MAKING THE WHITE FOLK ANGRY: THE MEDIA, "RACE" AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM IN 2010

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Abstract: This article examines the broadcast and press media's role in promoting a new "xeno-racism" (Fekete, 2001) and the re-emergence of an exclusivist "white" identity which, it is argued, came to the fore in the period leading up to the 2010 general election in the UK. It argues that there is a strong interplay between elements of the popular media and leading politicians which serves to reproduce essentialising and exclusionary discourses underpinned by specific ideas about "race" and nation. The article focuses particularly on the repeated use of the category "white working class" which features heavily in debates around immigration and national security. In doing so, it will attempt to trace the roots of this "hegemonic whiteness" (Hughey, 2010) and locate its position in wider social, political and economic contexts, including the growing racialisation of Muslims, the previous Labour government's desire to appear "tough" on immigration and its preoccupation with combating extremism and fighting the "War on Terror" (Saeed, 2004; Kundnani, 2007).

INTRODUCTION

Electoral politics in the UK in 2009 and 2010 have been marked by a significant shift in support to parties from the right. The European elections in May 2009 saw not only a surge of support for the Conservative Party, but also the election of two far-right British National Party (BNP) candidates as Members of European Parliament (MEPs) and a further 13 MEPs for right-wing populists in the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). Then, just 11 months later, 13 years of Labour government came to an end with the arrival in power of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government committed to a programme of deep and rapid public spending cuts. These events have taken place against a background of global economic recession and a soaring domestic budget deficit. However, the economy has

not always been the main focus of political discussion – as ever, "race" and immigration have frequently been at the top of the domestic political agenda.[1]

This paper concerns itself with the media's role in promoting racialised and exclusionary discourses, marked by and productive of specific ideologies around "race" and "nation", which have come to dominate public debates on immigration and its significance in contemporary society. It is argued here that leading politicians have all too often appeared to echo the inflammatory rhetoric of the tabloid media in drawing upon a set of racialised discourses which construct the "white working class" and "British culture" as under threat from the dual dangers of immigration and Islamic extremism. This has led to the immigration debate becoming racialised to an extent not seen in many years (Richardson, 2009), with some mainstream politicians now content to overtly play the "race card" to an extent that would have been unthinkable during national elections in the recent past (Vautier, 2009).

The growing racialisation of religion, particularly Islam, has also been evident in this process. The ascendency of a culture-based racism is seen in the way Muslims increasingly find themselves grouped together homogenously and subject to suspicion and hostility from journalists and politicians alike. Indeed, Rattansi (2003, no page) comments that this apparent convergence in views between establishment thinking and the ideas of the far-right is one of the most alarming features of contemporary politics. As will be shown, recent academic research on contemporary right-wing extremism by writers such as Copsey (2007) and Rhodes (2009) has noted that the far-right British National Party has recently embraced a "national populist" posture and has benefitted politically from the populist rhetoric espoused by newspapers and mainstream politicians on issues such as immigration and the threat of Islamic terrorism.

This paper begins with a discussion of the ideologies underpinning these discourses, namely "race", racism and nationalism, and is followed by a more detailed examination of how "white working class" and "national populist" discourses have been deployed by media and politicians during recent elections. This discursive analysis draws upon examples from the broadcast and press media with whom politicians specifically sought to interact, thus illustrating their tendency to mutually reinforce racialised and exclusionary modes of thinking on immigration. As Vautier (2009, p. 127) has commented, case studies of public exchanges between politicians and journalists during election time can illustrate how "commonsense ideas about race, racisms and racial difference are repeated and reworked". It is often the case, Vautier adds, that an interplay of "commentary and collusion" between media and politicians helps transform "racialised politics into national discursive events" (2009, p. 130).

Rather than focussing on a quantitative content analysis of media and political treatments of immigration and "race" during the elections of 2009 and 2010, it was decided that a critical discourse analysis of mainstream immigration coverage would yield greater insight as to which discourses were at work and how they operated. The contention of this paper is that the discourses identified in the research have worked to shape the immigration debate by establishing an interpretive framework based on the

assumption that immigration is a problem that must be robustly managed or drastically curbed. In doing so, such discourse has not only linked immigration with fears of Islamic extremism and terror, but has also encouraged the idea that Britain's "white" working classes have interests that are separate, distinct and explicitly threatened by immigrants and non-immigrants who are not sufficiently "British" and therefore excluded from membership of the "white working class".

