Shock racialisation

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Abstract

In this paper, I address the shock that a group of African students went through when they were intensely racialised and subjected to racist violence by Ukrainian authorities during their flight from Ukraine following the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022. While they had normalised the various forms of racialisation in their daily lives during the pre-war period, as they were seen by ordinary Ukrainian citizens as culturally other and sometimes as wealthy African students, it came as a shock to them that their racial identity suddenly made them expendable when they were violently prevented to flee the country. Using the concept of "shock racialisation," I analyse the abrupt changes in the intensity of racialisation that signal shifts in the established racialised order during "shock mobilities" and show that race still plays a crucial biopolitical role in contemporary nation-states.

Theme

Shock (Im)mobilities

Keywords

shock, racialisation, African international students, war in Ukraine, shock mobility, biopolitics, necropolitics

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This response to the "Special Section: African Migrants in the Ukraine War" explores the interplay between shock (im)mobility and experiences of racialisation of African students in Ukraine during the first days of the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022.[2] As different contributions on shock (im)mobilities have shown,[3] not only are the global mobility patterns between the Global South and North still highly unequal, these mobility inequalities can worsen during unforeseen events. The war in Ukraine and the refugee movement it triggered brought these inequalities to light once again, especially when Africans faced severe racism as they tried to escape the war.

Before the war, Ukraine was home to about 75,000 thousand international students, with the majority coming from India and Morocco, followed by Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Nigeria, and other Asian and African countries. During their studies at various Ukrainian public and private universities,[4] black Africans I spoke to lived mainly with their co-nationals, e.g. in student dormitories, with whom they also spent most of their time. When they interacted with Ukrainians, they experienced racialisation mainly in the form of being seen as culturally different and economically beneficial because they paid tuition fees and appeared as someone with a lot of money that the locals could take advantage of. At worst, they occasionally experienced various forms of overt racism. Yet they were able to tolerate their stay in Ukraine and the way they were racialised. This was also evident in the fact that they could develop the feeling that Ukraine was their home or a gateway to a more prosperous country.

However, when war broke out and many African students decided to flee the country, they were shocked to find that they were not allowed to cross the Ukrainian border. Because they were black, they suddenly became targets of state authorities, who threw them off trains for evacuation from Ukraine or pushed them back at border checkpoints. I use the term "shock racialisation" to analyse their shock experience that occurred during these moments. I argue that their shock occurred because the everyday racialisation from the pre-war period suddenly escalated into overtly racist behaviour on the part of state authorities who arbitrarily and violently enforced the "Ukrainians First"[5] policy by blocking the African students from leaving. The African students could not believe that they were now being subjected with impunity to such a direct form of racism that they had not experienced before. These changing intensities of racialisation require a brief theoretical explanation.

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2 I base my research findings on the subjective experiences of a group of students from various African countries, mainly from Nigeria, with whom I was able to speak in Berlin and with whom I published a series of open letters on various German public anthropology blogs – these letters can be accessed here: https://www.medizinethnologie.net/more-open-letters-from-african-students-from-ukraine-who-fled-to-germany-ii/ and http://publicanthropology.de/2022/04/11/an-open-letter-from-african-students-from-ukraine-who-fled-to-germany-with-an-introductory-text-on-the-situation-of-african-students-in-germany-by-ziga-podgornik-jakil/. In addition, between March 2022 and March 2023, I shared my flat with three African students from Ukraine and got to know other students through their acquaintances or through events organised by German-African organisations that helped these students settle in Berlin.

3 Xiang, Biao. 2021. *Shock (Im)mobilities*. Available online at: https://www.eth.mpg.de/molab-inventory/shock-immobilities. Last accessed 25 July 2023.

4 International students were enrolled in public and private universities in cities such as Kharkiv, Kiev, and Odessa, with medicine being the most popular subject, followed by other practical disciplines such as pharmacy, economics, finance, banking, and insurance. See: Hladchenko, Myroslava. 2021. International Students in Ukraine: A Gateway to Developed Countries. *European Journal of Higher Education*: 1–16. DOI: 10.1080/21568235.2021.1988669.

