Critically examine whether media coverage of immigration and national identity

Over the past 60 years the issue of immigration and the impact on the national identity has been a subject of great public interest. In this paper I will be examining the political and ideological controversies caused by immigration, if immigration has changed the national identity and if the mass media has fairly or unfairly depicted immigrants. In particular if stereotyped portrayal of immigrants reflects actual differences, or unfair prejudice. Arguments for both views will be explored. I will begin by discussing the Theory of racism, political discourses, construction of ideologies and national identities, ending with the media portrayal of immigration and immigrants

Racism

A number of studies carried out in different, and even opposed theoretical/methodological perspective's together with the experience of ethnic minorities with obvious or faint forms of racial discrimination and prejudice have concluded that western societies are racist (Essed, 1987).

Dijk (1991) describes racism as " a multifaceted societal structure where European's dominate people of other origins. This relation of dominance takes various forms of social, cultural, economic political hegemony, legitimated in terms of, usually negatively valued, different characteristics attributed to the dominated people."

The major characteristic selected for categorization has been the differences of bodily appearance. This developed into categorization during the eighteenth century about different ' races' that were supported by pseudo-scientific arguments concluded that the ' white race' was superior to other

races. This ideology of superiority was used to legitimise exploitation and oppression to extermination of non Europeans (Miles, 1989).

Scientist have proven that there are no ' races', such ' races' cannot have inherent social-cultural or moral characteristics, the notion of ' racism' can be misguided, this would, for example, precisely presuppose the notion of ' race' (Banton, 1977). Racism is denounced and denied as a political or rhetorical term but not as a theoretical concept (Essed, 1987).

Racial taxonomies of popular pseudo-scientific representations of different people were social constructions with social consequences as modern racism need not presuppose the biological notion of race or the associated racial hierarchies, but presupposes their continued social-cultural construction as adapted to the current historical context (Omi and Winnat, 1986). Racism is not presently defunct as Europeans no longer believe the ' racial superiority', dominant norms and values have discredited such ideology, hence the legitimation of group dominance (Dijk, 1991).

Groups remain dominant by using their resources to reproduce their dominance. This is essential for the reproduction of racism including new ideological production, definition of the ethnic situation through politics, education, and the media. The shift to cultural differences has become the modern variant of racial differentiations of earlier western ideologies, consequently racism is being transformed into ethnicism (Mullard, 1986).

Ideologies organise a set of attitude systemised along specific dimension that explains similarities among ideologies, for example about immigrants and minorities. The organizational function of ideologies involves the

development, combination, selection, and application of social norms and values. In the development of a racist ideology, people may assign more weight to the value of in group solidarity and allegiance than to equality of different groups (Dijk, 1991). Current ideologies have moved to a ' moderate' form of ethnic dominance.

Moderate racism legitimates itself officially through equality and tolerance within the political system, at the same time is not consistently anti-racist. To be completely anti-racist would imply the eradication of white group dominance in all area's of private and societal life, including discriminatory practices and their controlling of prejudiced ideologies (Malik, 1996).

State Racism

Black people have been present in Britain well before the arrival of immigrants from the colonies. Communities were established in port towns from the late nineteenth century. Ever since their arrival, the issue of immigration control has been at the forefront of political discourse. Discriminatory practices and early Aliens legislation sought to control the flow and prevent migrants from settling.

Some concerns were raised regarding the entry of the vast numbers of Irish and European immigrants, however, extensive media coverage was given to the arrival of West Indian and Jamaican workers in 1948. The liberal attitude towards the European's contrasted sharply with the reservations expressed about the supposed racial and social problems that would occur from the arrival of non European workers, thus obscuring the fact that most

immigrants came from white European and commonwealth countries (Kay and Miles, 1992).

Continued emphasis was placed on the need for further control and the behaviour of immigrants that engaged in criminal activities. Media coverage of the 1958 Nottingham and Notting Hill riots gave the issue national prominence and politicised this process (Miles, 1984). Political/Ideological debates on ' coloured immigration' were established. Politicians made a close link between immigration/race, the future of immigration split in two themes.