Certain key events during the election in 2010 brought these discourses sharply into focus and provide a good deal of the raw material upon which the research is based. These include the media furore following Gordon Brown's ill-fated meeting with Labour supporter Gillian Duffy on the streets of Rochdale, and Labour MP Phil Woolas' controversial election leaflets in his constituency of Oldham and Saddleworth. Both controversies, particularly the former, proved to be highly significant; Brown's indiscretion was seen by some observers (including members of his own team) as the fatal moment in which Labour effectively "lost the election" (Rawnsley, 2010, pp. 730-33), while Woolas would ultimately be stripped of his place in Parliament by High Court Judges who determined that he had knowingly made false statements about a political opponent in campaign materials. A critical discourse analysis of Brown's statements, and of the dominant media's responses to "Bigot-gate" (as it came to be known), allowed the researcher to identify a number of conceptual and rhetorical themes and ideas which reoccur in the dominant media's treatment of "race" and immigration. These were also evident in the statements of Woolas, his campaign team and in the controversial election leaflets themselves – drafted in language, as the Woolas team later admitted, specifically designed to appeal to "white Sun readers". However, in order to provide a more detailed analysis of these discourses, other examples are drawn upon from media coverage of recent years – not least from the very media outlets (such as the *Sun*) that Woolas and his colleagues sought to impress.

"RACE", NATION AND THE POLITICS OF WHITENESS

In recent years it has become increasingly common to hear repeated references in the media to "British workers" and the "white working class". These discourses have been mobilised particularly during and after local or national elections by politicians, reporters and commentators eager to articulate or explain the discontent felt by sections of the UK electorate. It is notable that these discourses – usually deployed during discussions about immigration and its impact on jobs, housing and public services – both draw upon and reconfigure ideas about "race" and nation that are a longstanding feature of British politics.

The articulation of social, political and economic fears in racial, national or communal terms is certainly no new phenomenon. Hartmann and Husband's seminal study of racism in the mass media in the 1970s highlighted the way in which "race" was constantly invoked by journalists and politicians as part of an explanatory framework for understanding many of the problems facing British society. The symbolism and meaning attached to "coloured" (i.e. non-white) immigration, they argued, led to the formation of "interpretive frameworks" through which people viewed issues like crime, overcrowding and economic decline. The media's influence,

according to Hartmann and Husband, was that it reinforced and reproduced imagery and stereotypes that were "indicative of an underlying perspective in British culture which provides a ready interpretative framework on matters of race and colour" (Hartmann and Husband, 1974, pp. 30-1). This underlying perspective had its roots in a colonial history wherein British relations with non-white "races" across the world were characterised by the domination and exploitation of those "races" for the benefit of the colonial power's economic advancement. The scholar Oliver Cox (2009) even argues that modern "race relations" effectively began in the late sixteenth century with the first contact between Native American populations and European colonisers in which the former were subjugated by the latter, thus establishing a symbolic "racial" power relationship that would persist for centuries.

The division of the human species into sub-groups according to skin colour, biological descent, typology or other natural features and their subsequent designation as markers of "race" was a highly ideological process that owed much to the prevailing politics and economics of the day (Miles, 1993). It is now widely acknowledged that ideas about which features make up a "race" are historically contingent. There is also widespread agreement that "races" do not exist in any meaningful biological sense (Banton, 1988; Smedley and Smedley, 2005). While most critics agree that "races" are socially constructed categories (Pilkington, 2003), Miles emphasises the ideological nature of the construction, arguing that "race" is the "ideological moment in a process of domination" (1993, p. 46) and analyses of "racialisation" must therefore examine the material interests and power relationships of the groups concerned. Pilkington (2003) illustrates this point by observing that at one time or another groups as diverse as African colonial subjects, Jewish migrants, women and even the "indigenous" working classes were all seen as belonging to different and inferior biological "races" by the materially dominant classes to whom they were subordinate. With this in mind, Hall argues that "race" must be seen not as a biological category but rather as an enduring *discursive* category:

> The organising category of those ways of speaking, systems of representation, and social practices (discourses) which utilise a loose, often unspecified set of differences in physical characteristics – skin colour, hair texture, physical and bodily features etc. – as symbolic markers in order to differentiate one group socially from another (1992, p. 298).

This is to acknowledge that what people see as "race" not only changes but can also be ascribed with various meanings at different moments in history. Similarly, Gandy (1998) has commented that it is the production of meaning that is the central aim of discursive and symbolic "racial projects". To illustrate this he points to the various stages through which "race" as a meaningful analytical category has evolved, from a belief in racial typologies at the height of imperialism to the "Black Power" movement's struggle for self-definition through "black pride" in the twentieth century (1998, pp. 37-9).

