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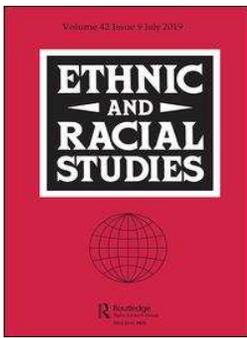
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# The “Irish question”: marginalizations at the nexus of sociology of migration and ethnic and racial studies in Britain<sup>\*</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Despite constituting one of the largest migrant groups, the Irish have been overlooked in most British sociological research on migration and ethnicity. We explore how this came about and examine its costs in relation to stigmatization and national security. The relative silence among British sociologists throughout the war in Northern Ireland and its impact on the Irish in England, requires further explanation. This neglect resulted in a failure to learn lessons from the past especially about the potential impact of counter-terrorism practices on Muslim communities. Furthermore, we show how unpacking the compressed category of whiteness helps to understand the dynamic interplay of other identity markers such as accent, religion, nationality and class in shaping how different groups of white migrants, especially Eastern/Central Europeans, have been perceived, represented and racialized in various public discourses.

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**KEYWORDS** Irish; migrants; suspects; white; Central/Eastern European; Muslim

## Introduction

In recent years, as the UK government negotiated a Brexit deal, many were surprised at the critical ways in which Ireland has impacted on British-EU relations. The surprise is often based on a profound ignorance about Ireland and British–Irish relations. Ireland is invisible to England in a way Britain/England can never be invisible to Ireland.<sup>1</sup> This was almost laughably revealed when the former Minister of State for Northern Ireland, Karen Bradley, admitted that she was “unaware that nationalists did not vote for

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<sup>\*</sup>We have tried to use the terms UK, Britain (England, Scotland and Wales) and England throughout the article in as precise a way as possible, endeavouring to avoid conflation. In different contexts different usages seemed appropriate.

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unionists and that unionists did not vote for nationalists” (Carroll 2018). Surprise can also be based on ingrained notions of superiority and primacy of UK interests. Boris Johnson, while Foreign Secretary, commenting on the EU requirement for a backstop dealing with the Irish border in any Brexit negotiation said that it was a folly that “the tail was now wagging the dog” (Blaney 2018) and on another occasion likened the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland to that between the London boroughs of Camden and Westminster for congestion charge purposes (Leahy 2019). The border in Ireland is in fact a British imposed partition of the island, one of a series of partitions Britain used to extricate itself from colonial situations, and is an international border.

This ignorance of Ireland or tendency to downgrade the significance of things Irish does not solely reside in the minds and attitudes of the so-called British “chumocracy”, public schooled, Oxford-educated, and heavily represented in politics (Bagehot 2018). It extends to the realm of academic studies in Britain too. We explore this theme at the nexus of the sociology of migration and of race and ethnic studies. Satnam Virdee has recently observed that racism studies lie on the margins of the discipline of sociology and that British sociology’s definitive contribution, the study of social class, has shown “a willful indifference towards coming to terms with the theoretical and conceptual implications of thinking race and class together” (Virdee 2019, 4). While concurring with this we observe that the sociology of migration and racism studies in Britain have their own marginalizations, one of which has been an underplaying of the evidence and consequent implications of racism directed towards the Irish in Britain.

Some researchers have noted this neglect or lack of integration of Irish experiences into the nexus of sociology of migration and ethnic and racial studies (Miles 1982; Hickman 1995, 1998; Mac an Ghaill 2000, 2001; Garner 2006; Ryan 2007; Virdee 2014). Robert Miles (1982, 122) argued that focusing on the Irish as historically the largest migration to Britain would challenge the assumption that migration to Britain is a recent “problem” and that migrants are people who have black or brown skins. And he asked, to what extent would developing an Irish dimension involve an important reformulation of concepts of racism built around skin colour rather than other (real, imagined) phenotypical and cultural characteristics?

While a number of scholars note the “significant immigrant influxes” of Irish in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Vertovec 2007, 1027; Miles 1982; Castles and Kosack 1985; Solomos 1989), far less attention has been paid to large-scale Irish immigration to Britain in the mid-late twentieth century. This relative absence is problematic as Mac an Ghaill (2001) argues, because sociological texts are a site of knowledge construction about nation, “race” and ethnicity. Of particular concern is the elision between black people positioned within state-generated moral panics as a social

problem, and sociological representations of racism that position black people as the exclusive object of inquiry (Mac an Ghail 2001, 180).

