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Marginalized white ethnicity, race and crime

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Abstract

White ethnicity is generally invisible and unexamined in racism, crime and justice debates. Serving mostly as a default comparator to describe visible minority experiences of crime and criminal justice processes, white ethnicity is seen as unproblematic as an ethnicity except as a potential source of racism. This article draws on aspects of 'whiteness studies' in the USA and UK—focusing on marginalized white ethnicities—to explore *racialized* 'white' ethnicity, both historically and today. Designations such as white 'underclass', 'new' migrants, 'white trash' are offered to show that some whites are seen as 'less white' than others within a hierarchy of 'whiteness'. The article concludes that racism and classism towards marginalized white working-class ethnicities have criminalized these groups in ways not too dissimilar from the criminalization of visible working-class minorities.

Key Words

class • ethnicity • social exclusion • social marginality • whiteness

Introduction

The white English working class is now the only group of people that the chattering classes are happy to hear mocked and attacked.

(Julie Burchill, cited in Collins, 2004: 225)

Burchill's iconoclastic view of class relations in modern Britain can be read at a number of levels, not least its veracity and reductionism. Yet it is striking, that while sexist and particularly racist language has become taboo in official discourse, the language of class contempt has not (Sayer, 2005). Class contempt

varies from the subtlest forms of aversion to visceral revulsion, disgust and sneering that serves to project all that is bad and immoral onto the other, while reciprocally enhancing and confirming the goodness, self-regard and status of one's own class. Class contempt 'through distance, denigration and disgust ...' towards the disadvantaged white working class also serves darker and more disturbing purposes that racialize this group too (Skeggs, 2004: 118). Class distance is drawn from setting moral boundaries between different sorts of whiteness, especially through ascriptions of the body and appearance. The white working class are denigrated for their 'excessive artificial appearance' and behaviour, vulgarity, 'letting go' and moral irresponsibility. Designations such as 'white trash' or 'chav' perfectly encompass feelings of class contempt. Contempt can lead to the criminalization of the black and white working class, and the condoning of middle-class crime, and the whole effect is to reinforce and reproduce class hierarchy. At the same time it is important in making these and other claims, developed later, not to create simply inverted binaries of class and ethnic identity that posit the respectable as bad and demands for respect automatically valid (Sayer, 2005).

It is remarkable how white ethnicity and class retain their anonymity in discussions of ethnicity and crime—especially as self-report studies suggest that 'whites' disproportionately offend compared to other ethnic groups and obviously commit the vast bulk of crimes. After all, 85 per cent of offences involving children and young people were committed by those who classify their ethnicity as white, and 92 per cent of black young people and children are not subject to disposals in the youth justice system (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2007).¹ Similarly, recent studies have found white working-class boys living in disadvantaged areas are the lowest performing group of pupils in schools after the small population of Traveller children (Curtis, 2008). And of course, school failure is a strong predictor of delinquency, crime and antisocial behaviour.

In a sense these sorts of cultural, criminological and class issues make it all the more puzzling why white ethnicity has remained unaddressed in discussions of ethnicity, race and crime. The key problem seems to be a general difficulty in social science in conceiving whiteness or white ethnicity other than in terms of privilege, power and superiority over *other* ethnicities. Whiteness as an ethnicity appears as an empty signifier devoid of content or meaning *except* insofar as it racializes *other* 'visible minorities'. That is not to say that the racial persecution of some white groups goes unrecognized as the case of Jewish, Irish and Gypsies amply shows. It is, rather, that these examples are sometimes seen as distant, exceptional or atypical and there is a focus on the recent past and the present. When studies *do* uncover counter-intuitive forms of discrimination, for example, Mooney and Young's (1999) study of stop and search in North London, they tend to be ignored. This piece of research found that foot stops of Irish men were higher than for African-Caribbean and that African stops were lower than white English ones, because the police focus on groups that are disproportionately working class and/or male as well as visible ethnic groups. In a

different mixed ethnic context, Waddington et al.'s (2004) observation study of stop and search arrived at not dissimilar conclusions, arguing that white urban lower-class men who were available to be stopped suffered disproportionate stop and search regardless of visible ethnicity.

As a final preamble for the discussion to follow, it is likely that ethnic and racial categories in the British context that are limited to 'Black', 'Asian', 'White', 'Other', and more recently, 'Mixed', hardly capture the increasingly complex demographic make-up of a society that has experienced recent large-scale immigration. Apart from the inability of these categories to capture diversity within them, descriptions of a white majority and ethnic minorities in some urban areas seem increasingly outmoded (Dorling and Thomas, 2007). Some of this immigration from 'white' EU countries, high levels of racist violence experienced by asylum seekers and the fact that many immigrants are exploited in unregulated jobs, trafficked or enslaved in the sex trade, all puts a new complexion on inter- and intra-ethnic group relations in European societies (Goodey, 2003; Melossi, 2003; Garner, 2004, 2007b; Stenson and Waddington, 2007).