The "racial project" of whiteness has gone through many transformations, of which the "white working class" recently referred to by British politicians and commentators is only the latest permutation. Although "whiteness" as a symbolic value associated with pale skin is an ancient phenomenon, it assumed a distinctively

"racial" and ideological-political character only with the onset of European colonialism in the late fifteenth century, as the degradation and suffering of the slave trade and plantation exploitation came to be seen simply as the result of a natural order in which black "races" were inherently degraded and degenerate (Cox, 2009) and "whiteness" signified progress, prowess and enlightenment. As Dyer (1997) puts it, "white people are neither literally or symbolically white" but have been "coloured" or "raced" as part of a social process which attributes certain qualities to certain visible human features.

Hughey (2010, p. 1292) has written of a "hegemonic whiteness" wherein racial identity for whites not only positions itself as different from (and superior to) non-whites but also marginalises those "practices of being white that fail to exemplify dominant ideals". It is true, for example, that many groups throughout history that were visibly as "white" as anyone were in fact excluded from the category on the grounds that they failed to meet the necessary criteria of "racial" or national belonging – what Jacobson (1998) refers to as the "probationary whiteness" of the Jewish, Irish, Italian and Greek migrants of the United States, for example. A further case in point is the European migrant workers in the UK who, despite being racially "white", working class and resident in the UK, are excluded from most definitions of the "white working class" which appear in debates around immigration – precisely because they are seen to represent an alien presence in the UK which threatens the racialised privileges of the authentically British "white working class".

Indeed, Bonnett (2000) has noted how the British working class, having once been excluded from the "symbolic formation of whiteness", eventually came to "actively employ this identity as if it was significant – or, indeed, central – to their own sense of self, nation and community" (2000, p. 28). Bonnett argues that it was the development of "popularist imperialism" in the late nineteenth century, and the construction of advanced welfare-capitalism in the mid-twentieth century, that led to "whiteness" becoming available to the British working class. Once available, it became cast as "the identity of the ordinary ... a lack of exceptionality, the homely virtues of quietness, tidiness, cleanness and decency" (2000, p. 40). The welfare state, a project designed to maintain harmony in a society ridden by class inequality, was central to this formulation, as it was cited as a source of national pride which cut across the class divide and gave working class people a stake in the "national interest" by maintaining a relatively healthy and affluent population.

This highlights the important relationship between "race" and nation which has been an implicit and explicit presence in debates about immigration in Britain for more than a century. Indeed, although politicians and commentators strenuously claim that immigration and "race" are not linked, "race" and nation in the UK are historically and culturally contiguous. Immigration control in the UK has always been highly selective in its exclusion of certain groups at different times. The earliest example of modern border controls in 1905 have been described as "a thinly disguised means for excluding Jews", a group who had been "racialised – depicted as criminal, diseased and likely to import moral decay" (Marfleet, 2006, p. 123). A raft of measures to curb immigration from the early 1960s onwards was inspired by a similar desire to exclude non-white migrants from the Commonwealth. In the words of

William Deedes, a minister in the government which presided over the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962: "The Bill's real purpose was to restrict the influx of coloured immigrants. We were reluctant to say so openly" (1968, p. 10).

Furthermore, several writers have noted the close links between notions of racial or hegemonic "whiteness" and national belonging. The nation was famously described by Benedict Anderson (1991) as an "imagined political community". Balibar and Wallerstein (1991), meanwhile, have suggested that the existence of a national frontier itself can be seen as a "prior criterion" to the formation of racism, as both "race" and nation involve classification, differentialism and exclusion of groups which are constructed as *Other*. In the case of Britain, with its colonial history and careful cultivation of "whiteness" as a virtue synonymous with imperial domination and national pride, the racialised character of the nation remains intact even in the absence of more overt social racisms of old.

Modood (1992, pp. 5-7), for example, has drawn attention to what he describes as the practically "quasi-ethnic" nature of Britishness in its identification with whiteness, while Anthias and Yuval-Davis maintain that racism in Britain is rooted in a "hegemonic Anglomorphic ethnicity" which is embodied in the British state and constructs non-white, non-Christian minorities as only "partial members of the British national collectivity" (1992, pp. 55-9). Journalists at the *Daily Mail* newspaper revealed that such thinking persists when they complained in February 2009 that the Government would "fail to record the true impact of immigration because they [the Office for National Statistics] record their children as British rather than second or third generation immigrants" (Hundal, 2009). People from second or third generation migratory backgrounds were therefore rendered "un-British" and rhetorically excluded from membership of the national collectivity. As Sanz Sabido (2009) points out, this labelling of certain groups of British citizens as "foreign" must be examined as part of a wider process with links to issues around national security, globalisation and the "War on Terror".

