: Looking for Chinatown in the London Docks, 1900–40' in *History Workshop Journal* Issue 62 (Autumn 2006), p. 66.

Even into the twentieth century migration remained central to the identity of the East End – but now not simply with people arriving: the mass housing schemes of London County Council, begun in the inter-war period, created an East End diaspora which reached not only into Essex, but as far as Norfolk towns such as Thetford and Kings Lynn. David Feldman has rightly pointed to this council-led mass working class migration as the largest in Britain's history. We would do well to think about the social impact this mass of immigrants had on their rural 'host' populations – just one area where more research is needed.

So what we in fact have is the formation of working class areas of British cities being the product of both in and increasingly out-migration, from and to parts of Britain and further afield. And whether in the East End, new towns or suburban council estates, often because of poverty, people of different backgrounds lived and continue to live in close proximity. Across the past two centuries at least the articulations of disquiet about migrant groups and their impact on the existing populations have often been generated by elites who have used it as a means of articulating, or displacing disquiet over the effects of poverty and inequality. This, of course, does not mean that relations between people of different backgrounds was never unproblematic – riots such as those against lascar seamen in 1919 in multi-racial ports across England and Wales; as well as the degree of working class support for Oswald Mosely in the 1930s all indicate that in times of economic hardship and scarce resources expressions of xenophobic intolerance were also part of the everyday reality of life.

The point, however, is less to deny that there are times when economic pressure and other factors have resulted in problematic relations between perceived 'insiders' and 'outsiders', but rather to challenge labels and concepts which hide more than they reveal. The 'white working class' of which we speak might well include people of hugely diverse ethnic backgrounds and histories of migration. The way in which these might be hidden, even by an individual from themselves, was revealed in this interchange between a research colleague, Ben Rogaly – himself a white, middle class academic, but with mixed Polish-Jewish South African and English heritage - and Lily Haley, a 'white working class woman' brought up on a stigmatised council estate, and the daughter of an Irish migrant. They had been talking about her neighbours who Lily had described as 'immigrants' and found difficult:

> Ben: Do you see yourself as a, as the daughter of an immigrant? Would you not think of it like that?
> Lily: [long pause] I didn't. But yes, you're right.
> Ben: No, I'm not trying to catch you out.
> Lily: [laughs]
> Ben: It's because it's a subject that I'm really interested in. And because I only worked it out myself, in relation to my father. Because he grew up in South Africa. And I, and he came here and he didn't have a job and then he, you know, all that.
> Lily: You see, my dad didn't, and he's created. Yeah, you're right. But I suppose because I was born here, I think of myself as English

As with the case of many of those who might think of themselves in opposition to 'immigrants' or 'minorities', all it takes is some small attention to history to unpick our assumptions. What I am simply aiming to do here is to flag up the importance of destabilising lazy categories, interrogating them, and if we find them wanting, then discarding them.