These are some of the more obvious ways we can begin to think afresh about white ethnicities. The next section asks what constitutes 'whiteness' and white ethnicity, its peculiarities and how it can be said to exist as a distinct entity in its own right and in relation to other ethnicities. The following section discusses historical legacies of how marginalized white ethnicities have been represented in ways that give potency to the idea of their deviancy and criminality. The continuities and discontinuities of this legacy found in contemporary representations are explored, again drawing out the ways in which racialized 'white' groups such as the 'unfit', 'the anti-social', 'criminals', the poor, 'white trash' and the 'underclass' were and are elided around marginalized white ethnicity often associated with criminality (Webster, 2007). Classed, raced and gendered marginalized white ethnicity is spatialized as well through the creation of moral boundaries and disciplining within hierarchies of whiteness.

What is white ethnicity?

Ethnicity like class is relational, productive and active in social relationships rather than a mere fixed or passive descriptor or category. Whiteness conjures up other ethnicities while at the same time is often rendered invisible, 'normal', 'neutral'. It is an identity and a lifestyle, and a set of perspectives on social relationships, marked by varying degrees of self-awareness. Acquired in the course of collective and individual history, white ethnicity is about becoming, being and staying 'white', and its distinctiveness becomes realized in specific social and spatial locations. Certain locations are sought out, others are avoided, becoming one thing and not being something else (Ball, 2003). The relational and interdependent aspects of white ethnicity arise from it defining others as belonging to a different race or ethnicity and

thus implicitly or explicitly defining itself as belonging to a race or ethnicity also. Changes in the situation, power or status of each group influence the position of the other (Scotson and Elias, 1994; Webster, 1997).

White ethnicity possesses peculiarities and powers that often mark it out from other ethnicities that can confer superiority or dominance even among whites who are themselves in positions of relative powerlessness. Garner's (2006, 2007a) survey on the uses and meaning of 'whiteness' shows how hierarchies of whiteness and class serve to reproduce social hierarchies by creating and maintaining internal borders between the more and less white. Another peculiarity is that white people frequently construct themselves as not possessing race or ethnicity even when they are beneficiaries of their whiteness, accrue 'white' privileges and racialize others. Like all ethnicities, whiteness is fluid and contingent rather than an essential or reified category. The focus here on marginalized white ethnicities encompasses the fact that whiteness has historically functioned as a racial supremacist identity—even when the main victims were 'white', that it is a normalizing, dominant and controlling ethnicity, and we cannot assume that whiteness operates on 'a level playing field' of inter-ethnic competition over scarce resources (Garner, 2007a: 9). Nevertheless, if whiteness is the norm by which measures and judgements about difference, deviance or criminality are made then we need to interrogate its nature and status critically rather than accept its 'normality' and 'invisibility' (Dyer, 1997). If whiteness has always been visible from the perspective of people of 'colour' creating a 'double consciousness' of always looking at and judging oneself through the eyes of others, then it needs to be rendered visible to whites too (Du Bois, [1903] 1996; Garner, 2007a). Indeed, some writers in the USA and increasingly Britain have argued that whiteness is excessively visible (and racialized too) and that there is a very high degree of 'colour-coding' of issues and in places to do with safety, fear of crime and the prospect of meeting violence (Webster, 1996, 1997, 2007).

Today increasingly, the emergence of linked academic, journalistic and popular discourses about whiteness are of significance for debates about ethnicity, race, crime and justice, and in particular for understanding the racialization² and criminalization of marginalized white ethnicity. Debates cannot be left to dichotomous and gross over-simplifications of the 'threat' said to be posed by a de-industrialized white 'underclass' accused by liberals of harbouring endemic white racism and racist violence, and by conservatives of harbouring endemic amoral, family-breakdown-ridden, welfare-sponging and crime-prone behaviour, nor to the 'threat' that 'new' immigration and asylum are said to pose to stability, order and social cohesion (Garner, 2007a).

Emergence of marginalized white ethnicity: immigrants, 'abject whites', 'white trash' and other 'degenerates'

The emergence of 'whiteness' and white ethnicity as a focus of study is best exemplified in the United States with its long tradition of European immigration

and codification of the idea that some whites are 'whiter' than others. The struggle of white working-class immigrant groups to be conferred white 'privileges' and membership of the 'white race' easily displaced their class interests (Allen, 1997). The example of Irish migrants is a case in point. For Irish-Americans their white-skin privileges were crucial to maintain their position against African-Americans, with whom they were aligned in the racial hierarchy of the time (Allen, 1994). As in Britain, where relatively recently 'Paddy-bashing' was only ever a stone's throw from 'Paki-bashing', so in the United States, nativist folk wisdom held that 'an Irishman was a "nigger", inside out' (Roediger, 2007: 133). Despite sharing neighbourhoods, poverty, criminalization³ and common experiences of racism with blacks, this denial of their 'whiteness' only resulted in their insisting all the more on their own whiteness and on white supremacy in opposition to blacks. The key was gaining better work, winning acceptance and political rights. 'White niggers' were white workers in arduous, unskilled manual work or subservient positions, and in part Irish-American whiteness took shape attempting to sever any racial connections to blacks and 'nigger work', i.e. the burden of doing unskilled work (Roediger, 2007). The role that labour competition and conflict was said to play in processes of becoming white among European immigrant groups has not gone unchallenged, and in any case labour competition was intense within each group—black and white (Ignatiev, 1995). Nevertheless, it was much easier for the Irish to defend jobs and rights as 'white' entitlements, that is, in racial terms instead of as Irish, ethnic or class ones, to gain access to better jobs. Between 1890 and 1945 eventual assimilation—best understood as 'whitening as a process'—saw how an initial status of 'inbetweenness' (neither securely white nor non-white) became 'fully white' (Roediger, 2007: 8).