5 Tardzenyuy Thomas, Mengnjo. 2023. Shock immobility: Why some African migrants are staying in Ukraine. *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes*. Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation'. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

If racialisation refers to the normalisation of social differences along "racial" lines (Blickstein, 2019),[6] it also shapes the way people experience and navigate existing racialised regimes. Although racialised subjects are aware that they are treated differently, they sometimes tolerate and endure these circumstances for a long period of time. But in certain moments of crisis, the existing racialised regimes may crystallise and racialisation can intensify into overt forms of racism—similar to shock mobility (Xiang et al., 2022),[7] it is not that new forms of racialisation emerge, but the existing forms temporarily or permanently change their intensity, speed, direction, and consequences. When these changes become unbearable for the racialised subjects and are felt as an intense bodily experience of injustice, a shock paralyses them.

"The Life in Ukraine was Peaceful before the War"

As I sat in the kitchen watching Kendrick and Jack prepare their meal, they complained about their daily difficulties since arriving in Germany. At the same time, they were reminiscing about the not-so-long ago time when they were students in Ukraine, describing it as "peaceful" and "good." Kendrick, a twenty-something from Cameroon who had studied in Kiev for less than a year, had shared a private flat with another student from his country. He showed me a picture of a little snowman with a cigarette in his mouth that he had built with his flatmate on the balcony of the flat and told me: "We did such silly things because there was so much snow. Other days we went to these big shopping malls together." Jack joined in and mentioned that he spent his free time watching football matches on his mobile phone at home. A student from Nigeria who had lived in Ukraine for nearly five years, he first lived in dorms for international students and later moved on his own.

As I listened to them, I noticed a common thread running through the stories shared by my other interlocutors. Most emphasised that they spent their time mainly with other international students or acquaintances from their home countries, with whom they lived in dormitories or private flats. Kendrick said he only knew two Ukrainians from his university with whom he had met for drinks a few times.

Being largely disconnected from the white Ukrainian majority in their private lives, however, did not necessarily bother the African students I spoke with, as they had established their own daily routines and ways of navigating public spaces. They owned small businesses like hair salons, sold products through online marketplaces, and sometimes worked for Ukrainian businesses to pay their bills while they studied. Kendrick felt that Ukraine had become his home,[8] while Jack viewed his stay in Ukraine as a gateway to the "West," such as the United States, the United Kingdom, or Canada.[9]

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6 Blickstein, Tamar. 2019. "Affects of Racialization." In *Affective Societies: Key Concepts,* edited by Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve, 152–165. London and New York: Routledge.

7 Biao Xiang, Allen, William L., Khosravi, Shahram, Kringelbach, Hélène Neveu, Ortiga, Yasmin Y., Liao, Karen Anne S., Cuéllar, Jorge E., Momen, Lamea, Deshingkar, Priya and Naik, Mukta. 2022. Shock Mobilities During Moments of Acute Uncertainty. *Geopolitics*: 1–26. DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2022.2091314.

8 For the feeling of attachment to Ukraine by African migrants, see also: Tardzenyuy Thomas, Mengnjo. 2023. Shock immobility: Why some African migrants are staying in Ukraine. *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes.* Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation'. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

9 On Ukraine's role as a gateway to Western countries for international students from the Global South, see: Hladchenko, Myroslava. 2021. "International Students in Ukraine: A Gateway to Developed Countries." *European Journal of Higher Education*: 1–16.

Curious about his interactions with the few Ukrainians he met, I asked Kendrick about what Ukrainians were interested in when they talked with him. He smiled and said that they often wanted to know about his "African culture", but their curiosity did not seem to mind him. Jack added that Ukrainians often thought Africa was one country and that all black Africans had a common culture. Although homogenising different African nationalities in this way is a common racist trope (Johnson, 1993),[10] it was not necessarily perceived as racist by the students themselves. It did, however, make them feel that they were seen as culturally different.