A clear example of how the Irish have become invisible in research is presented in the work of Campbell (2013). Drawing on a mugging which took place in Handsworth, Birmingham in 1972, involving three young attackers and an elderly victim, Campbell compares the incident as reported at the time in the media and how, subsequently, it was written about in academic literature. The victim of the “mugging” was Irish and one of the convicted attackers was of Irish descent. Another convicted attacker was of Cypriot origin and the third was African-Caribbean. Campbell demonstrates that there is a disjunction between press reports of the incident, most of which referred to the diversity of the attackers including the “Irishness” of two of the four people involved, and the narrow focus in subsequent academic accounts which downplay or entirely omit references to these diverse ethnicities.

This mugging is the centre-piece of discussion in *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al. 1978), described in its 35th-anniversary edition as the text “that inspired a generation”. Subsequent academic retellings of the incident and comments on its noteworthiness, based on their reading of *Policing*, either recount the incident as three black youths robbing an elderly white man or they remove any sense that the victim was himself a migrant (Campbell cites a number of examples). Either way from *Policing* onwards, as Campbell (2013) notes, academic commentaries on this incident evacuate Irishness and, as a result, the critique of the conflation of nation and “race” presented in such texts as *Policing* did not question the existence of an undifferentiated whiteness (see also Hickman 1995).

In this paper, we seek to challenge the historical myopia which underpins many studies at the nexus of sociology of migration and ethnic and racial studies in Britain. We use two examples to explore the costs, in terms of understandings and policy formation, of the myopia about Irish migrants of much research at the nexus of sociology of migration and ethnic and racial studies. Our thesis is that this nexus of research and theorizing has neglected the Irish and, as a result, it has tended to treat recent phenomenon such as the impacts of securitization and practices of suspectification around Muslims and racism against white migrants from Central/Eastern Europe as new and unprecedented.

First, we argue that the silence, through 30 years of (English) sociology,<sup>2</sup> on Northern Ireland and on the impact of events in Northern Ireland on Irish communities in England seriously depleted the extant knowledge base of how communities are impacted by counter-terrorism measures and by political and media discourses about groups, of minority ethnic origin, “harbouring terrorists”. We do not rehearse full details of the similar and dissimilar impacts of these representations and measures on the lives of Muslim and Irish

communities (see elsewhere: Hickman et al. 2011; Hickman et al. 2012; Nickels et al. 2012) rather our aim here is to reflect on why this productive comparison is not made more of within sociology.

Second, we argue for bringing research on intra-European mobilities, in particular the mainly white migrants arriving in Britain from Central/Eastern Europe, into wider discussions of ethnicity and “race” in ways that complicate the black/white dichotomy. As predicted over a decade ago (Ryan et al. 2006) the experiences of the Irish as predominantly white, European migrants may hold lessons for some challenges facing post-accession migrants arriving and settling in Britain since 2004. This wider historical lens may offer insights and question some of the assumed “newness” of migratory trends in this century. As Irish migration to Britain increased again following the 2008 recession, lessons from the past may not only be relevant to other intra-EU migrants but also to new generations of Irish arrivals (Ryan 2015; Glynn 2015).

But we begin with a short discussion of racialization of the Irish.

### **Migration and racialization of the Irish in England**

The emergence of interest in migration among sociologists in England coincided with increasing arrivals from commonwealth countries, particularly those in the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent, in the 1940s and 1950s, and tended to be framed by a “race relations” discourse (Meer and Nayak 2015). In the post-1945 period Irish migrants were consistently the largest in-coming group until the final decade of the twentieth century (Hickman and Walter 1997; Delaney 2013). Between 50,000 and 60,000 people from the Irish Republic arrived every year throughout the 1950s. In the 1950s, one in three of those entering England were from southern Ireland (Delaney 2013, 119). Substantial migration from Ireland resumed throughout the 1980s (Gray 2004) and again in 2010 (Glynn 2015). However, Irish migration has not been subject to sustained analysis by English sociology of migration probably for two main reasons: Irish migrants are not seen as “proper” migrants and because they have not been perceived as part of the “race relations” problem, as defined by official discourses and duly analysed by academia, due to whiteness and presumed cultural similarity.