In this sense, whiteness is nearly always salvageable in a way that black, Mexican, Asian and Native American ethnicity is not. Although denigrated and likened to blacks, marginalized white groups were, in law, white. Nevertheless a contingent white racialized hierarchy designated a number of white 'races', although in the end being white was not just about a certain range of phenotypes, but claims on culture and values (Garner, 2007a: 68). Other themes such as nativist fears about proximity to marginalized white groups were contradicted by complaints that these groups 'segregated themselves' on 'racial' grounds, and threatened 'white men's wages'. The greatest complaint, however, was of the fecundity of white working-class new migrants (Roediger, 2007). Of key importance here was the ways that the idea that 'white' was a racial identity became enshrined in the new racial science, and later the eugenics movement, from the mid- to the late 19th century (Webster, 2007). The new science produced complex schemas and typologies of subdivisions of whiteness, often associated with degeneration and criminality as well as racial superiority. In fact those who were phenotypically white were not equally incorporated into the dominant groups because they were disadvantaged by class and culture. The most intriguing case was the designation 'white trash', which has historical parallels with representations of some sections of the white working class in Britain

(Webster, 2007; Wilson, 2007). Like the figure of the 'chav' in Britain today, the figure of 'white trash' represented pollution, excess and worklessness far from respectability.

A number of characteristics were attributed to the 19th-century working classes including fecundity and criminality as well as shared physical qualities so that the language of 'race' overlapped with that of class seen in tropes that fixed on the body and culture. Hartigan's tracing of the development of the phenomenon of 'white trash' from the mid-19th century onwards concluded that the 'objectifications of this group ... arose from this moral categorization of those who will and will not work' (2005: 67)—poor whites and white trash respectively. The racial connotations of 'white trash' combined the following: natural habitat, blood lines to do with prolific sexuality, their designation as threat from below because weaker blood was multiplying faster than stronger, their moral incapacity to labour because of their racial status, all connected to anxieties about urbanization, crime and the migration of poor southern whites to northern cities. The main themes though were 'degeneration', debasement, worklessness and respectability—that later inform representation of lower-class whites throughout the 20th century. In some accounts they were upheld as a bulwark against black inferiority, in others as sacrificing the superiority of whites to the inferior race, yet in others as a contamination that could bring down the future of the white race (Hartigan, 2005: 69). In the southern version their origins were said to lie in British migration to the United States of paupers and convicts.

The particular problem that 'white trash' posed for racists, racial scientists and eugenicists was that they were both white and 'degenerate', in which the latter reflected not only a moral state but a phenotypical one of physical taints, stigmata and in some sense 'colour'. Turn-of-the-century eugenics and criminal family field studies—the 'Jukes' family, 'the tribe of Ishmael' and many others—perfectly embodied these concerns (Hartigan, 2005; Webster, 2007). Their image as incestuous, crime-ridden families associated with the range of social problems of urbanization profoundly impacted upon white middle-class audiences. Although these 'odd tribes' were constantly referred to by their supposed distinctive and telling physical appearance and behaviour, they were palpably white. The ways that eugenicists got around this was to argue that despite the fact these families were obviously white; poor whites were 'the worst of the race' through their hereditary (Hartigan, 2005: 88). Hereditary degeneration was seen in the physical markers of race—although emphasizing 'stature' and 'comportment' rather than skin colour—ensuring that class distinctions were encompassed by racial discourse.⁴ This also marked a shift from explanations about poor whites that had largely drawn on newly developing discourses on sexuality and criminality to the racial constitution of 'good' and 'bad' families, and the threats posed by the latter to the race posed by the breeding habits of poor whites and their sexuality. This shift in criminal family studies from class otherness to racial sameness had as its colloquy concerns over uncontrolled sexuality reconstituted as attention to hereditary and race.

Of course, criminology from its foundations in the 19th century had been mired in the racialization of white criminality, notably in the work of Lombroso whose main innovation was to equate the white European criminal with non-white races (see Webster, 2007). As Garland (1985) observed, criminological texts at the turn of the last century, in linking disparate themes and categories of the 'unfit', most commonly drew together criminality, degeneracy, the nation and 'the race' in an open appeal to the concerns about racial deterioration which were widespread in Edwardian Britain. This eugenicist 'population problem' contrasted the abundant fertility of the 'unfit' (criminals, alcoholics, imbeciles, etc.) with a lower birth rate of the better classes. The proposed solution was the forced sterilization of the lower classes, the physically and mentally 'unfit', the criminal, the degenerate among a panoply of individuals and populations considered socially undesirable. Differentiating whites into bio-social groups formed an important basis to subsequent attempts to distinguish the criminal from the non-criminal. In Britain, eugenicist discourse was always weaker than moral discourse about the marginalized white working class, particularly their pleasures and 'excess' and the blurring of these pleasures with criminality. The perceived problem in the early Victorian period, as it is now, was the working classes' prodigious consumption of alcohol, their lack of saving and a life lived day-to-day without care for what the future may bring (Wilson, 2007). Even Marx referred to the lower classes as 'social scum'.