While most of my interlocutors did not address racism in the pre-war period, I asked Kendrick and Jack if they sometimes experienced it. Kendrick replied diplomatically at first that there were always bad apples among Ukrainians and: "When they're drunk, they can hurt you because you're black." However, as we talked about his annual tuition fees and flat expenses,[11] he became more critical of Ukrainians: "I think as long as they get something from you, like you have the money for rent and university, they are okay with you. It's all about the money for them." Jack shared his view. He recalled that his landlord had once searched his flat without his permission, which he perceived as racist behaviour.

Kendrick's and Jack's experience of racialisation also underlines that their racial identity was often linked to their social status. Being Black African, then, meant not only sharing a common "African culture" in the eyes of Ukrainians, but also being financially well-off. Skin colour and origin were directly linked to the perception that Africans had plenty of money to study in Ukraine, demonstrating that racialisation operated at the intersection of class and race. By paying for the universities where they studied and to landlords who rented out flats to them, they felt as their bodies became potential source of financial extraction.[12] Sarah, a medical student from Nigeria with whom I shared a coffee in a hip café in Berlin, most explicitly echoed this sentiment: "The Ukrainians just want to milk the foreign [African] students."

The fact that most of my interlocutors described their former life in Ukraine before the Russian invasion as "peaceful", "normal", or "good" suggests that their experience of racialisation was normalised to some extent.[13] When I asked them explicitly about racism in Ukraine, most mentioned an instance of racism they had witnessed themselves or heard about from their peers. One student from Nigeria I spoke with recounted that she and her friend walked past an older man with a child in a shopping mall in Kyiv and heard him say they were "monkeys". Some students also mentioned that they experienced racial prejudice in public spaces, for example when they felt that white Ukrainian citizens did not want to sit next to them in the metro. However, as Kendrick, Jack, and Sarah's narratives attest, they shared the feeling that Ukraine had at least financial benefit from them. What then particularly shocked them when war broke out was that they suddenly became disposable bodies left to die. Their shock showed that everyday racial politics were crystallised and intensified in the biopolitics and necropolitics of the Ukrainian state.

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10 Johnson, Charles. 1993. "A Phenomenology of the Black Body." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 32 (4): 599–613.

11 Some information about tuition fees at Ukrainian universities for international students can be found here: https://www.kpi.kharkov.ua/eng/for-future-students/education-in-ukraine/. Last accessed 25 July 2023.

12 Mbembe, Achille. 2017. *Critique of Black Reason.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

13 Blickstein, Tamar. 2019. "Affects of Racialization." In *Affective Societies: Key Concepts*, edited by Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve, 152–165. London and New York: Routledge.

The Intensification of Everyday Racialization

When Kendrick arrived at the apartment we shared in Berlin, he found it difficult to process the ordeal he had gone through fleeing Ukraine. As he sat on the bed in his room and told me the story of his flight, he was still stunned by what had happened at the border crossings in Ukraine: "I was really shocked, wow! I mean sure there was also racism in Ukraine, but that was something I hadn't experienced before. I couldn't believe that the Ukrainian authorities didn't allow me to cross."

As Ukrainian government declared the martial law and ordered able-bodied Ukrainian men to stay in Ukraine, the draft excluded women and children, as well as non-Ukrainian citizens. My interlocutors, however, were shocked that suddenly they became target of intense racial profiling and racism by the Ukrainian authorities. They could not understand why white Ukrainians, with the exception of able-bodied men,[14] were allowed to leave the country, while they were forcibly stopped at the borders or prevented from boarding the trains used for evacuation. Not even black women and children were spared. One of my interlocutors was aghast when he and his underage siblings finally managed to board the train in Kiev and were almost immediately pushed off the train by a group of Ukrainian soldiers.