First, revising the Nationality Act of 1948. After carefully analysing cabinet debates on immigration from non white colonies, James and Harris (1993) concluded, from 1948 – 1962 Government instituted several covert, illegal executive measures to discourage black migration, involved in complex ideological, political racialisation of immigration policies, resulted in the implementation of the Commonwealth Act that relinquished the free entry principle.

Second, a link was made between problems caused by too many black immigrants on housing, employment and crime. This proved to be influential in the development of immigration legislation and race relations act. State intervention was necessary to stop the momentum of immigration and to address the supposedly linked problems. Anti immigration lobbies argued that they are a real threat to the British way of life, rule of law and started to call for repatriation/exclusion of immigrants.

The riots were exploited by Lord Salisbury and others to justify claims that ' controls should be imposed on black immigration and he was extremely apprehensive of the economic and social results, for European and Africans alike, that were likely to flow from an unrestricted immigration of men and women of the African race into Britain' (Guardian, 3 September 1958). The interplay between such politicised comments and the link to social problems was given coverage in the press that resulted in the spread of a variety of stereotypes of popular images of immigrants.

Enoch Powell's infamous 1968 ' Rivers of Blood' speech triggered an explosion of prejudices, bigotry, alarm, fear, and tension right across British society. He called for repatriation and the immediate halt of immigration. Underlining Powell's speech was a deep seated fear that immigration is fatally weakening the racial, religious, cultural ties that bound Britain together for centuries.

The Establishment embraced a radical different vision for the country. The Home secretary Roy Jenkins, a liberal reformer, argued that immigrants should no longer have to integrate, new comers can retain their own values, it was a birth of the new way of thinking about Britain as a Multicultural society where equal opportunities and cultural diversity in an atmosphere of tolerance. Multiculturalism as an ideology was seen as a solution for dealing with racial conflict and tension. Introduction of the race relations bill and the Commission for Racial Equality further strengthened this ideology (Dodd, 1995).

The language used by Powell during the 1970's to describe race politics had as much to do with the definition of Britishness as it had with characteristic of the minority communities themselves. He argued that the loss of national identity was due to the failure of the country to recognise the consequence of immigration on the national culture. Such arguments were by no means limited to Powell, his thoughts were given respectability by the increasingly influential New Right, who adopted race as a political discourse (Carter, 1987).

New Right

The meaning of ' Britishness' has constantly changed, ' Britishness' had to be made and remade throughout history (Colls and Dodds, 1986). This consists of shared customs, language, colour, religion, and many other supposed attributes of the national culture. Attempts were made to reinvent the British identity during the 1980's inline with its image as an island race. Expression of identity, and redefinition of the terms of racial political discourse dominated politics and the media as it came to grips with the loss of an Empire and changes in world geopolitical order.

Margaret Thatcher's ' Swamping' statement echoed Powell's views. She raised issues in relation to the rate of immigration, concerns about the need for the protection of ' the British nation and character' from the threats from ' within and without', threat to political, religious, and cultural homogeneity of white British society (Hollingsworth, 1986). This was an example of how the New Right used immigration to mobilise political support without directly using racist language. She further argued that the rise of the National Front

during the 1970's was due to failure of political institutions in dealing with immigration. Another clear example of the obsession with identity was Norman Tibbit's ' cricket test'. Despite ferocious criticism of his remarks, he refused to retract his statement but rather expressed similar views.

Western Governments, Population, Press including Intellectuals were shocked at the reaction of Muslim's across the world following the publication of the Satanic Verses. The events were seen as an attack on ' our freedom of speech, international terrorism, fundamentalist intolerance'. Old division between Islam and Christianity started to surface in the media. The media legitimised prejudices against Muslim and emphasized the socio-cultural superiority of whites (Assad, 1990).

The was a turning pointing on the debate about national, ethno religious identities, reinforced public interest in fundamentalism and gave new life to the debates on cultural differences and the part religion plays in the process of assimilation and integration (Bhatt, 1997). Media responses focused on the implications for future race relations. The Daily Telegraph in an editorial headed ' Races Apart' highlighted ' the difficulty of integrating the Muslim community into British life, and there must be increased pessimism about how far different communities in our nation can ever be integrated, or want to be' (The Daily Telegraph, 17 May 1989).

