
Anti-Polish Migrant Moral Panic in the UK: A Response

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The contribution of Sean Hier details for us the evolution of understanding with regard to moral panics, including highlighting its recent formulation into a panics-as-regulation research framework. Central to this emerging panics-as-regulation framework are contemporary moral regulation and individual risk management studies. Therefore, our contribution has demonstrated how this conceptual framework is capable of emphasising the contradictions of the contemporary British neo-liberal market. These contradictions, as we have argued, found their embodiment in anti-Polish migrant societal reactions in the UK. Given that, our argument can be seen as parallel with that of Hier's intervention. Thus we will mainly concern ourselves with Slačálek's call for a re-discovery of the concept of hegemony for the study of panics in complex contemporary societies. Before turning to this theoretical research agenda and its implications for the sociology of moral panics, it is worth detailing what we believe to be the key economic and political considerations underlying our contribution, which justified using a 'Canadian turn' perspective.

First, we should of course re-emphasise the complexity of contemporary moral panics and the difficulty this poses for instrumental control originating either from above or below. So whilst we can detect three distinct patterns with regard to UK state responses to Polish migration, these are of course underpinned by volatile market considerations that are ever more driven by the differing dimensions of global labour and capital markets. With regard to our three patterns, our first one can be described as one of almost calm. This was evident following the May 2004 accession of Poland to the EU. Here governments were supportive of Polish migration and went to some lengths to identify that Central and Eastern European (CEE) migrants were positive for the UK economy (see the Home Of-

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face [2007] for a summation of reports). Business leaders and employers were also supportive of the role that these new entrants to the UK labour market played [e.g. Dench et al. 2006]. At the community level, a response could be identified with little reported job displacement [e.g. Gilpin et al. 2006] and with many resources to assist in the integration of migrants into local neighbourhoods. Trade unions at local workplaces were also supportive of these entrants into the UK labour market. It is important to add that this period witnessed the largest numbers of Polish workers entering the UK labour market up to the end of 2007.

In 2008 we see a second pattern emerging, one of disquiet and debate with regard to migration and driven by the global financial crisis, as identified by our data. Also relevant here for our subsequent third phase were the early signs of a change in state response. With reference to CEE workers this can be initially identified at the government level with a House of Lords (2008) committee critically stating that the economic impact of migration had been in some places negative rather than positive. Whilst disquiet about new migration was now combined with a growing anti-European dialogue openly displayed through the media. This can very much be seen as a period when controlling influences such as business and differing political elites were moving sometimes in opposite directions, as displayed by those who supplied evidence to the House of Lords committee above. At a community level, resources from the central government were not always targeted to locations in need of support for language translation or health care and housing needs. Trade unions were also coming under pressure from members whose wages were either reduced or frozen because of the financial crisis. The general question was often, 'what are you doing for us rather than migrants?'

Thus, coming into our third stage, we can identify a rudimentary coalition of political elites forming with regard to this anxiety over migration, driven by but certainly not originating in UKIP, as noted by Slačálek. We now have what could be described as an 'auction' with regard to who can be 'hard-hitting' on migration linked to an anti-EU nationalism, which is of course evident throughout the European Union. So whilst we recognise that there may appear to be some state coherence, this is not only opportunistic it is driven by idiosyncratic events as discussed below. We instead argue that what underpins these identifiable anti-migration panics are the contradictions of the neo-liberal market. Of fundamental importance here is to remember that this neo-liberal emphasis is driven by *laissez-faire* economic liberalism, which glorifies the individual, the work ethic, and the primacy of markets as opposed to collective combinations. Thus, as Hyman [2001] details, 'collective' regulation based on trade unions, and to some extent the law through workplace inspectorates, has been replaced by regulation that supports the expansion of markets from a national, through a European to a global level. Whilst the tenor of this change is clear, we do not find any instrumental logic in these developments, in fact there is debate over the scope and extent of globalism, the extent and integration of European political, economic, and

employment relations systems, and even the nature of and term neo-liberalism. That is why a focus on the interplay between prudentialism and panics as regulation allows us to reveal and gain important insights into these complex dynamics.

Now to narrow our response more specifically to Slačálek's identification of hegemony as a framework for the study of moral panics today. In doing this we need to take a closer look at the concept of hegemony itself. Whilst Slačálek calls for the re-discovery of hegemony, it is not clear what current of hegemony he has in mind. We can perhaps assume that he refers to the conventional Gramscian approach that was used by Hall et al. [1978] in their 'policing the crisis'. If this is the case his call requires substantial updating, given the fact that our understanding of hegemony has been substantially revised since Hall et al. [1978] introduced the concept into social control studies. In a way, Slačálek in *passim* acknowledged certain deficiencies of the concept of Hall et al., without, however, elaborating substantially possible forms of new conceptualisations. While considering a conceptual revision, we should turn particularly to an approach elaborated by Laclau and Mouffe [1985; see also Laclau 1990, 1996, 2005] and other Essex School scholars [e.g. Norval 1996; Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000] who applied semiotic insights to Gramscian essentialist assumptions [e.g. De Saussure 1966; Hjelmslev 1975; Derrida 1967]. This led to the abolition of the privileged centre within the social field (privilege embodied by class and economic relations in Gramscian scholarship but also referring to fixed interest groups or social control agents in moral panic studies), who acted in conventional analysis as a stable instance underpinning social action. By emphasising the undecidability of the social field a novel hegemonic approach revealed the contingency of social discourses, policies, strategies and actor's positions that then—to paraphrase Nachman Ben Yehuda [2009: 2]—triggered the need to conceptualise the struggle between different moral, political, and cultural concepts that strive for attention and domination. Overall, then, it is improbable, if not impossible, from the analytic point of view, that a social control agent can assume a privileged agency (either acting at the grassroots or elite level).