Contemporary representations of marginalized white ethnicity: the 'social scum' as 'white niggers'

As Hartigan (2005) argues, the confidence with which people continue to be labelled white trash derives from a long tradition of social contempt, racial and class stereotyping sustained by ascriptions of naturalness, social difference and inferiority, far exceeding white supremacist or racist ideology's focus on non-whites. If anything, the mythic role of white trash and its reproduction through popular culture has greater salience today in post-industrial America. Instead of diminishing, contemporary representations of white trash have taken a different turn in that 'it is possible to read images of white trash as a carnivalesque aesthetic, a transgressive celebration of the *grotesque* body (with its illicit sexuality and propensity for cathartic emotions) that will not be restrained by (white) middle-class social decorums' (Hartigan, 2005: 121–2, emphasis in original). If those who use the term do so as a means of self-designation to transgress and resist designations of social contempt and tenuous economic standing, then this appears only to amplify inscriptions of social difference, even among members of the white working class (Hartigan, 2005: 122). Beyond self-designations, popular representations of white trash also take ironic forms. The American hip hop artist Eminem described himself as 'white trash' adopting the identity of 'wigger' (an oxymoronic 'white nigger', i.e. both white and lower working class, living in Detroit, described in

another oxymoron as ‘America’s first Third World city’) (cited in Taylor, 2005: 148). Eminem’s ironic evocations of ‘White America’ neither romanticized blackness nor denied white privilege. They provided a trope on being white and poor in the richest country in the world. Clearly, and again, some people are ‘whiter than others’.

In a British context, journalistic and popular representations—whether implicit or explicit—focus on consumption patterns, tastes and expression and where people live. Here are offered two contrasting tropes—one from *The Economist*, the other from a local newspaper—illustrative of our themes. In a generally sympathetic article, *The Economist* (26 October 2006) asked its readers to consider the plight of ‘The forgotten underclass’ and how white residents of a working-class neighbourhood in Dagenham in East London resented both white and multiethnic new arrivals to their neighbourhood, complaining that the new arrivals were more qualified and had better prospects than the people among whom they had settled.

Leaving aside the veracity of these claims for the moment, let’s examine the *nomenclature* of these sorts of discussions. After identifying the aspirant and ‘respectable’ white working class who had left the area for the fringes of Essex, those left behind—the white underclass—are accorded and judged a social status *between* similarly disadvantaged visible minority ethnic groups and the ‘respectable’ white working class who have embraced mobility and opportunity. *The Economist* article implies or states that: first, poor whites lack aspirations themselves or for their children but are racist towards similarly positioned but more aspirant minority ethnic groups in their midst; second, that poor whites lack ‘taste’, i.e. appropriate consumer patterns and aspirations, particularly their ‘choice’ to live in council housing; third, that poor whites are disproportionately criminal compared to any other group; finally, that poor whites make poor choices and have bad judgement impairing their ability to take up opportunities of mobility, affluence and respectability.

Turning to an altogether different nomenclature that identifies and isolates the ‘social scum’ as an object of humour and ridicule, Hanley quotes a local newspaper:

A Wood (local council estate) man found himself in hot water after asking his estranged partner to fill up his Pot Noodle. The 30-year-old admitted putting his hands around his partner’s neck and pulling out her earring, causing a cut ear and lip and a scratched neck. Colin Doyle, defending, said that his client lived opposite the house where his partner lives with their two children, and he had gone over to ask for some hot water after his own home had been burgled, leaving him with no food.

(2007: 10)

Hanley rightly comments on how the emblematic Pot Noodle—‘the slag of all snacks’—is used ‘as a fun insult by those who have grown tired of disguising their snobbery’ (2007: 10). The quotation manages to juxtapose Pot Noodles, wife-beating, burglary and council estates in one overall ‘joke’. As

Hanley adds ‘Poor taste, bad grammar, the betrayal of family history beyond that which is conveniently aspirational: all these traits are now deemed “council estate behaviour”’ (2007: 10). The ‘joke’ does little to hide what is really going on here: contempt, fear and loathing of the white poor.

These tropes coalesce in the ‘chav’ phenomenon. The notion of respectability can be clearly observed as a racialized ascription here in the generation of class boundaries between respectable, poor whites and ‘visible’ minorities. These classifications offer potent and differing versions of whiteness based on entitlement and respectability (Garner, 2007a). For example, in Nayak’s (2003) study of white youth subcultures in Newcastle, family and/or occupational histories based on ‘hard work’ were key signifiers of respectability among the ‘Real Geordies’ against the racialized and criminalized ‘Charver Kids’ with whom they compared themselves. And here a residue of earlier popular ideas that groups are criminal in their looks, including their ‘racial’ looks, survive today:

If the postures of *Charver Kids* are ‘ape-like’ and pronounced, other body-reflexive practices such as smoking, spitting, swearing loudly and drinking alcohol from bottles and cans in public further served to authenticate their ‘roughness’ ... Like many minority ethnic groups before them, charvers were associated with street crime, disease, drugs, over-breeding (many came from large families) and the seedy underbelly of the ‘black economy’.