Such statements were common and helped to push back the questions about integration of minorities onto to the agenda. Furthermore, this aided those who questioned the viability of an ethnically plural society. The Rushdie

affair is seen as the precursor of a series of controversies that shaped ideas on race and ethnic relations (Bhatt, 1997).

New Labour

New Labour debated the issue of what it means to be British, and started to define a new sense of patriotism at the same time linking national identity to the ever growing multicultural society. One example of trying to make this link was by Robin Cook: ' Chicken tikka masala is now Britain's true national dish because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences' (Evening Standard, 19 April 2001). This was an attempt to popularise the idea that the national identity is able to assimilate other cultures.

Following the 2001 riots, attacks on 9/11 and 7/7, there was a shift in political language on race relations and immigration. With the perpetrators of the London Bombings, themselves born in England of immigrant families, the issue of integration continued to hit the headlines. David Blunkett introduced strict immigration controls while arguing in favour of multiculturalism. In 2005 the ' life in the UK test' was implemented whilst completely ignoring the link between Norman Tebbit's Cricket test. Mathew Taylor argued that policies relating to multiculturalism were constructing a ' consenting apartheid', this was a reference to areas where there was little or no contact between minorities and majorities (Guardian, 4 December 2001).

Media

Hartmann (1974) argues, historically the media perpetuate negative perceptions of immigrants, and define the situation as one inter group conflict, heavily imbued with the significance of colour, that leads to an active collusion with racist definitions. Definitions of newsworthy events are determined by powerful professional, organizational routines, and social ideologies (Gans, 1979).

During the 1980's, several cities in the UK with a predominantly immigrant population experienced civil unrest. The media paid considerable attention to these events. Definitions of these events by politicians were displayed and endorsed by the media:

" Theses criminal acts are not a result of discrimination, inequality, or as an expression of socio-economic frustration. The riots are an attack on our civil order, and these criminal acts were committed by black youths. Correct response should be to strengthen the police force in order to contain this urban unrest" (Daily Mail, 7 October 1985).

The media conveys knowledge about events to the population who have little knowledge about the reality, political definitions are conveyed and accepted by large segments of the public, in turn creates popular resentment, this provides an ideological framework for the interpretation of events, and acts to legitimise discrimination and prejudices against immigrants (Dijk, 1991).

However, Freedman (2002) argues that there has always been a mixed feeling and anxiety towards new comers, this public perception gave rise to the negative and unfair representation of minority groups in the media.

Freedman identifies two views: One view is that the media representation of minority groups is often consistent with societal views. As a result the media represents a public face to the worries and concerns of the dominant group from whom expects to extract funding. For example during the 1980's Russian's were portrayed as aggressive and authoritarian in films like ' Red Dawn, 1984'. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, these depictions evaporated and replaced with new ones like ' Four Lions, 2010' where British Muslims were portrayed as suicide bombers.

Media representation of minority groups has tended to move away from realistic depictions of actual differences to extending prejudices against minorities that reflects social hostility towards them. The common theme is that such stereotypes are used as a hostile movement that denies minorities the opportunity to integrate as equal members of society. Negative depictions of minority's works to harm their self esteem/image while encouraging prejudices and simply failing to confront prejudices that already exist in society (Gans, 1979).

Media coverage portrayed minority political mobilisation following the Rushdie Affair as a threat to everyday political rhetoric, endangering the fabric of society, and that antiracist were harming race relations more than the extreme racist right wing (Assad, 1990).

The alternative argument would be to portray minorities differently to the majorities, by doing so will reflect differences oppose to prejudice (Freedman, 2002). Such depictions may be stereotypical, however, these

stereotypes are based on reality, not prejudices highlighting the actual social problems that exist.

Proponents of this view would argue that this portrayal is a process of assimilation. For example the Jews experienced discrimination, numerous generations later they have acculturated to British society, thus diminishing discriminatory practices.