Therefore, within such a revised conceptual terrain that places antagonism and contingency at its analytical core, the conventional analysis of hegemony focused on fixed social control agents has lost its relevance. Instead, to trigger a moral panic occurrence we would expect to see actors' contingent articulations as identified by our published contribution. We thus refer to a multiplicity of discourses that acted in essence as 'ideological state apparatuses' in interpellating Poles' deviant subjectivity. In doing so we follow recent moral panic and social control literature, which emphasises the necessity to grasp dispersed ideological articulations that initiate panic occurrences. This is, for instance, evident in Hay's seminal study on the ideological interpellation of moral panic participants [Hay 1996]. His text identified how the media were capable of recruiting individuals into panic through their ability to transcend the particularity of the given event onto the level of the universal social concern:

Through the process of discursive amplification, the 'event' is translated from a particular conjuncture that must be understood in its own terms, to an event which is seen as emblematic and symptomatic of broader processes—moral decay, social malaise and the destruction of the social fabric of the family and thus society itself. [ibid.: 204]

The outburst of societal reactions becomes relevant when particular idiosyncrasies are linked to the wider field of ideological family resemblance. This mechanism is demonstrated in Hier and Greenberg's text, which examined how the Canadian press mobilised the public to oppose illegal Chinese migration [Hier and Greenberg 2002]. According to Hier and Greenberg, the very possibility of achieving any success in spreading anti-migrant claims was conditioned by the connections this had with wider public anxieties over racism, fear of crime, and a crisis in health provision. Other authors have also highlighted that recurring panic events cannot be properly understood without placing them in the broader discursive framework of the anxieties that are embedded in contemporary media and society [e.g. Critcher 2006; Parnaby 2003; Hier 2002; Watney 1987]. For example, anxieties over 'the war on drugs', 'bogus asylum-seekers', 'sexual predators', or, of course, one of the most powerful panic scripts which relates to threats to children by a myriad of dangers including paedophiles and kidnappers [Krinsky 2008; Critcher 2003; deYoung 2004; Jenkins 1992].

Moral panic studies might benefit from the 're-discovery' of the concept of hegemony. It may after all crucially refine an analysis of panics taking place in the now multi-mediated social field [McRobbie and Thornton 1995], directing as it does attention towards the articulations of various agents that construct contingent discursive foundations for panic strategies. These discursive strategies are meant to suture social contingency through constructing ideological proposals offering universal interpretations of antagonistic situations. They also lay down a surface of inscription for collective identities of different 'right-thinking' people. Following Laclau [1996], who rejects the possibility of any 'positive ground' and argues that 'a constitutive exclusion' is the ground for all identities, folk devils must be something negating differential identities. Indeed we construct an 'antagonistic limit' in our analysis identifying that an anti-Polish migrant panic in the UK led to Poles being nominated to function negatively, in essence blocking certain UK citizens from forming 'prudent identities' whilst 'managing' their employment security. Given this, a revised hegemonic approach has the potential to analyse the reaffirmation of the collective moral boundaries of panic proponents.

Further, it may also help to examine the counter-hegemonic articulations of various categories of deviants, as we should not forget that folk devils do fight back [McRobbie 1994]. In fact, some studies have indicated that contingency embedded in the social field can be prone to be subverted by folk devils' political action. For example, Hier [2002] analysed how the moralising policy of local authorities aimed at closing down a rave in Toronto by linking the events to the image of the ecstasy drug panic was in fact subverted by the discourses of the

rave organisers. They countered the moral panic campaigners by employing discourses that amplified 'the risks associated with banning raves from city spaces' [ibid.: 51]. According to Hier, the rave organisers' discursive strategies provide an example of Beck's alternative sub-politics. Here, in a social environment where the politicisation of risks flourish and the sites of cultural antagonism proliferate, new social movements can successfully fight back against dominant social control policies. Another example comes from a recent analysis of the Polish Hare Krishna movement's discursive fighting-back strategies [Smoczynski 2011]. The emergence of emancipatory discourses that offer an alternative to anti-cult moral panic relates to the advent of new emancipatory possibilities for social groups claiming their rights [see also Offe 1985; Melucci 1985]. Here Hare Krishnas successfully influenced official institutions and the public in order to rearticulate their stereotypical identities forged by moral panic agents.

To conclude, following Laclau we argue that understanding moral panics as an instance of the Gramscian hegemonic contest challenges not so much the mode of social control but the actual logic of the construction of the status of social control. In contrast, an anti-essentialist approach not only demonstrates the limits of the classic moral panic model but also involves a re-definition of its selected categories. Panic occurrences might, however, be analysed as an instance of hegemonic struggle between competing socio-cultural projects aiming to provide a 'common sense' for a given group. Of course, such an approach does not advocate a non-constrained flux of signifiers that would be able to perform an unrestrictive hegemonic function. As Laclau [2005] has noted, no position universally resonates in society equally with the public, the reason being the 'unevenness of structural locations and power relations'; in other words, there are some signifiers that are able to do a better job than other signifiers. This complex theoretical terrain calls for further systematic elaboration.

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