We recognize the privileges Irish migrants to Britain accrue, in the present day, not only from EU citizenship but also from the benefits derived from the arrangements between British and Irish states through the Common Travel Area (CTA). After Irish independence in 1922 unrestricted movement continued between the two countries until the Second World War, although this was far from uncontested (see below). During the war Ireland’s neutrality led both states to support controls on movement. The origins of the current CTA lie in Irish agreement to a similar immigration policy to that of the UK in 1952. Consequently, in April 1952 the UK abolished immigration

controls on travel to Britain from the island of Ireland through the repeal of the requirement for aliens to obtain leave to land if their journey was from Ireland. The long-lasting nature of these arrangements is due primarily to the specific difficulties of policing the border, and operating immigration controls, between Ireland and Northern Ireland (B. Ryan 2001).<sup>3</sup>

Ireland declared a republic and severed its last links with the Crown and Commonwealth in 1948, however, in 1949 the passage of the Ireland Act at Westminster ensured that Ireland was not classed as a foreign country under British law and Irish citizens, although strictly speaking “aliens”, were to be treated as if they were “subjects” (Hickman 1998). Three years later the reconfiguration of the CTA cemented these relations. One consequence of these peculiar arrangements is that the Irish in Britain were not seen as “proper migrants”.

Irish migrants have long occupied an ambiguous and complex positionality in Britain as simultaneously “insiders” and “outsiders” (Walter 2001). As economic migrants and former colonial subjects, Irish people have right of entry and many of the rights of citizenship (Paul 1997). Simultaneously, they have been racialized as “other” and policed as a threat to national security. While the racialization of the Irish is embedded in the long colonial history between Britain and Ireland, in the decades following Irish independence in 1922 there was a notable upsurge in racializing Irishness within British public discourses (Douglas 2002, 43). Images of the Irish as inferior, violent, drunken and dirty “savages” proliferated throughout the British popular press in the inter-war years (Ryan 2001; Douglas 2002). A review of British political debates and government documents of the time reveals that Irish migrants were regarded as much needed labour but also as prone to drunkenness, criminality, and carriers of TB (Hickman 1998; Ryan 2001).

In research conducted by Louise Ryan on inter-war debates on Irish migration to Britain, using newspaper and official government documents, anti-Irish sentiment is palpable. For example, Rev. Longbottom, an Alderman from Liverpool and a vocal opponent of the “Irish immigration menace” (Liverpool Echo, 15 January 1938; cited in Ryan 2001), alleged that: “these immigrants account for a great deal of our public assistance expenditure” and “provide by far the greater proportion of our juvenile and adult criminals” (ibid). Such views can be seen as part of the long tradition of blaming “migrants” for England’s ills, a sentiment apparent in recent Brexit debates (Rzepnikowska 2018). British public discourses in the 1920s and 1930s underlined not only the alien nature of Irish migrants but also their “otherness”. They are depicted as animal-like and semi-civilised (see Ryan 2001). As Hickman (1995) has noted, in the twentieth century “anti-Irish racism and anti-Catholicism” continued to be detectable strands in “the imagined myths of Britishness” (p. 205).

The post-1945 period saw the end of empire and national reconstruction after World War II. The three prime sources of labour for Britain's reconstruction programme were people from Ireland, the Caribbean, and the Indian sub-continent. Changing public policies in the post-war period (Vertovec 2007), were prompted by the government anticipating a "race relations" problem and installing a black/white dichotomy as part of official discourses to explain social relations in the context of significant immigration. Large-scale Irish migration in the post-war period meant that, to sustain the black/white dichotomy, the Irish had to be re-racialized as emphatically "white" (there having been considerable historical doubt on this score) and "forcibly included" within the cultural parameters of the nation.

Cabinet papers from the 1950s state that it was necessary "to argue boldly along the lines that the population of the whole British Isles is for historical and geographical reasons essentially one" (PRO reference number: CAB 129/77; CP (55) 102; quoted in Hickman 1998) in order to justify the exclusion of the Irish from the proposed migration controls in what became the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962.<sup>4</sup> That same Cabinet paper asserted that "an Irishman looking for lodgings, is generally speaking, not likely to have any more difficulty than an Englishman". Simultaneously, notices declaring "No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs" were being posted in lodging houses in London and Birmingham. A myth of white homogeneity across "the British Isles" developed as part of official discourses in the 1950s and it assumed that all people who were white smoothly assimilated into the "British way of life" and that "problems" all resided with migrants who possessed a different skin colour and, an assumed, different cultural background and identity.