(Nayak, 2006: 823–4)

Here, poor whites are popularly identified and stigmatized as a ‘race apart’ by their *visible* comportment, body shape, dress and physical looks.

According to Hayward and Yar (2006) the popular reconfiguration of the underclass idea in the epithet ‘chav’ pathologizes class dispositions in relation to consumption rather than employment. In the wider public imagination the relationship between consumption and classification appears to shift from an explicit concern with ‘race’ and social marginality to one of ‘class’ and social marginality. Previous concerns about the underclass possessing a distinctive set of *cultural* pathological dispositions that inform behavioural patterns and choices—to be unemployed and give birth outside of marriage, have been joined by a shift that accords consumption a central role in the production of social distinctions and classifications of ‘us’ and ‘them’. Popular discussion of the ‘chav’ focuses not on the inability to consume because of poverty, but on the excessive participation in aesthetically impoverished forms of consumption. Here stigmatization processes become analogous to, and substitute for, now ‘discredited’ racialization processes. The synonym ‘chav’ takes various popular forms including, ‘[C]ouncil [h]oused [a]nd [v]iolent’, but it owes its origins to the Romany dialect word for small child (‘chavo’ or ‘chavi’). An altogether more sinister nomenclature describes the fecund, primitive, animalistic, ‘sub-human’ and criminal nature of the ‘chav’. This symbolic marginalized white ethnicity has become a ‘legitimate’ target of displaced racism, and popular websites and commentary classify and judge ‘chavs’ according to their *appearance*—their ‘tribal dress code’ and ostentatious displays that liken

them to ‘pikneys’—and *location* and the consumer outlets they are said to frequent (see, for example, www.chavscum.co.uk, www.chavtowns.co.uk). Hayward and Yar conclude that:

... the ‘chav’ phenomenon partakes of a social process in which consumption, identity, marginality and social control converge; consumption practices now serve as the locus around which exclusion is configured and the excluded are classified, identified and subjected to (increasingly intense) regimes of management’.

(2006: 24)

The emphasis here on representations of ‘excessive’ consumption underestimates the continued salience of employment as a marker of class and respectability. Young people labelled as ‘chavs’ or ‘charvas’ affiliate on the basis of social class which directly affects and limits their subculture ‘choice’ as does their locality (McCulloch et al., 2006).

These themes are also heavily gendered. Skeggs’ study of white working-class women in north-west England shows how respectability and the body are the most ubiquitous signifiers of class, and that respectability ‘is usually the concern of those who are not seen to have it’; and is ‘one of the key mechanisms by which people are othered and pathologized’, something to ‘desire, to prove and to achieve’ in order to be valued and legitimated (1997: 1). The issue of being and appearing respectable pervaded the lives of the women she spoke to. Skeggs notes how these women, although inscribed and marked by their denigration as degenerate, attributed respectability and high moral standing to themselves. Here appearance was the signifier of conduct; to look was to be. Appearance worked as a sign of moral evaluation, of excessive sexuality just as modesty and propriety have been central to the formation of middle-class femininity.

White racism? ‘Respectability’ and the fearful proximity of poor whites

Today, the ‘problem’ of the white working class is often posed in terms of their supposed endemic racism. Indeed, the few studies of white ethnicity available within debates about racism, crime and justice have focused exclusively on white identity as a source of support for the perpetration of racist violence (Webster, 1996, 2007; Sibbitt, 1997; Bowling, 1999; Ray et al., 2003, 2004; Ray and Smith, 2004).⁵ Less attention has been given to wider processes influencing the formation of white ethnicity and the relationship of white ethnicity to fear of crime and decline within neighbourhoods.

Seen as a ‘disorganised, racist and sexist detritus’ (Haylett, 2001: 358, cited in Garner, 2007a: 73), the white working-class poor are blamed for a ‘decline’ in the working-class, pathological masculinities, backwardness, degeneracy, crime, over-fecundity, fecklessness and above all are seen as an anachronistic remnant of an industrial culture blocking a full move to modernization and

progress—just as they were accused of being in Victorian England (Wilson, 2007). This somewhat overwrought portrait has been interrogated by numerous studies of the lived realities of white working-class life both in the United States and Britain. Only some of the nuanced findings of these studies are rehearsed here drawing out some common themes and findings, again with a focus on marginalized white ethnicity. Hartigan's (1999, 2005) study of white enclaves in overwhelmingly black Detroit challenges academic and journalistic characterizations of white working-class communities as either the sole source of racism, or as the most stubbornly racist section of society. Instead, working-class whites are far more ambivalent about their class location and their relationships with whites and minorities from better and worse-off neighbourhoods. Whites made class as well as race distinctions about other poor whites living in their neighbourhood and whites were not simply in opposition to blacks. More often than not, issues of maintaining respectability overrode those of race. Similarly, Kefalas' (2003) comparable ethnographic study of a white working-class neighbourhood in Chicago's Southwest Side unpicks the construction of white racism in a 'white enclave' contiguous with Chicago's African-American West Side ghetto:

Beltwayites' racism then can be seen as a byproduct of their efforts to fortify the cultural and moral boundaries between themselves and more stigmatized groups. Class-bound ideologies and boundaries make it difficult for garden [a local colloquialism for the area] dwellers to reconcile themselves to [the] existence of *white* teenage mothers, *white* drug addicts, *white* gangbangers, *white* single mothers, and poor *whites*. Whites are respectable, and respectability keeps people safe from the dangers posed by destructive social forces.

