

Racism in contemporary britain



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“ The existence of ‘ races’ in a given society presupposes the presence of racism, for without racism, physical characteristics are devoid of social significance” (Van den Berghe, 1978, p. 11).

This represents a tension, explored within this essay, between the inability to categorise human beings into separate ‘ races’ on the basis of physical difference (Peoples and Bailey, 2011) and the fact that such categorisation occurs, based on the misconception that socially constructed concepts of racial difference are an objective reality (Barak et al., 2010). As the existence of ‘ race’ relies fundamentally upon its construction within society (Marger, 2011), it appears, within this essay, as ‘ race’. In examining the existence of racism in contemporary Britain, a number of definitions will be explored, however, a commonality among them is their dependence on the definition of ‘ race’, demonstrating, I would argue, the equally, socially, constructed, nature of racism (Capdevila and Callaghan, 2007).

By examining Immigration and Asylum policy, this essay will analyse how differing definitions of racism, explain its continued existence, within a seemingly tolerant society (Wemyss, 2009). It also considers how immigrants and asylum seekers are perceived and treated within society, because in addition to occurring at policy level, racism is a lived experience (Lentin, 2011). I do not consider the definitions examined, namely biological, new, institutional and cultural racism, to be an exhaustive list and recognise that considering its existence from other constructs, may give a different picture of contemporary Britain, further demonstrating the need for a critical approach to concepts of racism and its existence within society (Zamudio et al., 2011). I will conclude by exploring whether accurately defining racism,

impacts its prevalence, or whether pursuing the eradication of negative life chances, for minority ethnic groups, is not more beneficial than the categorisation of discrimination.

Although it is now commonly recognised that there are no biological differences, by which ‘races’ can be categorised (Nanda and Warms, 2010), this concept continues to create the foundation for biological racism and associates such difference with a behavioural hierarchy in terms of morals and intellect (Smedley and Smedley, 2005). This concept of hierarchy, I would argue, is integral to racism, in that the ‘self’ is constructed as superior and the ‘other’ as inferior (Rivers, 2008). Having proven the non-existence of ‘race’, this form of racism could be considered outdated and irrelevant, however, I would argue that its prevalence is still apparent within scientific discourse and public opinion (Lentin, 2011). In recent political debate, for example, around reducing the spread of HIV within the UK, by providing free treatment to foreign nationals (HAUK Select Committee, 2011), objectors have argued that this will increase immigration, out of a desire for free medical treatment (Department of Health, 2005). Whilst I would not deny the greater prevalence of HIV in some parts of the world, and therefore some ethnic groups, associating this with the motivation for immigration, within such ethnic groups, being to take advantage of free resources, I would argue, has biologically racist undertones. In addition, there is no evidence that the provision of free HIV treatment would create such ‘health tourism’ (NAT., 2008).

With racism being legislated against (Race Relations Act, 1976), racist undertones are now more common than overt racism, when taking a

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biologically racist perspective (Jiwani and Richardson, 2011) and the denial of racism within Immigration and Asylum policy, arguing that “ it’s not racist to impose limits on immigration” (Conservative Party, 2005), is unsurprising. Whilst immigration rules, by their nature, discriminate between those who have, and do not have, the right to remain in the UK, I would argue that this discrimination is only biologically racist, if decisions are made on the basis of physical difference. As such, it could be argued that the Conservative discourse is justified, in that some criteria are required for immigration control, but that such rules do not refer to particular ‘ racial’ groups having characteristics determining their suitability for immigration (Srisankarajah, 2006). Whilst this argument does not necessarily prove the lack of racism within Immigration Policy, it demonstrates how one definition of racism, in this case biological, can be used to deny its existence, whereas, as this essay will demonstrate, constructing alternative definitions highlights greater prevalence of racism within Immigration and Asylum policy.

A combination of factors, including legislation, scientific rationale behind the non-existence of ‘ race’ and eugenics movements, have resulted in traditional forms of racism being constructed as socially unacceptable, causing a reduction, although not eradication, in overt, racist behaviour and a denial of racist intent (Romm, 2010). If my understanding of racism, therefore, were restricted to a biological definition, I might argue that its existence within contemporary Britain has reduced. By redefining racism, however, in the light of its social unacceptability, to subtler, indirect forms, the existence of racism, I would argue, in both Immigration and Asylum policy and wider British society, can still be seen. This subtler definition,

known as New Racism (Collins and Solomos, 2010), argues that the same belief in racial superiority underpins many current discourses, but that new language is used to represent these traditional beliefs, for example, substituting 'race' with immigrant or asylum seeker (Kimber, 2010).

