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Publisher citation:

OpenAIR citation:

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Break-point for Brexit? How UKIP's image of 'hate' set race discourse reeling back decades

There are many lines in [Policing the Crisis](#) – the seminal account of a flap about an invented 1970s wave of mob violence supposedly orchestrated by black youths - that might have been written as a critique of Grassroots Out's "[Breaking Point](#)" poster (or, indeed, the Brexit campaign generally). In one of [numerous memorable passages](#), the late Stuart Hall and his co-authors decried the “incalculable harm” done by politicians’, law-enforcers’ and the news media’s repeated claims about a racially tinged “mugging” epidemic – accusing them of “raising the wrong things into sensational focus” and “hiding and mystifying the deeper causes” of genuine, but far more nuanced, social problems. All of which brings us back to *that* poster: an image of invading ["orientals"](#) so laced with distortion, alarm and misrepresentation that it can only be viewed as a weapon of wilfully fomented [moral panic](#).

But, aside from its manifest racism and unsettling personification of Enoch Powell’s baleful ['Rivers of Blood' speech](#), what is the poster trying to ‘say’? And why is its underlying ‘message’ so profoundly untruthful? In deconstructing the image – and its equally deceitful slogan – we somehow need to divorce ourselves from the acres of commentary it provoked after Nigel Farage unveiled it on his battle-bus a week before referendum-day. So let’s confine ourselves to noting the most flagrant falsehood commentators exposed: namely that, far from depicting a line of European Union economic migrants (the people to whom the principle of free movement between member states applies), let alone one entering the United Kingdom, it showed a line of *non-EU refugees* crossing the Croatia-Slovenia border.

For all its crucial importance in framing the Farage case, though, this removal of context was far from the poster's most invidious deception. To turn to the charge of racism (as opposed to mere xenophobia), the poster depicted a river of people snaking towards the camera – almost all of whom are youthful-looking black or Asian men. This was UKIP's crystallisation of the fabled Cameron "[swarm](#)". Its malice lay in the fact that it simultaneously suggested a threefold untruth: that the inward migration encouraged by our EU membership is a non-white phenomenon; that it principally involves young, able-bodied males who can only be coming to steal our jobs and livelihoods; and that it is a Trojan horse for importing Islamist (ergo 'Middle Eastern-looking') terrorists. Not since Saatchi and Saatchi recruited an army of young Conservatives to stage a similarly sinuous fake dole queue for its epochal 1979 '[Labour isn't Working](#)' campaign had such a deceitfully anonymised procession been constructed in the service of British political propaganda. And it was this same spirit of calculated vagueness in its othering – constructing a hazily defined, straw-man threat - that underpinned the poster's infamous call to arms. The strapline urging us all to "take back control of our borders" paid not the scantest regard to [overwhelming independent evidence](#) that Britain's refusal to sign the [Schengen Agreement](#) already prevented the Syrian 'migrants' the photo depicted from entering the UK via other European countries.

The poster was, then, a masterclass in conflation and exploitation: it conflated the (starkly different) identities and statuses of intra-EU migrants/immigrants and inter-EU refugees/asylum-seekers, and it exploited not only these cruelly misrepresented subjects but the climate of suspicion and distrust that [numerous recent studies](#) have identified as a growing feature of advanced neoliberal societies. In so doing, it also exploited the insecurities and anxieties of those it claimed to represent: the "[ordinary, decent people](#)" of

the post-industrial North-East, South-West, Wales and eastern coastal fringes now so besieged by global market forces they are primed to be on the lookout for scapegoats.

The significance of the poster, then, lies less in what its divide-and-rule tactics *actually* achieved than what they *sought to* achieve. We will never know for sure quite how influential it was - though, given the referendum's result, the possibility that it swayed some minds is hard to discount. But in spite – or perhaps because - of the opprobrium it drew from the Twitterati and opinion leaders across the [spectrum of Brexit debate](#), its viral spread ensured its shock value the infamy and ubiquity Grassroots Out doubtless craved. While the moral panic dissected in Hall et al's study found a different outward expression – in fears specifically about violent crime, rather than pressure on jobs, housing or public services – it arose out of a period as economically turbulent, and socially divided, as our own. To this end, it recognised that the “mugging” discourse was but one manifestation of a deeper-rooted, perceived “crisis” of cultural identity – mobilised by authoritarian conservative forces convinced that [“the ‘British way of life’” was “coming apart at the seams”](#). In short: an imagined Britain (like UKIP's) on the verge of “breaking point”.