The Rural Racism Project:
Towards an Inclusive Countryside

Unpacking the Backlash:

Executive Summary 3

This Executive Summary report is part of a series of publications produced as part of *The Rural Racism Project: Towards an Inclusive Countryside*. Our full range of reports relating to this project are listed below and can be accessed at: https://le.ac.uk/hate-studies/research

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Executive Summary: Unpacking the Backlash

This executive summary presents the core findings from the "Unpacking the Backlash" stream of The Rural Racism Project. This strand investigates the nature, triggers, and impacts of hostile responses to discussions about rural racism, offering insights into how and why backlash occurs when rural racism is raised in public or online forums.

Context and Rationale

Despite growing recognition of racism in rural England, public and online discussions frequently provoke intense backlash. This resistance impedes progress toward inclusion and understanding, making it vital to systematically analyse how backlash manifests and what it reveals about rural identities, power dynamics, and the boundaries of belonging.

Methodology

The "Unpacking the Backlash" research employed a qualitative approach, including **case studies and discourse analysis.** Approximately 193,000 words were collected from below the line comments of news articles and social media posts, and public debates about rural racism, heritage, and countryside access. Analysis of eight case studies reveal how backlash against discussions of race and the countryside promotes racism and exclusion.

Key Findings

Case Study One: The National Trust: In September 2020, the National Trust released an interim report discussing how 93 of its 300 properties are connected with colonialism and historic slavery. Following this, the National Trust was criticised for:

- Being too 'political' and trying to force an unwelcome version of British history onto its members and visitors.
- Any changes of interpretations relating to historic objects were regarded with suspicion, and as acts of 'sanitising' or 'erasing' history.
- An 'us versus them' strategy was employed as people foregrounded their national identity and expressed pride in their country whilst denying the necessity to discuss colonialism and historic slavery and their relevance.
- 'Whataboutery' was employed to shift the attention to other examples of historical wrongdoings and discriminatory acts, suggesting that they are more relevant or significant for today's society.

Case Study Two: Changes to Built Environment: The toppling of Edward Colston's statue marked the beginning of a series of actions taken against statues and other memorials related to enslavers and colonialists. Following this, there were discussions about the location and interpretation of statues and their representation in both historical and contemporary contexts:

- Statues and monuments are inherently viewed as valuable because they are important symbols of *our* history, where we can learn from the mistakes of ancestors to build a better society for the next generation.
- Commentors employed a 'the past is the past' approach whereby attention is shifted from historic to modern slavery.
- Sceptics question current calls to address colonial history and representational meanings of statues and places. White advocates are depicted as virtue signallers who should not take an interest in the matters of non-White groups.

Case Study Three: The Renaming of Pubs: In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, the corporate sector was under scrutiny for its historical involvement with slavery. Many businesses, including pubs, were found to have links to individuals who benefited from the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833. The complexity of the stories behind pub names racialised the discourse around renaming:
- The issue of retaining or losing historical pub names shows that a name is not *just* a name but entails layers of historical and cultural meaning. To the sceptics, proposed pub renaming represented an attempt to erase history and damage British culture.
- Political correctness was seen as a destructive, radicalising force, in which people are viewed as oversensitive and too easily offended.
- Online sceptics suggest that reasoning (e.g., the origins and history of pub names) is being threatened by emotional considerations (i.e. appeals to address concerns about racist names), and entails 'virtue signalling'.

Case Study Four: Gardening: Several individuals have spoken publicly about horticulture's diversity problem, criticising it for lacking sensitivity to issues of race. This includes how words such as 'heritage' and 'native' are commonly perceived as synonymous for 'better', whilst individuals also disclose experiences of covert and overt racism in the field. These remarks sparked a backlash:
- Gardening is seen as needing to be 'rescued' from being politicised by including discussions about race or racism, as commentators imbue their arguments with exaggeration, sarcasm and parody.
- Some commentators declare that they are not racist and place the onus on people who are not White to rationalise what they perceive to be racist. This creates two simplified categories - minoritised groups who believe racism exists versus White sceptics - whose world views are depicted as irreconcilable.
- At the root of the backlash is a strong sense of pride and belonging towards the country. 'This occurs everywhere' is a common argument to normalise racist actions and reasoning.