Returning to the Conservative Manifesto (2005), if no inference of racism exists within policy proposals, then why is there a need for rhetoric which defends a non-racist position? The powerful use of language is evident in this kind of discourse, because in addition to denying racist intent, arguments are constructed, such that, accusations of racism are deemed irrational, making any covert or indirect forms of racism difficult to challenge (Goodman and Burke, 2011). In Conservative leader, Michael Howard's election campaign (2005), for example, the need for stricter immigration control is argued to be based on common sense, rather than racist principles. Mr. Howard categorises immigrants as 'good' and 'bad', with those being different and not encompassing British values, deemed 'bad' (Btihaj, 2006). Being a child of immigrants, he classifies himself a 'good' immigrant, for whom racism is unacceptable because he is 'one of them', however, Michael is white, and therefore does not look 'different' and his immigrant Father is Romanian, a Christian, European country whose values and cultures are more in line with "Britishness" than perhaps, 'non-white', 'non-Christian' countries, making conforming to the image of 'good' immigrant, much easier for him (Capdevila and Callaghan, 2007). In this way, I would argue that, although new language is used, racist beliefs underpin this discourse, in describing acceptable immigrants as 'white', with similar culture and values, and conversely less acceptable immigrants, as 'non-white' individuals, refusing

to conform to 'our culture and values'. A biological definition would deny racism within this speech, whereas, a new racism definition highlights underlying racist discourse, which may result in the implementation of racist immigration policies. I would argue that this further demonstrates the contested and constructed nature of racism, which can be made to exist, or not, on the basis of its definition.

This coded use of language can also be seen in wider public attitudes, within the UK. Where terms like lazy, stupid and unprincipled were historically used to describe 'racial' groups, they are now connected with immigrants and asylum seekers (Craig, 2007). Similarly, Finney and Peach (2006) found that although discriminatory views have shifted from 'race' to immigrants and asylum seekers, similar language, and reasons for feelings of animosity, are used in describing both groups. A biologically racist perspective, could argue that attitudes toward ethnic minorities have improved within the UK, but I would argue that, considering a new racism definition, although language and focus have changed, racist attitudes still prevail within contemporary British society.

Another perspective in understanding racism, is to consider how policies, decision making and institutional practices create and define racism, rather than individual belief systems. This institutional definition of racism, argues that, policies are constructed to both subordinate, and maintain control over, particular racial groups (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1969). In this way, racism is the creation of inferiority through the implementation of organisational policies and procedures (Better, 2008) and is rooted in the processes of established and respected forces within society, which I would argue makes

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them less likely to be challenged than individual acts of racism (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1969). Institutional racism can occur unintentionally, by unwitting prejudice and racial stereotyping creating policies and cultural practices which disadvantage ethnic minorities (Macpherson, 1999). The complexity of institutional racism is that, organisations cannot make decisions or policies, without the presence of individuals and therefore questions whether an institution can be racist, or whether racism results from the influence of individuals within that institution (Roush, 2008).

The UK Border Agency, in working predominantly with immigrants and asylum seekers, in my view, holds significant potential for institutional racism. Whether such racism is intentional is contested, but irrespectively, I would argue that, some immigration policies disproportionately disadvantage certain ethnic minorities. Recent changes to work permit policies, for example, mean that restaurants employing chefs from outside the EU, must find applicants with at least 5 years' experience and graduate-level qualifications, paying them at least £28, 260 a year (Home Office, 2011). Although this policy is applied to all restaurants and its implementation aims to prioritise jobs for British citizens, I would argue that restaurants providing cuisine originating outside Europe, are likely to be disproportionately impacted by this policy and that such businesses are likely to be owned by, and employing individuals of, ethnic minorities (Khaleeli, 2012). In this way, whether intentionally or not, I would argue that these immigration changes are institutionally racist, in that their negative impact, upon ethnic minorities, is unjustifiably disproportionate. This again demonstrates, I would argue, how the definition of racism taken, can significantly impact its

perceived existence within contemporary British society. A biological definition, for example, would argue that decisions are not being made on the basis of physical difference, as all individuals are receiving the same treatment, and therefore the policy is not racist. Similarly, new racism, by examining the language used, could still conclude that the intention of this policy, is not to favour any particular racial group. The difference, I would argue, with institutional racism, is that intent is less important than impact and therefore, racism can be deemed to exist if the outcomes for ethnic minorities are disproportionately worse than the general population, which in regard to this policy, I would argue, could be the case.

The final perspective being explored, cultural racism, is argued by some to simply be an extension of new racism (Jacobson, 2008). Within immigration and asylum discourse, however, I would argue, the language of culture so frequently replaces that of 'race', as to make a distinct exploration of cultural racism beneficial (Diller, 2010). Cultural racism relates to the belief that less dominant cultures are dysfunctional, maladaptive or even deviant, emphasising individual failings, rather than a societal failure to accommodate difference (Williams, 2007). Although it could be argued that this moves too far from a valid definition of racism, this depends upon how 'race' is defined and if there are no biological differences by which 'races' can be categorised, then the socially constructed differences which create racism, may also be cultural differences (Pon, 2009). In this way cultural racism is both the negatively, differential treatment on the basis of cultural difference (Hill, 2008) and the denial of opportunity to express one's culture (Ford, 2005).