RACISM, XENO-RACISM AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

Given that what constitutes "race" is determined largely by historical and material conditions, it follows that racism cannot be a fixed, rigid concept but rather one that evolves and multiplies in and across various settings. Furthermore, Miles (1993) contends that because "race" is an ideologically constructed category, it is the process of "racialisation" that merits study, for it is that which produces racisms by dividing human beings into separate groupings which are held to be essentially and irreconcilably different. Similarly, Todorov (2009) argues that although "modern racialism" focuses more on culture than biology, the "rigidity of the determinism" remains the same. It is more appropriate, then, to speak of "racisms" – or, for critics like Miles who stress the ideological nature of the process, "different modalities of racism within the historical matrix mapped by the evolution of the capitalist mode of production and by the associated rise of the nation state" (Miles, 1993, p. 21). Racism assumes different forms in different social, political and historical contexts, and certain groups may be "racialised" (e.g. the Irish) differently in one historical moment

from the next. As Balibar points out, racisms are "ever active formations" which can materialise in different guises in different places and times (Balibar, 1991, p. 40).

A genuine understanding of the anti-immigrant racism popularised in mass media debates around immigration in the 2000s demands an examination of the wider historical context in which those debates have taken place and some consideration of the changing nature of racism in Britain. In the later decades of the twentieth century, classic racisms associated with differentiation by "racial" biology were largely superseded by racisms which drew upon notions of culture and ethnicity as the basis of separateness (Barker, 1981; Hall, 1992). Gilroy (1987), for example, observed that in post-war Britain discourses of patriotism and nationalism became part of a new racism concerned primarily with mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, whereby non-white law-breaking was seen as proof of the cultural incompatibility of non-whites with "Britishness" (see also Hall et al., 1978). Whilst hostility towards newly arrived migrants in the UK was by no means unprecedented (Fryer, 1984; Spencer, 1997), hostility towards settled migrant groups (and their descendents) and new arrivals now focused on their "alien" culture which was said to pose a threat to "British values" and the national way of life. As Barker explained: "You do not need to think of yourself as superior – you do not even have to dislike or blame those who are so different from you – in order to say that the presence of these aliens constitutes a threat to our way of life" (1981, p. 18).

One form of racism that has drawn heavily on these culturalist discourses is that which has arisen from the racialisation of Islam and Muslims, a process that has long been observed by anti-racist critics and campaigners. Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992, p.55), for example, have highlighted the extent to which the relationship between religion and the state in Britain has led to an assumed correlation between religious and national identity, and that "the exclusion of minority religious groups from the national collectivity has started a process of racialisation that especially relates to Muslims". As Saeed (2004, p. 72) points out, traditional stereotypes which highlighted the supposed "passivity" of British Asians – that is, first and second generation migrants to the UK from countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh – has been superseded by "a more militant aggressive identity which is meant to be further at odds with 'British secular society'". This new stereotype has focussed specifically on people's Muslim identity. In spite of their significant national, ethnic and linguistic diversity, Muslims in Britain and worldwide are increasingly seen as a homogenous group which has "common origins, a shared culture and monolithic identity" (Kundnani 2007, p. 126). As social geographer Ceri Peach (2006, p. 631) puts it: "The events of 11 September, 2001 in the United States, the Iraq war of 2003, the Madrid bombs of 11 March 2004, the London bombings of 7 July 2005, the riots in the *banlieus* of Paris in January 2006 and the continuing Middle East crises, magnified an already focused attention on the Muslim population of Britain."

Minority communities in the UK traditionally described in "ethnic" or national terms (or simply under the heading of "Asian") are now seen primarily as "Muslims", a single community that has been castigated for its alleged separatism, insularity and unwillingness to integrate into mainstream society and reluctance to adopt "British" values (Kundnani, 2007). Drawing upon Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilisations" thesis (1996), many of these critics claim that Islam poses a threat to Western culture, leading to a situation where Muslims' allegiance to Britain and "the West" is increasingly placed under question (Saeed, 2004). Huntington's thesis, which posits a stark divide between the politics and values of the West and the Islamic world, has been critiqued by Halliday (1995) and Said (2003) not least for its essentialising view of cultures and its positing of a false binary. As they have pointed out, Huntington's analysis overlooks not only the diversity and heterogeneity of Islam but also the considerable social, cultural, political and economic ties between the "Islamic world" and "the West". Nevertheless, this fossilisation of cultural difference as a pretext for the stigmatisation and marginalisation of certain social groups bears all the hallmarks of the "pseudo-biological culturalism" Barker identified as the "new racism". As Saeed (2004) comments, Muslims in Britain have come to be seen as a kind of "enemy within" in a process of racialisation often referred to as "Islamophobia" (Runnymede Trust, 1997; Greater London Authority, 2007) or "anti-Muslim racism" (Halliday, 1995).