This re-racialization of Irish migrants was deemed necessary because working-class Catholics of Irish descent or Irish-born migrants were not automatically reinscribed as part of the nation when the working class were incorporated after the end of the second world war. Waters (1997) points out the working class were fully woven into the fabric of the national imaginary after 1945 – in part due to the war effort, and in part due to their presumed embourgeoisement and the social rights of citizenship conferred on the working class by the developing welfare state. In Water's view British academics' work on the "dark stranger" (e.g. Patterson 1965) paralleled the mapping of the working class as "a race apart" a century earlier.

Although some sociological studies of migration and of racism in the 1960s and early 1970s focused on, included or mentioned the Irish (e.g. Jackson 1963; Patterson 1965; Rex and Moore 1967; Richmond 1973), this tailed away in the mid-1970s. After this Irish migrants were included in sociological studies of certain institutional arenas – education, mental health, the Catholic Church – but not in sociological research that addressed the impact of migration (see Walter 2011, for a full discussion). Geographers and historians were often more inclusive in their studies of migration and racism (Walter

1986; Gilley and Swift 1989; Peatling 2005; Delaney 2013; Wills 2018). One consequence was that, within sociology produced in England, migration studies became a synonym for studies of “race”, whereby “race” meant black people. This conflation was not effectively challenged until the late 1980s when Tariq Modood argued that the “Black category” needed to be deconstructed and no useful analytical (or political) purpose was served by conflating together the experiences of migrants and their descendants from the Caribbean with those from the Indian sub-continent (Modood 1988).

A small number of sociologists concerned with these issues in the 1990s either urged the disaggregation of the white category or recognized the racialization experienced by the Irish in Britain and consequently did not perpetuate a fixed white/black framework, which homogenized both categories, as the sole means of understanding racism (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Bonnett 1993; Brah 1996). A large number of Irish NGOs in England, armed with the 1997 report of the Commission for Racial Equality on *Discrimination and the Irish in Britain* (Hickman and Walter 1997), argued, for the disaggregation of the white category in ethnic monitoring to reveal the specificity of the racialized experiences of Irish people in Britain. They were raising issues about people viewed predominantly through lenses of whiteness and class and therefore not officially perceived or classified as a minority ethnic group. These efforts resulted in an Irish category being introduced within the “white” section of the ethnicity question in the 2001 Census, although this did not result in stimulation of much interest in the Irish data and in reportage the different elements of the white category were usually conflated together (Hickman and Moore 2010; Hickman 2011).

It is intermediate positionings, and proximities, that have often been neglected by the sociology of ethnicity and race in Britain. There is some work on Greek Cypriots, Chinese and Turkish migrants (for example, Anthias 1992; Parker 1995; Atay 2010), who do not fall neatly within the black/white binary model, but the findings and analyses of those bodies of work have been less systematically integrated within ethnic and racial studies. Work on other minority ethnic groups continues (for example, Jenkins and Cetin 2018 on the Alevis in Britain).

In this section, we explored why Irish migrants may not have been viewed as “proper” migrants and how both in official discourses and in public policies since the 1950s they have been assumed to be white and culturally similar to the majority English population. Using an analogy from the study of sound waves in physics, we argue that whiteness was “compressed” into a dense category. However, by pulling this tight compression apart – “rarefaction” – we can see its different component elements more easily. Drawing on the work of Garner who noted that “new migration” into Britain in the twenty-first century illustrated that many white groups can be labelled as “other” (Garner 2006. 258), and the earlier work of Hickman (1995) and Ryan (2001,

2007), we suggest that generalized categories need to be problematized and explored to examine a range of discourses, experiences and policies. Schaffer and Nasar (2018) note that telling the story of white Irish migrants has the potential to clarify the significance of colour in migration history, as well as to improve historical understanding of the multiple processes by which Britain has been shaped by constructions of racial difference. In the next two sections, we develop this discussion by drawing upon recent research.