(Kefalas, 2003: 155, emphases in original)

In a British context too the formation of white ethnicity at neighbourhood level sets itself not against visible ethnicity per se, but against *any* marginalized ethnicity including poor whites (Scotson and Elias, 1994). It is this proximity to *the poor* rather than visible ethnicity per se that so unsettles locals, leading to anxiety and fear—fear of crime and fear of 'falling' through downward mobility into the ranks of the poor. Spatial and social polarization occurs through prominent themes—'narratives of urban decline' and characterizations of 'respectability' contrasted with physical decay, disorder and nascent criminality. Watt, for example, concluded that the main preoccupation of white working-class council house tenants in Camden was to maintain respectability: 'The result was a permanent underlying urban anxiety about being *too close*, socially and spatially, to concentrated poverty' (2006: 788, emphasis in original).

What then of white working-class racism? Writing of the 1950s—a period which saw a second wave of white race riots against black areas—Burke (1994, cited in Collins, 2004: 185) argued that everyday white working-class racism did not seek justification in notions of biological inferiority, but in the fight for scarce resources around the body, the home and the marketplace. By the time Enoch Powell gave 'public' voice and

vision to a certain sort of white working-class fear of being 'swamped' by 'immigrants' and 'foreigners' in Birmingham in 1968, the terms of a fully fledged racist white ethnicity had been laid. These misplaced fears grew from the more vulnerable, unskilled sectors of the white working class in a context of growing insecurity and nascent economic restructuring. Many others accepted the new multiracial environment in which they found themselves (Collins, 2004). Nevertheless, and especially in London's east end, the acute shortage of affordable housing and disruption of the white working class' intergenerational 'inheritance' of 'respectable' social housing, as well as its stigmatization, continues to make struggles over housing almost synonymous with inter-ethnic competition and conflict (Dench et al., 2006). The formation of 'confident', exclusive forms of racist white ethnicity in some neighbourhoods seems to occur when most areas of people's lives overlap a great deal at the local level—from work to family. Where residents tend to be dependent on family and local social networks for information about housing, jobs and leisure opportunities, they tend to exclude 'outsiders' more compared to people living in more 'open' neighbourhoods; that is, where most people have connections of different sorts outside it, their ties are spread more widely and are more able to pull in resources from other areas of their lives (Wallman, 1982, 1986).

As we have seen, the marginalization of white ethnicity is always mediated by notions of respectability. Marginalization and respectability are simultaneously formed by negatively assigning local poor, stigmatized or minority populations blame for perceived community decline and unwelcome social and economic change; bolstered, it is believed, by state immigration and welfare policy and local government multicultural policies. Garner (2007a) summarizes this trope as: respectability plus work leads to entitlement, and the white underclass, minority groups, migrant communities, asylum seekers, the unemployed and single mothers are accused of not paying their dues, and are perceived as feckless, fecund, hedonistic, excessive, queue-jumpers.

The isolation and segregation of the white ghetto: 'people living on council estates aren't like the rest of us'

The spatial confinement of marginalized white ethnicity to the habitus⁶ of the white council estate, the white rioting of these estates in 1991 and 1992 and their stigmatization as places of political and physical neglect, low incomes, high welfare dependency, poor job prospects and low educational attainment, mark the *prime* spatial location of marginalized white ethnicity (Power and Tunstall, 1997; Webster et al., 2004; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Stenson and Waddington, 2007). The much greater polarization and spatial concentration by social class rather than visible ethnicity in Britain compared to the United States greatly reinforces the marginalization and ghettoization of white ethnicity (Dorling et al., 2007; Thomas and Dorling,

2007). The objective trajectory and decline of social housing estates as white—or, in London, multiethnic ghettos—is well known. What are less known are the subjective effects of this isolation and segregation. Seen as ‘Little more than holding cages for the feral and the lazy’ (Hanley, 2007: 140), white estates can be likened to the sorts of abandoned, isolated and segregated places usually attributed to black ghettos in the USA.

The emergence and isolation of the white ghetto is vividly described by Hanley from her first-hand experience:

To be working-class in Britain is also to have a *wall in the head*, and, since council housing has come to mean housing for the working class (and the non-working class), that wall exists unbroken throughout every estate in the land ... Your knowledge of what’s out there, beyond the thick glass walls, is entirely reliant on what you can glean from the lives of the people you know, which usually means your own family members. If your family and friends all live on the same estate, that’s a little wall built for you right there ... The world seems to stop on the edge of every estate ...