This racialisation of groups with a shared religious identity exemplifies the shift towards a racism which focuses on culture rather than biology and in which the target group's skin colour or physical appearance is ostensibly no longer important. For example, Greenslade (2005) has noted that since the term "asylum seeker" is seemingly "racially impartial" it has become possible for journalists and politicians to use inflammatory language against asylum seekers that would no longer be seen as acceptable against groups which are considered "racial" or "ethnic" in a classic sense. Quoting Ambalavaner Sivanandan, Fekete has argued that the racism employed against Muslims, refugees and Eastern European migrant workers in modern Britain since the turn of the twenty-first century can thus be described as a form of "xeno-racism":

> It is a racism, that is, that cannot be colour-coded, directed as it is at poor whites as well, and is therefore passed off as xenophobia, a 'natural' fear of strangers. But in the way it denigrates and reifies people before segregating and/or expelling them, it is a xenophobia that bears all the hallmarks of the old racism. It is racism in substance, but 'xeno' in form. It is a racism that is meted out to impoverished strangers even if they are white. It is xeno-racism (Fekete 2001, p. 24).

Indeed, many of the classic tenets of racism directed towards past groups of migrants – from Irish workers in the nineteenth century, to Jews in the early twentieth century, and West Indians in the early post-war era – can clearly be seen in action today, with East European migrant workers, asylum seekers and British Muslims being the latest in a long line of groups to be accused of taking jobs, draining the country's resources and posing a threat to its security and identity with their "alien" values and "un-British" behaviour (Kundnani, 2007). Although hostility towards European migrant workers is ostensibly colour-blind, it nevertheless draws upon many of the same essentialising and exclusionary discourses that have been used to

stigmatise earlier groups of migrants. "Collectivising features", Balibar argues, "will be set up as stigmata for exteriority and impurity, whether these relate to style of life, beliefs or ethnic origins" (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991, p. 60). This can certainly be seen in press coverage of migrant workers in the UK in recent years. Seen less as human beings or migrant workers than simply as "Poles", "Italians" or generic "immigrants", their alien character and "Otherness" has constantly been invoked by a tabloid media quick to stigmatise them as "feckless", dishonest or greedy (Slack, 2006a) – all accusations noteworthy for being levelled against earlier generations of migrants.

Nevertheless, Sivanandan's assertion that this form of racism "cannot be colour-coded, directed as it is at poor whites as well" must be questioned. Although new forms of racism have tended to focus primarily on culture rather than colour, debates around immigration and security in modern Britain have increasingly drawn upon discourses which invoke the concerns of a "white working class" which explicitly brings skin colour back into the fray. This brings to mind Vautier's comment that "white anxieties" over threats to "white privilege" provoked by immigration refer "not to whiteness in a literal sense, or to a homogenous community" but to "an ideal of national and dominant belonging" which may exclude migrants who actually see themselves as "white" but who are nevertheless deemed to be "ethnically different" and therefore excluded from membership of the "white" nation (2009, p. 123). European migrants in the UK currently find themselves in this position. Despite being white and working class, they are victims of a racism which sees them as being not "British" enough to be truly "white" and are therefore excluded from membership of the "white working class" like Irish and Jewish migrants before them. It is therefore clear that the "xeno-racism" of which Sivanandan speaks – which indeed "bears all the hallmarks of the old racism" in the way it "denigrates and reifies people before segregating and/or expelling them" – needs to be examined in the context of a "hegemonic whiteness" (Hughey, 2010) which conflates "white" with "British" and actively excludes other Europeans from the ideal of "white" national belonging it has constructed.

MAKING THE WHITE FOLK ANGRY: LABOUR, THE MEDIA AND THE "WHITE WORKING CLASS"

The following section of the article examines how issues of "race" and immigration surfaced in the 2010 UK general election through the prominence of discourses which invoked the "white working class" as a meaningful analytical category, and traces the development of this discourse in electoral debates around immigration and security in recent years. As Richardson (2009, p. 358) recently commented: "Issues relating to immigration, asylum, and cultural, religious and 'racial' difference are prominent in British domestic politics to a degree not seen for over twenty years." During the 2005 election, Richardson observes, these themes dominated newspaper reports more than any other issue. Although no quantitative analysis has yet emerged on the frequency of these themes in the 2010 election, there can be little doubt that they played a prominent role.