### **Failures in relation to Northern Ireland and its impacts on the Irish in Britain**

Liam O'Dowd writing in 1996 stated that for most intellectuals Northern Ireland was simply a backward province of the UK. O'Dowd, at Queens University Belfast at the time, observed how the conflict his students' families and communities were embroiled in was being represented to them by the media as irrational and incomprehensible, as a struggle between secular humanism and religious fanaticism, between peace and violence, even between good and evil. He did not encounter many academics/intellectuals who were prepared to critically interrogate these representations of the conflict (O'Dowd 1996). The consequence was:

The idea that Northern Ireland is a place apart is not an innocent one. It is a place apart, not because it is unique, but because it suits a lot of different interests to treat it that way. Since the mid-nineteenth century the Irish Question has been an irritant for the UK state ... Since its creation in 1921 Northern Ireland has been deliberately treated as a place apart by successive UK governments. Academics and the media have, for the most part, colluded in this distancing. (Gilligan 2017, 5)

In failing to challenge the "exceptionalism" of Northern Ireland scholars colluded in the British state's strategy of containment. It is for this reason that Paddy Hillyard has characterized the response of British academics to the conflict in Northern Ireland as "the silence of the lambs" (in Gilligan 2008, 6).

This ignoring of Northern Ireland included British sociologists during the 1970s–90s (notable exceptions were Moore 1972, the Glasgow Media Group; Schlesinger 1991; the Feminist Review Collective 1995; Miller 1998; Jenkins 2008) with little challenge to discourses about the Irish as inherently violent and as a community likely to be harbouring the IRA. Consequently, the impact of those events and counter-terrorism policies, like the Prevention of Terrorism Act, on Irish communities living in England was under-researched. From 1970s to 1990s there is little doubt Northern Ireland both framed and bracketed the consideration of Irish people in England. The government approach (regardless of political party) of placing a *cordon sanitaire* around Northern Ireland lest any issues become inflammatory in Britain, not only

partly accounted for the IRA campaign in England (it was not pursued in Scotland or Wales) but also closed down discourses within which Northern Ireland and the Irish in England were discussed. There were few protests, let alone studies, about how Irish people were being treated even after the publication of Paddy Hillyard's book, *Suspect Community* (1993), research for which he had found impossible to gain funding support.

The main counterterrorism measures employed in Britain today stem directly from those developed during the period of IRA violence from 1970s to 1990s (Clutterbuck 2006). However, a dominant aspect of the narrative on terrorism in Britain, stemming from the state, is that there is a divorce between the era of political violence associated with Northern Ireland, and that associated with what is referred to often as "Islamic terror" (Malik 2005; Blair 2005). Consequently, insufficient lessons were learned, and questions asked, from one era to another, especially regarding the negative impacts of suspectification on Irish communities and of counter-terrorism practices and narratives on Muslim communities. Much of the information was available from the early 1990s about impacts on Irish communities (Hillyard 1993; Hickman and Walter 1997). The comparison between Muslims and the Irish in England as "suspect communities" was made by some lawyers (Pierce 2005) and legal scholars (Pantazis and Pemberton 2009) but within sociology, the situation facing Muslims in Britain has largely been viewed as "new" because of the focus on Islamophobia.

Hillyard's explanation of what constitutes a "suspect community" when addressing the Irish in England during "The Troubles" was that:

... a person who is drawn into the criminal justice system under the PTA [Prevention of Terrorism Act] is not a suspect in the normal sense of the word. In other words, they are not believed to be involved in or guilty of some illegal act [...] people are suspect primarily because they are Irish and once they are in the police station they are often labelled an Irish suspect, presumably as part of some classification system. In practice, they are being held because they belong to a suspect community. (Hillyard 1993, 7)

Despite differences that can be readily cited, the formulation and implementation of counter-terrorism measures has had similar impacts on the lives of Muslims and Irish populations. These impacts include becoming aware of being "suspect" in their encounters with neighbours, workmates, strangers in shops, on the streets and public transport, as they go about their daily lives, usually in the form of verbal and sometimes physical abuse or being shunned. Further the fear of being "suspected" is ever-present as a backdrop to daily life, perhaps the most insidious impact of all. Members of both Irish and Muslim communities live and work as *normal* Britons (Sharma and Sharma 2003). This, potentially, is their most disturbing aspect, whereby the "suspects" are indistinguishable from the rest of the population, the more

of a threat they constitute. Both these populations are the result of large post-war migrations into Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, and subsequent significant migrations since the 1980s in each case. This common history of migration is a contextualizing similarity.

Both Muslims and Irish people form part of the complex and vibrant multi-culture that characterizes Britain's urban spaces (Hickman, Mai, and Crowley 2012). But, as the Irish in Britain were by and large written out of sociological studies at the nexus of both migration studies and ethnic and racial studies, few in the academy or policy circles explored such potential links. After the 2005 London tube and bus bombings, it was often stated by politicians and the media that a disturbingly "new" aspect was that alleged perpetrators were "home grown". But this was not new, throughout the Northern Ireland "Troubles" people born in the United Kingdom (including England) who identified as "British" as well as those who identified as "Irish" were involved in political violence.