Stereotypes based on reality may be embedded within public consciousness proving to be immutable after social circumstances have changed. The dangers of tolerating and leaving stereotypes unchallenged can potentially be distorted and used to oppress other groups. Negative stereotypes may be based on differences in reality, however, the media fails to portray positive differences, resulting in an unfair prejudicial representation of minority groups (Freedman, 2002).

Historically, the media has over time deliberately presented inflammatory and prejudicial presentation of minority groups. Ultimately, media stereotypes will only decline when the viewing public looses interest in such stereotypes. Due to the cultural changes that have taken place over the past 50 years and criticisms from academics, media has come a long way in presenting a diversified view of British culture.

Racism or prejudice is considered to be immoral and illegal in society, a strategy of positive self representation is essential, and denial is the relevant functional move in the strategy of positive self representation. Journalist resent being called racist, they ignore and attack researchers and their finding's, resorting to defensive strategies and counter examples like ' we

write positive things about minorities' (Hollingsworth, 1986). Academic scholars have also contributed to the propagation of racist beliefs and the denial of racism (Essed, 1987).

Peregrine Worthorne argued that the threat to racial harmony was the politicisation of racial issues by politicians, black activist and race relations professional (Sunday Telegraph, 28 August 1988). This statement marginalised white racism and highlighted the supposed threat from black racism.

These are just a few examples of how the media has the capability to contribute to the collective elements that describe the ethnic situation, develops or changes the ideological framework, and manages ethnic relations/events. Moreover, it contributes to the reproduction of racist/prejudiced views and maintains ethnic dominance/inequality in society (Dijk, 1991).

More progress is extremely important, especially in the print media, who have been printing blatant lies, sensationalizing the most insignificant stories and engaging in illegal practices to secure stories without having to account for their behaviour. By increasing positive depictions of minorities in the mass media will lead to the majority understanding their concerns, issues and will help them integrate into main stream society.

Conclusion

Significant social changes has taken place in British society over the past six decades resulted in, if there was any, certainty about the meaning of '

Britishness'. The left wing politics of identity seems to be a result of the rise

of new social movement, while the right continued to fear the dilution of

Britishness by multiculturalism. It seems race continues to give rise to

political debate and controversies at both local and national level. The

problem with public debate on race relations is that it tends to be

speculative and at worst linked to dark predictions. The boundary of national

identity has been politically manipulated constantly. Major events have

highlighted the problems with constructing identities like ' British, Black,

Muslim and Asian' (Modood et al, 1994).

The shooting of Mark Duggen, the August riots, the conviction of the killers of

Stephen Lawrence has placed race relations, culture and identity back on the

agenda. David Starkey's discussed the effects of black culture and singled

out the influence of Gangster Rap on youths that were partly responsible for

the riots (Newsnight, 12 August 2011). Media commentators debated during

and after the riots, whether or not we should use anti riot methods and water

cannons. There was very little discussion on the underlining causes of the

riots, the effects on race relations, prejudice towards minorities, the likes of

the EDL and BNP exploiting such events to promote their xenophobic views.

Media response to Diane Abbot's comments (BBC, 5 January 2011) on '19th

Century Imperialist's strategy of divide and rule, referring to colonisers as

white' was vicious, accused of racism, called for her resignation, with much

vehemence then used for commentators like David Starkey, this

demonstrates the inherent double standards that continues to exist in the

media.

Some argue that racism emerged from a tribal mentality, people felt bound together by their bonds of race or tribe, and that national identity translates into a modern version of tribalism, the other side of patriotism is racism, whilst others argue that the British identity is like the British weather, it keeps changing, cannot be defined.

David Cameron stated in his speech in Munich " Multiculturalism has failed! We need a lot less of the passive tolerance and much more active, muscular liberalism, and a stronger national identity" (BBC, 5th of February 2011). This brings me back to Assad (1993) when he stated that ' Western states offer immigrants two options: complete assimilation or despised difference and exclusion'. His comments were seen as extreme at the time, however this reflects the ongoing debates as to who belongs and who doesn't. One wonders what Muscular liberalism means... Does it mean complete assimilation, or for those who refuse, will experience despised differences and exclusion? We wait to see how his comment translates into policies.