Muslims are frequently constructed, for example, as a homogenous group, when in reality the diversity of individuals classifying themselves as Muslim, is too vast to validate a single identity (Al-Azmeh, 2007). Despite this, the term Muslim has become a way of describing ethnicity, both in politics and public opinion (Wilson, 2007). This process of homogenisation, I would argue, has caused ideas of fundamentalism, and terrorist intent, to be attributed to the Muslim identity, constructing them, in some respects, as an enemy of British society (Todorov and Brown, 2010). This is not only a discriminatory and inaccurate portrayal of a diverse group, but also culturally racist in the way such beliefs are played out in the implementation of policy and treatment of Muslims within British society (Qasmiyeh, 2010). This can be seen in proposed legislative changes, following the terrorist attacks of September 2001, where Prime Minister, Tony Blair, argued a need for increased ability to exclude and remove those suspected of terrorism and those seeking to abuse the asylum system (Hansard, 2001). In addition, in describing the attacks, Mr. Blair highlighted the terrorists' motivation as a religious obligation set out in the Islamic Holy text, the Koran (ibid). This demonstrates, I would argue, an underlying discourse associating both Muslims and asylum seekers with terrorism (Huysmans and Alessandra, 2008). Further political statements in the subsequent decade, I would argue, cemented this construction of Muslims as the enemy (Pantazis and Pemberton, 2009). In 2006, for example, a report on countering terrorism (Cabinet Office, 2006) concluded that the most prominent threat came from Islamist extremists. Furthermore John Denham, as Home Office minister, suggested that behind a minority group of terrorists, sat a wider Islamic

community, who considered terrorism to be a legitimate response to current concerns (Denham, 2007).

A consequence of this negative construction of Muslims, I would argue, is the discriminatory treatment of immigrants and asylum seekers who identify as Muslim (Pantazis and Pemberton, 2009). Risk-profiling computers, for example, determining on entry to the UK who should be scanned, searched and questioned, have been found to focus upon Muslim-specific behaviours, categorising practising Muslims as ‘high risk’ (Webber, 2012). This is a clear demonstration, I would argue, of cultural racism, in determining negatively, differential treatment on the basis of cultural identity, further highlighting how the existence of racism, is very much dependent upon the way in which it is defined. Biological racism, for example, would argue that the range of ethnic diversity within Islam, indicates that any discriminatory treatment toward Muslims, cannot be racist, as underlying, discriminatory, motivations are not based upon biological difference. Similarly, although much of the discrimination explored, occurs at an institutional level, Institutional Racism is based on the impact of policies and practices upon ‘racial’, not cultural or religious, groups and so would not consider the matters explored to prove the existence of racism, within contemporary British society.

Having considered varying definitions of racism, I would conclude that its existence, within contemporary British society, is complex and can be argued to be both prevalent and a thing of the past (Rattansi, 2007). By taking a biological perspective, this essay has considered that, although racist undertones may exist in some immigration and asylum discourse, its prevalence within British society is decreasing (Day, 2011). Alternatively, by <https://assignbuster.com/racism-in-contemporary-britain/>

taking an institutional view, where it is not intent but impact which is measured, the existence of racism has been highlighted, through some UK policies and institutions disproportionately, disadvantaging ethnic minorities. Similarly, by considering racism from the perspective of new language being used in place of traditionally racist terms, the prevalence of racism increases significantly, specifically, as this essay had demonstrated, within Immigration and Asylum policy. Finally, by extending this new racism definition to the replacement of 'racialised' language, with that of culture, this essay has demonstrated how specific groups continue to experience significant levels of racism within British society, both in terms of policy construction and public attitude (Allen, 2010). Reflecting upon these various constructions of racism, I would argue that its perceived existence is highly dependent upon the definition used.

Whilst this analysis has examined the existence of racism, it could be said that it does not explain its existence. Why is it that some groups consider it appropriate to negatively treat others, on the basis of their 'race'? I would argue that the answer to this, is power. With biological racism, it is seen in the superiority and inferiority of 'racial' groups, on the premise that biological difference creates a 'natural hierarchy'. With new racism, it is seen in powerful discourses which paint racist ideologies as rational and in the best interests of Britain, whilst in reality maintaining the authoritative position of the powerful (Capedevila and Callaghan, 2007). With institutional racism, it is seen in those with the power to create policy and organisational procedures, constructing these to maximise the benefits for themselves and maintain their position of authority. Finally, with cultural racism, it is seen in

the view that inferior and less developed cultures should be discarded and individuals from such cultural groups assimilated into the dominant culture, accepting the superiority of these cultural norms.

In light of this, I would argue, that if the existence of racism is determined by its definition and the 'purpose' of racism is to maintain power, then a critical understanding of the constructed nature of racism, is paramount in assessing the discourses and policy proposals of those with such power. This reflection has also caused me to question the extent to which an academic pursuit of categorising behaviours, policies and ideologies as racist, is beneficial and if instead, it is deflecting the focus from challenging negative discrimination, faced by certain groups, irrespective of their experience fitting our socially constructed definition of racism. In conclusion, however, I would argue that, as racism is now considered both legally and morally wrong, if it can be accurately defined and its existence proved and highlighted, then work can be achieved towards its eradication (Cole, 2009).