In political discourses, government reports, speeches in parliament, and in policy debates about counter-terrorism in both eras, there is a marked similarity in how "suspect communities" are discussed. There is frequent reference to categories such as "the innocent Irish" or to "moderate Muslims" and also to "Irish terrorists" and "Muslim extremists". This bifurcated conceptualization is the core similarity in their representation. It leads to the "law-abiding" always being defined in relation to "terrorists" or "extremists" and blurring boundaries between them and the perpetrators of violence (Hickman et al. 2011).

This is reflected, and often generated, in media coverage in both periods speculating on the identities and "nature" of people who would carry out bombings, such as the 1974 Birmingham pub bombings<sup>5</sup> and the July 2005 London tube and bus bombings. Both Irish communities and Muslim communities are principally defined in the press in relation to how newspapers construct and perceive "British values". These communities become "suspect" when they or their assumed members are judged not to abide by these values. In news coverage, boundaries between those viewed as law-abiding citizens and as "extremists" or "terrorists", are permeable and shifting (Nickels et al. 2012).

The justification for not anticipating that Irish experiences may have some relevance for what Muslim communities are experiencing rests on the assumption that religion is the chief distinguishing characteristic of those subject to suspectification practices today. In fact in both the Irish and the Muslim instances, the conflation of ethnicity, "race", religion and migration is part of the power wielded in constructing communities as "suspect". This is important because of the historical significance of religion as a central characteristic of the construction of external and internal "Others" in the formation of British national identity (Hickman 1995), its framing as a global threat (Hitchens 2007) and because religious tolerance is a pre-requisite of

multicultural societies. In this sense Muslim and Irish experiences can usefully be compared in the British context. On the one hand, a more localized “suspect community” (Irish) is framed in terms of its ethno-national characteristics which mask different religious identities and allegiances and strong historical hostility in Britain to one of those denominations, Catholicism; and on the other hand, another “suspect community” represented as global (Muslims) is framed in terms of a constructed homogenized religious identity which masks a very wide range of ethnic, national and denominational communities. Both these sets of representations are bound up in the ethnic and religious histories of notions of Britishness.

Would the slant of the multiple research projects and reports on Muslims, Islamophobia and counter-terrorism have been different if sociology in England had ever concerned itself with the impact of counter-terrorism on the Irish in England from 1970s to 1990s? With a historical lens built-in perhaps the focus of many projects would not have been on Muslim communities themselves thus reinforcing the rhetoric and viewpoints of political and official discourses. The political discourse initiated by then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, after 9/11 that there was a clear demarcation between the two eras of political violence was not thoroughly examined or challenged by sociologists. This despite the clear transition from one era to another of counter-terrorism policies, methods and implementations.

### **Comparing recent Central/Eastern European migration to the UK with Irish migration**

It is important to understand how processes of racialization, ethnic stereotyping and stigmatization work within and across national groupings (Erel, Murji, and Nahaboo 2016). Studies of the racialization of post-accession European migrants (e.g. Moroşanu and Fox 2013; Rzepnikowska 2018) demonstrate how some new comers experience forms of prejudice, negative stereotyping and discrimination which bear a strong resemblance to the experiences of Irish migrants (Ryan 2007; Hickman and Walter 1997).

Research by Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy (2012) shows similar contradictory discourses around white Central/Eastern Europeans positioning them, like Irish migrants previously, as simultaneously white insiders in official British government policy but cultural outsiders in racializing media discourses. From the early 2000s, official British migration policy expressed a clear preference for Central/Eastern European migrants over workers from outside the EU, however, that did not necessarily entail social acceptance of this much-needed work force (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012). “Nominally shared whiteness between migrant and majority has not exempted these current cohorts of migrants from the sorts of racialization found in other migrations” (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012, 682) an observation which could have

been applied to the experiences of Irish migrants during the inter-war years and 1950s (Ryan 2001, 2007; Scully 2015).