Case Study Five: Muslim Hikers: Hiking might seem accessible to all, but research shows that minoritised groups are underrepresented in the outdoors. Consequently, Muslim Hikers launched as a walking group in July 2021. Through organising regular hiking events, it hopes to demonstrate to Muslims and other underrepresented communities that physical activities in outdoor spaces are accessible to them. Following this, they experienced increasing online abuse:

- Commentators employed a 'no barrier' sentiment to access the countryside that is racialised. Minoritised people who feel unwelcome in the countryside are blamed for finding excuses, not trying hard enough, or lacking genuine passion for nature.
- Online sceptics argue that minoritised groups do not follow 'The Countryside Code'. Sceptics assume the power position through representing themselves as more knowledgeable and experienced in hiking, and minoritised people as incompetent and ignorant of the etiquette in the countryside.
- The necessity of foregrounding one particular identity is questioned, suggesting demands for public attention and special treatment, and the building of 'fake' barriers by starting their own group rather than joining any existing walkers' groups which – they imply – would have no difficulty welcoming them.
- The founding of Muslim Hikers triggered an invasion narrative which sees some commentators criticise the group for attempting to expand their territory and 'control everything'. This 'us vs them' narrative, portrays the UK as superior to other nations whilst the actions of 'foreigners' are incongruent with 'British life'.

Case Study Six: Travellers: Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers, with distinct histories and cultures, are often met with inflammatory media representations and are not welcomed by local settled residents in rural spaces:

- Online commentators criticise Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers for not following laws and regulations. They argue that these communities 'play the minority card', using their identities/marginalised status to get special treatment, whilst disrupting the lives of 'law abiding' villagers.
- Online commentators discuss the itinerant cultures of Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities and their relationship to the countryside, representing them as uncivilized and greedy, whilst exploiting legal loopholes and engaging in crime.
- In cases where Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller groups seek to set up 'permanent' rural sites, their identity is viewed to be relinquished and

their status as minorities with protected characteristics is consequently contested.

Case Study Seven: Debate Programmes: Various stakeholders are advocating for a more inclusive countryside through focused equality and awareness-raising campaigns. These narratives were picked up by mainstream media, producing programmes which sparked furious debate on the question 'Is the countryside racist?':

- Online commentators who self-identify as rural residents express a desire to protect the status quo by resisting changes which might unsettle established ways of being, whilst suggesting that minoritised groups are outsiders who are not British, or not British enough.
- The backlash against raising the topic of rural racism stems from contesting established definitions of racism, whilst expressing bewilderment. The suggestion that there are barriers to access are rejected, while the underrepresentation of minoritised groups are attributed to personal choices and practical considerations.
- Among those who question that rural racism is an issue, there is strong resistance to any self-identification as racist. This in turn prompts reflections about what constitutes racism.

Case Study Eight: Research and Backlash: This involves an attempt to empirically record and analyse online abuse directed at the Rural Racism project. This reveals the scale of the challenge, given the strength of resistance to acknowledging and addressing rural racism:

- When newspapers feature the topic of rural racism, they often cite the work of academic researchers, sometimes referring to them as 'experts'. This word-choice triggers a clear backlash, characterised by dismissal of their expertise.
- Academics are accused of falling prey to confirmation bias, selecting examples of racism based on preconceived beliefs and producing opinion pieces rather than evidence-based work.
- These online expressions of doubt about the legitimacy of research into rural racism are often explicitly linked to the ethnicity of the researchers involved, suggesting that researchers in this area should be White because of the purported fragility or victim mentality of academics from marginalised groups.

Conclusion

The research identified several overarching themes that illuminate the complex dynamics of rural racism and resistance to addressing it:

- **Resistance to discussing racism:** There is widespread denial that racism exists or that it is significant in rural contexts. Efforts to address rural racism often provoke anger or defensive reactions.
- **Failure to acknowledge barriers:** Online commentary frequently downplays or ignores the barriers minoritised groups face in accessing the countryside, instead framing their concerns as oversensitivity or manufactured issues.
- **Preserving the status quo:** There is strong resistance to reinterpreting rural heritage, including towards changes in how colonial history is represented in public spaces and reluctance to raise awareness of rural racism.
- **'Us Versus Them' mentality:** Rural identity is habitually equated with Whiteness, as minoritised groups are depicted as outsiders, reinforcing exclusionary narratives.
- **Misconceptions of racism:** Rural racism is dismissed as irrelevant or limited to overt acts, with more subtle or systemic forms overlooked or trivialised.

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