(2007: 149, emphasis added)

The ghettoization of the white working-class estates that she eloquently describes represents a novel reconfiguration of class reproduction through geographical entrapment—spatial segregation by class—where the internal wall coexists with external invisible barriers of class. Walled people are happily described as ‘chav scum’, estates as places of ‘last resort’ and as ‘dumping grounds’ for those who have no choice in where they live compared to the apparently abundant choices of everyone else. Their ‘failure’ is not only contagious but morally repugnant and, of course, people do not have to live on them, so those who do are accused of self-segregation (Hanley, 2007). Most of all they serve to give concrete spatial reality to the existence of marginalized whiteness in the eyes of everyone else and as irredeemably associated with dangerous and criminal places.

The disciplining of marginalized white ethnicity

When asked what might be expected of daily life in ‘lower-class Britain’, the conservative American political scientist Charles Murray replied, ‘based on observations and knowledge of the US underclass’:

The New Rabble will be characterised by high levels of criminality, child neglect and abuse and drug use ... will exploit social benefit programmes ... will not enter the legitimate labour force when economic times are good ... The children ... unsocialised in the norms of considerate behaviour ... the New Rabble will dominate, which will be enough to make life miserable for everyone else.

(1994: 12)

There is little here that is new compared to the long-standing historical iconography of the disreputable white working class, their pleasures and

the blurring of these with criminality (Wilson, 2007). What is perhaps more novel is the way that Murray presaged the transition from more relaxed to more puritan times. The tools and targets of moral censure may have changed—ASBOs and *people living on council estates*—but the sense of the contemporary poor as a recalcitrant drag on appeals to ‘modernization’ is palpable in popular and policy discourse (Hughes, 2007).

The same obsessions—with ‘dysfunctional’ families, lone mothers and absent fathers—found in ‘moral underclass’ discourses remain but are given a more benign twist in the notion of ‘antisocial behaviour’. The ‘progeny’ of ‘dysfunctional’ families are to be met with an amalgam of authoritarian measures such as child curfews, antisocial behaviour orders and parenting orders, deployed in poor communities to regulate children and parents. The vindictiveness of local media provides dramatic illustrations of public humiliation of the targeted group—poor whites (Scruton, 2007). In May 2005 Tony Blair talked of antisocial behaviour as derived in irresponsible, undisciplined and improper parenting from ‘generation to generation’ (cited in Scruton, 2007: 145). This coded obsession with progeny and implicit concern with hereditary marks the group in terms of its deficient biological and/or cultural reproduction.

Much (rightly) has been made of the policing of black young men. Accounts of the policing of marginalized white ethnicities in some of the ‘whitest’ urban areas in Britain also deserve attention. One study of white young people in Edinburgh concluded that the police make distinctions about the respectable and unrespectable based on social class status—that do not always take account of serious and persistent offending—to construct a population of permanent suspects. This works in two ways: first, the lifestyles of lower-class young people make them more ‘available’ for policing and more likely to experience adversarial contact; second, police officers consistently elide moral status with affluence and are consistently more likely to pick on youngsters from less affluent backgrounds as individuals rather than on the basis of police targeting of deprived areas. Although less deferential in their manner to the police than more affluent young people, those who are less affluent tend to be ‘baited’ by the police. They are judged about their ‘respectability’ on the basis of their dress and physical appearance (typically ‘charva’ dress) and comportment, rendering an individual more suspect in the eyes of the police (McAra and McVie, 2005). Another study of police culture and nomenclature in Newcastle City Police revealed how the police reflected *in extremis* the contempt and fear of the wider white population towards poor whites living in certain areas (Young, 1991). ‘Real criminals’ were identified by their supposed genealogy—‘racial’ origins and places of residence—wherein certain working-class areas were deemed places that housed families of criminals. ‘Real criminals’ lived in the ‘jungle’ in and around the derogatorily termed ‘African villages’ where the residents were all said to be Bridewell regulars. Famous ‘criminal’ families were ‘second generation gypsy horse thieves’, illegitimate—socially and by birth—dirty and tattooed.

Conclusion and discussion

'Whiteness' is most 'visible' and most likely to be racialized and criminalized in its marginalized or subordinate forms.⁷ Hegemonic white ethnicity—typical of powerful white elites—tends to retain only an implicit view of itself as 'white'. Whiteness is rarely evoked or mobilized as an ethnic resource or as a target of racialized discourses other than in situations of scarcity, competition or rapid social, economic and demographic change. It is here *in extremis* that white ethnicity comes to have salience, and form an identifiable shape, profile and presence. Representations of marginalized white ethnicity, despite their claims to the contrary, give away the 'hidden injuries of class' (Sennett and Cobb, 1977). As Sayer (2005) argues, if class damages, then this implies that people themselves are damaged, often in ways that not only limit their potential but may in extreme cases lead to antisocial behaviour. This seems particularly the case concerning attitudes towards poor white working-class males (Haylett, 2001). If class inequalities generate shame, and sometimes rage, among the most disadvantaged, then their racialization (whether recognized or not) compounds the felt contempt and denigration.