As Dawney (2008) notes in her study of Central/Eastern European migrants in rural England, mobility problematizes social relations by destabilizing traditional constructions of identity. Her participants reported verbal abuse in the street, being refused service in shops and bars, as well as being refused accommodation. Dawney observed that the term “Polish”, in some localities, became a bye-word for stupid and a common insult used by children. This bears a striking resemblance to how “Irish” became a bye-word for “non-sense” (Curtis 1984). Bronwen Walter has noted that: “The racialization of the Irish is so ingrained in British culture as to be barely recognisable for what it is” (2001, 82). Research with recently arrived Irish migrants (Ryan and Kurdi 2015; see also Gray 2004) has found that this ingrained racialization of the Irish continues to inform negative stereotypes, anti-Irish “jokes” and can result in racist work-place bullying. Aideen, a newly qualified teacher working in a school in the north of England, reported being bullied by a colleague who used Aideen’s Irishness to question her understanding of English history and her pronunciation of English words. Despite being highly qualified and speaking English as her first language, her Irishness was used to undermine her professionalism (Ryan and Kurdi 2015). As Walter argues, accent and pronunciation have repeatedly been used as signifiers to racialize Irish people in Britain (Walter 2017). The psychological impact on Aideen cannot be under-estimated as she had begun to completely change her accent to avoid further criticism (cited in Ryan and Kurdi 2015).

The ways in which some white groups become racialized while other white migrants remain virtually invisible is worthy of further analysis. As Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy (2012) show, although the numbers of Hungarians and Romanians were roughly similar, migrants from these two neighbouring countries were depicted very differently in the British tabloid press. While Hungarians were virtually invisible, Romanians were the focus of much media attention. Migrants from Romania were frequently conflated with “Roma” and thus shared negative stereotypes as not only poor but also morally deficient, culturally backward, prone to crime, with a marked tendency to violent and disorderly conduct, as well as spreading disease. Racialization occurs when “migrants are collectively disparaged with reference to a combination of cultural, social, and/or quasi-biological traits” (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012, 689). The similarities to the Irish are quite striking (see Hickman and Walter 1997; Douglas 2002; Willis 2017). A study of Irish nurses who migrated to Britain in the 1950s–60s, revealed the pervasiveness of anti-Irish stereotypes, with minor mistakes or oversights immediately used as evidence of Irish stupidity (Ryan 2007). The nurses were confronted by persistent images of the Irish as “dirty” or “thick”. Sheila, a nurse in a London hospital during the 1960s, was criticized by the matron for not cleaning bedside

lockers properly and this apparent failure to meet required standards was immediately defined through her Irishness: “oh, there’s the Irish again, I’ll show you, this is how you clean a thing” (cited in Ryan 2007). Thus, stereotypes of the Irish as poor, ignorant and backward were augmented by gendered images of Irish women as lacking domestic skills (see also Walter 2001).

In recent years, migrants from particular Central/Eastern European countries while simultaneously distrusted and disliked were also needed as cheap labour in particular sectors of the economy (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012). This mirrors the arguments in British government debates on the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act for not including Irish migrants in the central provisions (Hickman 1998) as well as in the 1937 government inquiry into Irish migration (Ryan 2001). Like the Irish in earlier periods of labour shortage, Central/Eastern European workers fill a void in local economies. Their particular role as workers defined their place in society. Dawney found evidence that among the local English populace, all migrants were collectively referred to as “the strawberry pickers” (Dawney 2008). This is similar to how Irish men in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became associated with the term “navvies” such that this label became synonymous with all Irish male workers (Cowley 2001). Dawney (2008) also found evidence that local estate agents were wary of renting to Eastern European migrants because, they argued, landlords did not trust them as tenants. This reluctance to accept tenants simply because of their nationality harps back to the mid-twentieth century notices banning “Irish, Blacks and dogs”.

For migrant groups, whiteness cannot be taken for granted but “is subject to forms of contestation and negotiation” (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012, 692; see also Willis 2017). The experiences of Irish, Polish and Romanian migrants are not easily explicable using the black/white dichotomy which has continued to underpin sociological analysis of migration, “race” and ethnicity. It is apparent that many of the attitudes and hostility encountered by particular post-accession migrants are similar in key ways to those experienced by both earlier and recent migrants from Ireland to Britain. In these instances, white migrants can find themselves in contradictory positions, having freedom of movement and access to employment across borders (though that is likely to change with Brexit), filling labour market vacancies, while at the same time encountering resentment and criticism for taking jobs that no one else seemed to want.

While contemporary Irish migrants to Britain, like other EU nationals, are not subject to the same travel and other restrictions as non-EU immigrants, these relative privileges are always precarious especially for those engaged in low income and temporary jobs. Following the 2016 EU Referendum, Britain has been preparing to leave the EU. Many of these privileges have been rendered uncertain and attacks on white migrants are widely reported

as accent and language substitute for skin colour as the basis for targeting individuals (see Rzepnikowska 2018).