Sarah shared a similar fate as she was blocked several times when trying to board the train to Poland: "The police didn't allow me to board. I could not believe it. We all have the same blood under our skin." Echoing Fanon's phrase that as a black person he simply wanted to be recognised as a human being,[15] Sarah's experience testifies to the fact that her racial identity trumped her other subject positions and deprived her of equal human treatment.

It was at the border crossings that the arbitrariness of the Ukrainian authorities over who could leave the country and receive protection was most bodily and materially felt. As I continued my conversation with Kendrick, he vividly recounted how the bitter cold pierced his face in the snowy landscape as he had to walk miles and was forcibly prevented from crossing: "The border guard was yelling at me and trying to hit me with his baton. I didn't want to leave, so I slept three days in the cold and snow. I got so sick that I couldn't breathe."

The arbitrariness was particularly evident in the reasons the Ukrainian authorities gave him and other African students as to why they were not allowed to pass. While some reasons were already highlighted in the entries in the MoLab's Special Section, my interlocutors, both male and female, said that (white) Ukrainians had priority in crossing the border, while they were told that they would have to wait for an unknown period of time or that a special train would come to pick them up. Others, mainly male interlocutors, were dumbfounded and incredulous when they were told by border officials to stay and fight.

The shock racialisation triggered by the violence and arbitrary behaviour of the Ukrainian authorities has shown that everyday pre-war racialisation in Ukraine has now taken on an overtly biopolitical function, denoting a politics in which the state decides which populations must live or die—a politics

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14 Some of my interlocutors reported that they saw Ukrainian men who were eligible for conscription allowed to cross the border.
15 Fanon, Frantz. 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London, UK: Pluto Press.

that ultimately has to do with questions of race.[16] On the other hand, when African students were asked to stay and fight, they were again seen as potentially making a useful contribution to the Ukrainian state and citizens, but not because of their financial contribution. On the contrary, they were seen as useful in that they can serve the necropolitics of the Ukrainian state, a policy of subjugating life to the power of death, provided it can be used to kill the enemy.[17]

Despite their dehumanisation, the overt racism and racial profiling also sparked temporary bonds of solidarity among the African and other international students. Some of my interlocutors reported intense moments of camaraderie that emerged between the international students from different countries when the Ukrainian authorities asked them to leave the train. A student from Sierra Leone echoed this sentiment: "We stood together and protested and we succeeded to stay on the train." Kendrick, however, recounted with disappointment that some international students stuck at the border with him took his belongings packed in a box without his permission and used them to climb over the border fence, destroying them in the process. It was every person for themselves. While desperate moments sometimes led to temporary solidarity between students that transcended national and racial lines, these moments were usually ad hoc and short-lived.

Conclusion

In this contribution, I have focused on the changes of intensities of racialisation during shock (im)mobility. While mobility studies have explored changing mobility patterns in times of crises, the focus on race has so far been under-researched. The concept of shock racialisation is one way to examine how unanticipated events can disrupt or reinforce established racialised orders in nation-states.

The stories of African students in Ukraine have pointed to this dynamic. With the outbreak of war and the state of exception that followed, their shock revealed that the racialisation that had previously characterised their everyday lives took on a more overt and violent form, now enforced by state actors. Before the war, the experiences of racialisation described by my interlocutors had more to do with their interactions with ordinary Ukrainians (people they met in public spaces, landlords, etc.) and universities where they studied than with the state. While their racial identities had always affected their living situation in Ukraine, especially how they moved in public spaces and how they were treated by the white majority, the new ways they were racialised nearly cost them their lives as they were not allowed to cross the border. As the war rages on, it remains to be seen if these changes in racial politics will become the new normal or return to the pre-war status quo. It also yet to be seen whether shock racialisation can also open up spaces of struggle against existing racial orders.

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16 Mora, Mariana. 2017. "Ayotzinapa and the Criminalization of Racialized Poverty in La Montaña, Guerrero, Mexico." *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 40 (1): 67–85
17 Mbembe, Achille. 2017. *Critique of Black Reason*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.