The "white working class" and its particular relevance to the issue of immigration became a topic of national importance in the general election of 2010 thanks largely to the intervention of a voter in Rochdale whose altercation with canvassing Prime Minister Gordon Brown was broadcast live on television and quickly came to dominate news agendas. On the morning of 28 April 2010 the Prime Minister was on an election walkabout in Rochdale, Greater Manchester, surrounded by the usual gaggle of journalists, photographers and camera crews, when he stopped to chat in the street with local woman Gillian Duffy, 65. Duffy briefly raised a number of issues with Brown including tax, pensions, the budget deficit, benefits, immigration and university tuition fees. In a short exchange, Mrs Duffy appeared to link the issue of unfair welfare distribution with mass migration from Eastern Europe:

> Duffy: But there's too many people now who aren't vulnerable but they can claim and people who are vulnerable can't get claim, can't get it.
>
> Brown: But they shouldn't be doing that. There's no life on the dole for people any more. If you're unemployed you've got to go back to work. It's six months...
>
> Duffy: You can't say anything about the immigrants because you're saying that you're... all these Eastern Europeans what are coming in, where are they flocking from? (*BBC News*, 28 April 2010, no page)

Brown and Duffy ended the conversation cordially before Brown climbed into his car and departed. Unwittingly recorded by an active *Sky News* microphone, the Prime Minister complained to aides inside the car: *"That was a disaster. Should never have put me with that woman ... whose idea was that?"* When asked what the woman had said, Brown replied: *"Ugh, everything – she's just a sort of bigoted woman, said she used to be Labour. It's just ridiculous."* Brown's remarks were almost immediately picked up by *Sky News* and broadcast continually for the remainder of the day. By the time Brown appeared on a BBC radio interview just one hour later, the tape was relayed to him for the first time. Although subsequent interviews with Duffy suggested that she did not automatically equate the "bigot" accusations specifically with her comments on immigration, Brown admitted to interviewer Jeremy Vine: "The problem was that I was dealing with a question that she raised about immigration and I wasn't given a chance to answer it because we had a whole melee of press around us ... It was a question about immigration that really I think was annoying" (BBC News, 28 April, n.p.).

This episode was interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, the media's role in elevating the issue of immigration to the top of the political agenda was undeniably important, and reaffirms Vautier's point that national discursive events are often produced through an interplay between politicians and journalists. *Sky News*' editorial decision to broadcast Brown's off-camera remarks had significant political consequences and forced Brown into a humiliating climb-down. It set the news agenda for at least the rest of the week and provided rival parties with valuable political capital. Furthermore, it provided an opportunity for journalists and political rivals to focus on one issue among the many that were mentioned by Duffy – namely immigration – and to frame the issue within the racialised discourse of the "white working class". Immigration subsequently became the only topic to be covered in two

of the three televised leadership debates between the main party leaders, as Brown was forced to acknowledge his mistake in the debate which followed the incident little more than twenty-four hours later.

The BBC's political editor Nick Robinson commented that the incident "catapults the issue of immigration to the top of the political agenda" (Robinson, 2010, no page). Robinson then attempted to contextualise the mood of popular dissatisfaction with the economy and immigration by articulating a discourse that placed "race" at the centre of the issue: "The leader of the Labour Party has insulted one of the very type of voter it's so vital for his party to hang on to – older, white and traditionally Labour." Robinson's invocation of the "white working class" was indicative of a wider linking of immigration with "race" in a discourse of "whiteness" that had become prominent in electoral debates around immigration in preceding years. Here, "white" not only signified that someone was British and working class but also that they were hostile to immigration – and that it was in their interests that immigration be curtailed or halted.

The tendency of politicians and commentators to draw upon a discourse of whiteness to discuss immigration has often been linked to the growing electoral success of the far-right British National Party. It has been noted that far-right groups such as the BNP perform well when they are able to seize upon the legitimate concerns of working and lower middle class voters on issues such as the availability and quality of jobs, housing and local services (John et al., 2006). In the aftermath of the nationwide local elections in 2008, anti-fascist commentator Nick Lowles of *Searchlight* magazine observed that the BNP was emerging as the voice of the "forgotten working class". The results of a study conducted by YouGov a year later in June 2009 discovered that the majority of BNP voters were male, manual workers with an annual income slightly lower than the national median. While 40 per cent of the public as a whole thought that white people suffered unfair discrimination, the figure reached 77 per cent among BNP voters (YouGov, 2009). As Lowles concluded a year earlier: "The BNP provides far more than a racist scapegoat. It gives some voters a sense of belonging, an articulation of their own frustration – even a new white identity" (2008, p. 5).