Contemporary popular, political and policy discourses about the white working class have lost none of their historical legacy and potency to stereotype, stigmatize and blame social exclusion on the culture of this group rather than as something that is done to them (Skeggs, 2004: 86). The conditions of existence of marginalized white working-class ethnicity unleash a 'chain of signifiers': familial disorder and dysfunction, dangerous masculinities, dependency, fecund and excessive femininities, antisocial behaviour, moral and ecological decay and quick to resort to criminality, and all spatialized. Culture becomes segregated by territory and place, seen in the naming and shaming of 'sink estates' or 'the worst housing estates' (Haylett, 2001; Hanley, 2007). Most of all—strangely echoing Lombroso—the unifying theme is of the atavistic backwardness of the white working class as a burdensome barrier and break on the development of a modern, 'multicultural' nation—a role previously projected onto 'black youth'—and as a 'detritus of the Industrial Revolution' (Daley, 1994: 16, cited in Skeggs, 2004: 91). Political rhetoric now distinguishes between different sorts of whiteness: the respectable who can be incorporated into the nation and the non-respectable who cannot.

A key objection to many of the arguments presented here will be that some cultural and racial characteristics fix some groups and enable others to be mobile. For example, Skeggs (2004) makes the point that black working-class masculinity as it operates in popular culture is available to be appropriated by black or white in ways that black boys cannot easily perform being white, because they are always inscribed as black and cannot move between black and white in the same ways. The mobility of white attachment and inscription are not equally available to all. In this sense the couplet 'black male/criminal' is said to be always stronger and more deterministic than the couplet 'poor white/criminal'. The argument presented here suggests that this may not be the case.

Class contempt towards economically and socially marginalized 'white' groups reveal features of discourses and representations previously reserved for visible minorities. This moralistic targeting of the disadvantaged white working class—through tropes of moral culpability, laziness, aesthetically impoverished consumption and housing 'choices'—works as a displacement activity and 'legitimate' outlet for racist social opprobrium. The racist undertone risks accusations of racism circumvented because the targets are 'degenerate whites'. Race and ethnically based class contempt is shown, however, to have a long history both in Britain and the United States. Drawing distinctions between different sorts of 'whiteness' deemed inferior or superior according to attributions of 'degeneracy', 'respectability', antisocial behaviour, criminality, the body, appearance and heritability, class contempt is shown to be social and racial. The use of derogatory designations by the white middle class and even by the white working class—'family dysfunction', 'white trash', 'chav underclass', 'living on a council estate'—denigrates and distances (mostly) poor whites to justify and reproduce social hierarchies. Feared and disciplined because of their supposed inherent criminality, racism and distance from respectability, resented as 'detritus' of deindustrialization and a burden on 'progress', blamed for their self-exclusion and 'self-segregation', there is, finally, avoidance of any serious critical engagement with what is done to marginalize white ethnicity.

Notes

1. Presumably, if comparisons of offending and victimization by current ethnic categories were controlled for social class, area of residence or other proxies for SES—something that most surveys omit or is only implicit—then differences between 'whites' and others would disappear or whites show higher rates of offending and/or victimization when similar age and SES were compared.
2. An important caveat to the proceeding discussion is that as Steve Garner argues, 'racialized identities are dynamically produced and are reproduced by particular practices, in particular places, at particular times' (2007c: 117). This is also true of classed identities, and the balance, importance and relationships between racialized and classed identities are contingent on given situations and local conditions. It would be quite wrong to read this article as privileging white ethnicity over class or vice versa, or as making white ethnicity equivalent to 'visible' ethnicity as one ethnicity among many. Similarly, 'marginalized white ethnicity' is not simply a coda for 'lower-class whites' who may or may not be racialized or assigned an ethnicity (Webster, 2007).
3. It is not coincidental that the term 'paddywagon' refers *both* to a police vehicle used to transport large numbers of Irish people who have been arrested *and* a police car because Irishmen made up a large proportion of the officers of early police forces in American cities—a metaphor perfectly reflecting the making of the Irish into whites.

4. Many readers will insist that although of historic interest these eugenics discourses are today discredited and anachronistic. And yet, in the course of writing this article, I and colleagues received a presentation from a senior police officer that mapped the genealogy of a local white lower-class prolific criminal family, posing the question ‘how can the police and other agencies interdict to prevent the intergenerational transmission of criminality within these extended families?’ Of course the racial genealogy was mentioned in passing as Irish Traveller origin!
5. Recent studies have pointed to a de facto residential segregation that has occurred in many areas against a wider cultural and social context of violence, social exclusion and marginalization. As white working-class communities displace ‘resentment at economic decline and social decay onto apparent representatives of a “cosmopolitan” culture’ (Ray and Smith, 2004: 695), encouraged in this by local media representations and far-right political parties, these wider crises of deindustrialization and neighbourhood destabilization become displaced onto the biographies and structures of feelings of individuals, including racist offenders. These processes involve the transformation of offender’s unacknowledged shame rooted in multiple disadvantages and perceptions that Asians are illegitimately given preferential treatment and are more successful than them. Shame turns to fury and rage directed against Asians within a cultural context in which violence and racism are taken for granted (Ray et al., 2003, 2004; Webster, 2007).
6. The literal meaning of the term is a self-referencing, self-enclosed, ‘anthropological’ time, place and space.
7. ‘White ethnicity’ in this context may be understood as a proxy for social class, having ‘foreign’ or (new) ‘immigrant’ status and so on, but this article is also concerned with how certain sorts of ‘whiteness’ become visible through signifiers of dress, deportment, place, conspicuous consumption patterns, worklessness and proximity to poverty.

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