## Conclusion

Brexit negotiations, and especially the thorny issue of the Northern Ireland border, have highlighted a widespread lack of understanding in Britain, including among some British politicians, about the history and complexity of British–Irish relations. As we write, the British government is proposing to in effect redraw the border between the UK and Ireland down the middle of the Irish Sea, with myriad consequences for Ireland, north and south. Furthermore, the information that Irish Citizens are exempt from settled status requirement,<sup>6</sup> underlines the anomalies of Irish positionality in Britain. While clearly enjoying some privileges as “non-citizens” who are treated in many ways like “subjects”, the Irish have also experienced stigmatization, abuse, discrimination and suspectification. These issues can only be understood through an historical lens of colonial relations and the enduring role of the Irish as a reserve army of labour for Britain (Engels in Hazelkorn 1983). It is possible that, given changing immigration regimes, the availability and close proximity of Irish labour will become even more important to the British economy.

It is remarkable that, despite substantial migration from Ireland over the past 200 years, the Irish have been overlooked in much of the sociological research on migration and ethnicity in Britain. In this paper, we have aimed to explain how and why this virtual neglect of the Irish has come about (including its specificity in England) and what has been lost through this marginalization of Irish experiences. We are not suggesting there is no mention of the Irish in British sociological studies. What is absent is an integration of research about the Irish in Britain, especially the three major phases of immigration from Ireland since 1945, into the dominant paradigms informing migration studies and ethnic and racial studies. The only manner in which they are integrated is as part of the “white” facet of the black/white dichotomy and this has resulted in research about their experiences being overlooked as lacking relevance when studying racism, ethnic disadvantages and discrimination.

By tracing immigration policies and public debates through the twentieth century, we have shown the contingency and conditionality of Irish positionality in Britain through phases of heightened visibility to virtual invisibility, and back again, over time. While the Common Travel Area agreements appeared to give the Irish in Britain unprecedented access and entitlements, the anti-terrorist legislation from the 1970s to 1990s powerfully demonstrated the fragility of Irish rights and belonging.

But it is not only important to study the Irish for their own sake, we argue that integrating Irish experiences into mainstream sociological research on

migration and ethnicity is also important for other reasons. For example, the neglect of earlier Irish experiences during a previous “terror threat” has not only led to many missed lessons from the recent past, but also to an acceptance in many quarters that it is Muslim communities themselves that require investigation. In addition, we show how unpacking the white category helps us to understand the dynamic interplay of other identity markers such as accent, religion, nationality and class in shaping how particular groups of white migrants, including the Irish, have been perceived, represented and racialized in public, political and media discourses over time. We hope this paper will spark research, especially more comparative studies, aiming to put Irish migrants in Britain, and England in particular, back on the agenda.

## Notes

1. See Peter Flanagan for a perspective on this as an Irishman in Britain, *Irish Times*, February 19, 2019.
2. In writing this article we have tried to be exact when referring to sociology of migration and ethnic and racial studies in Britain or in referring to what we identify as characteristics most common amongst its practitioners in England. Nonetheless this is tricky, and our characterizations may not be those of others. Our premise is that Scotland is a different nation (social formation) compared to England and understandings of Irish migration and its impact and of Northern Ireland and the impact of “The Troubles” is frequently different in Scotland compared to south of the border.
3. Irish migrants to England/Britain since the creation of two states on the island of Ireland in the 1920s always included some from Northern Ireland (although the percentage grew significantly from the 1970s). When we use the term “the Irish” in discussing Irish migration we include those from the Republic of Ireland [legally Ireland] and from Northern Ireland. The legal status of migrants from Northern Ireland is different to those from the Irish Republic as the former are internal migrants within the United Kingdom. This has, however, not necessarily afforded them protection from experiencing anti-Irish prejudice [Hickman and Walter 1997].
4. The Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962 also included powers for the deportation of immigrants who offended against British laws. Irish migrants were included in these provisions. By May 1965, three years after the passage of the Act 716 immigrants had been deported using these powers, 452 of them were Irish.
5. The Birmingham Pub Bombings were carried out by the IRA in November 1974 in central Birmingham killing 21 people. The Prevention of Terrorism Act was passed by parliament a few days later.
6. <https://www.gov.uk/settled-status-eu-citizens-families>.

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