The discourse of whiteness that the BNP simultaneously exploited and promoted gained growing currency in the media and among leading politicians, who rather than challenging discourses of white privilege and white anxiety, in some cases appeared to endorse them. In April 2006, for example, government minister Margaret Hodge claimed that "eight out of ten" voters in her Barking constituency had indicated their willingness to vote BNP in local elections (The Telegraph, 16 April 2006, no page). Despite ostensibly distancing themselves from the "odious BNP" both Hodge and the *Daily Mail* appeared to endorse the far-right party's interpretative framework on the alleged problems caused by immigration. The paper's editorial quoted Hodge articulating the fears of her constituents who had vowed to vote for the BNP: "They can't get a home for their children, they see black and ethnic minority communities moving in and they are angry" (Daily Mail, 17 April 2006, no page). The *Mail* reinforced Hodge's sentiments on behalf of the working class, its editorial opining: "It is they … who feel the real impact of uncontrolled immigration, who

believe they are being pushed down the queue for social housing, healthcare and welfare benefits by newcomers." Nowhere did the *Mail* (or Hodge) attempt to refute such myths or present alternative explanations for the problems cited.

However, such invocations were not always in response to the threat of the BNP. In early 2009, a *Sun* headline declared "White Working Class Ignored", with supporting quotes from Labour's Communities Secretary Hazel Blears: "White working-class people living on estates sometimes just don't feel anyone is listening or speaking up for them" (Hartley, 2009, no page). One week after Gordon Brown's encounter with Gillian Duffy, the *Daily Mail*'s Harriet Sergeant claimed that "the immigration crisis has nothing to do with class, colour or religious background" (Sergeant, 2010, no page). Yet she ended the piece with this sombre second-hand account of a visit to a primary school in East London:

> On the wall hung school photos, past and present. There was one glaring difference. All the children 50 years ago were white. All the children in the recent photo were not. Where had the descendants of those white children gone, I wondered? In another country, one would presume some terrible ethnic cleansing had taken place. In the UK, it goes by another name – multiculturalism (Sergeant, 2010, n.p.).

This comparison between ethnic cleansing and multiculturalism returns "race" firmly to the centre of the "crisis" over immigration which had originated in Gillian Duffy's comments on Eastern European migrant workers. Furthermore, it is uncomfortably reminiscent of the BNP's frequently stated claims that multiculturalism constitutes a form of genocide or "ethnocide" (Copsey, 2007) against the "indigenous" British people.

Elsewhere during the 2010 general election campaign, similar racialised discourses were at work in Oldham East and Saddleworth. There, Immigration Minister Phil Woolas distributed a number of election leaflets and newspapers targeting rival Liberal Democrat candidate Elwyn Watkins for being "soft" on immigration, crime, terrorism and Islamic extremism.[2] In one leaflet it was claimed that an extremist group had endorsed the Liberal Democrat candidate and that the Liberal Democrats had failed to reject their endorsement – "*maybe because the Liberal Democrats are giving amnesty to thousands of illegal immigrants*".[3] Thus the leaflet made an explicit link between Islamic extremism and immigration, and reminded its readers: "*Immigration Minister is a demanding job in which Phil's tough stance has been widely praised. The* Sun *newspaper said 'we applaud both his vision and his bottle'.*"

Once again the interplay between media and politicians in the reproduction of exclusionary, essentialising discourses was clearly visible. Woolas' leaflets used images and rhetoric which mirrored the most virulent anti-Muslim stereotyping seen in British tabloids in recent years. As Poole (2006) has shown, in the wake of the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks, much media reporting of Muslims has focussed on the themes of deviance, cultural difference and threats to security. When Woolas announced in 2006 that a Muslim teacher in Dewsbury should be sacked for refusing to remove her veil, the *Sun*'s Jon Gaunt endorsed his position with enthusiasm: "It's

great that Race Minister Phil Woolas has finally discovered a backbone and told the Dewsbury Dalek that she either lifts the veil or picks up her P45 [employee departure form]." He added: "The problem lies with your community and their failure to integrate, not with the majority population" (Gaunt, 2006, no page). Gaunt's description of Woolas as "Race Minister" rather than "Immigration Minister" is highly revealing of the conflation between "race", culture and migration which exists in much media reporting. Nevertheless, this was followed by another controversial intervention by Woolas in 2008 when he told a conference audience that the immigration debate should be framed in terms of reference set by the *Sun* and praised the newspaper's readers for their understanding of the issues (Wheeler, 2008).

Of particular note is the fact that Woolas retained the seat by a slender margin of 103 votes, only for the result to be legally challenged by his Liberal Democrat opponent on the grounds that Labour's leaflets were alleged to have made a number of false statements about Watkins, including that he had taken "illegal" foreign donations. In the ensuing Parliamentary court case, it was heard how Woolas' election team had intended to "make the white folk angry" and "galvanise the white *Sun* vote" in Labour's favour (*Manchester Evening News*, 13 September 2010) for fear of losing this most marginal of seats. This only served to demonstrate once more the centrality of racialised politics in media and political discourses during and after the election. The dichotomy between "white *Sun* readers" and Islamic extremists echoed the essentialising discourse of Huntington's "clash of civilisations" thesis in the way it made no account of the many social, cultural and political overlaps between white, working class and Muslim voters in Oldham and Saddleworth. It was evident, however, that the somewhat rigid category of the "white working class" had gained considerable political currency.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to illustrate the media's role in promoting racialised and exclusionary discourses in debates around immigration in contemporary British politics. Having focussed on the prominence of discourses of whiteness and their place in discussions about immigration and national security, a number of points can be drawn in conclusion. Firstly, it can be seen that despite pleas to the contrary (see Slack, 2006b, for example) the immigration debate has become explicitly racialised to an extent not seen in decades. Whereas mainstream politicians in the run-up to the 1997 general election disavowed playing the "race card" in an overt sense (Vautier, 2009), their counterparts in 2010 openly drew upon discourses that invoked "race" as a meaningful category appropriate for discussing immigration.

Secondly, it can be argued that such discourses of whiteness are marked by and productive of ideologies around "race" and nation that are rooted in the changing social, political and cultural contexts in which they appear, although the conflation of whiteness with Britishness, and the exclusion of certain groups from membership of the national collectivity, is a recurring theme in British history. The essentialisation of Muslim identity, for example, together with its constant invocation as a potential threat to British values and the security of the "white working class", owes much to the broader context in which support for a "War on Terror" has been pursued by

successive British governments. The exclusion of white working class migrants from dominant definitions of the "white working class", meanwhile, has taken place against a background of European Union enlargement and population movement followed by the onset of a global economic recession and rising domestic unemployment.

Finally, the mutually reinforcing relationship between elements of the popular press, the broadcast media and leading politicians is evident in the "interplay of commentary and collusion that helps turn racialised politics into national discursive events" (Vautier, 2009, p. 130), as highlighted particularly during the 2010 general election. In this respect, it is perhaps telling that Immigration Minister Phil Woolas endorsed the *Sun* newspaper's coverage of immigration (which has been widely criticised for its tone and accuracy – see Greenslade, 2005; Article 19, 2003) and then sought to emulate some of its most inflammatory rhetoric against Muslims in an attempt to appeal to "white *Sun* readers". The popular media and mainstream politicians like Woolas have played a dual role in maintaining a consensus long ago identified by Hartmann and Husband (1974) in which immigration is seen largely as a problem afflicting modern Britain.

Whilst it is far from clear whether the predominance of these racialised discourses can be overturned, there is certainly evidence that subordinate discourses can challenge and undermine their exclusionary logic on a limited scale. As Sanz Sabido (2009, p. 79) comments: "Mediated discourses need to provide the audience with objective information about political debates and disputes, and move away from generating and supporting division and the idea of 'clashing civilisations'." Garapich (2008), for example, has noted the emergence of an independent migrant media as a factor in the successful integration of Polish migrants into the British workforce. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that workers themselves, host and migrant alike, have been known to organise collectively across national and "racial" divides in order to challenge exclusionary discourses, as during the industrial disputes in the energy sector in 2009 in response to nationalistic demands for "British jobs for British workers" at picket lines across the UK (see Solidarity, 2009, no page). Meanwhile, charities working with refugees have reported that organisations such as Presswise/Mediawise, the National Union of Journalists, smaller circulation newspapers like the *Independent* and regional newspapers have all played a positive role in attempting to provide a more balanced discussion of immigration (JCHR, 2007, pp. 98-107).

The racialisation of the immigration debate, it seems, has been significant but not total. It is, perhaps, a struggle over the terms of debate in which subordinate forces will continue to compete, winning small victories along the way.

ENDNOTES

1.   "Race" appears in inverted commas throughout this article in acknowledgement of the fact that the concept has no basis in biology and is socially constructed. See Miles (1993).

2.   Each of these can be viewed at http://www.electionleaflets.org/, retrieved October 10, 2010.
3.   See http://www.electionleaflets.org/leaflets/6105/, retrieved October 10, 2010.

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