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The “red door” controversy—Middlesbrough's asylum seekers and the discursive politics of racism.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the summer and autumn of 2015, Britain's news media regularly featured dramatic images of men, women and children crossing the Mediterranean in desperate attempts to reach the safety of mainland Europe. In response to the growing visibility of this refugee 'crisis', Britain's long-running and deeply polarised public debate over asylum entered a bitter new phase. Though some evidence (UK Polling Report, 2015) had suggested a softening of attitudes towards refugees following the tragic case of Aylan Kurdi (Jones, 2015), opinion polls indicated that the majority of the public remained opposed to any increase of refugee numbers in Britain (ComRes, 2015), and by November, in the aftermath of terrorist attacks in France, public attitudes towards the acceptance of refugees had hardened once again (YouGov, 2015).

The following article explores how this polarised debate played out in the North East of England, focusing on mediated responses to asylum and refugee issues in the town of Middlesbrough. Drawing on critical discourse analysis of national and local newspaper articles and online media, the article examines the intersections of racism, place and class in media reports of a single news event which occurred in early 2016. Having already been the focus of substantial media attention for being home to the highest proportion of asylum seekers in England (Reed, 2015), Middlesbrough made national headlines again in January 2016 after it was claimed that the homes of asylum seekers in the town had been made identifiable through the distinctive colour of their houses' front doors, leading to occupants being singled out for racially motivated abuse and violence. Media responses to this story, which first appeared in the *Times* newspaper, can be seen not only to reflect wider concerns for refugees in light of the crisis in the Mediterranean, but also to highlight the contradictory ways in which racism is constructed in 'elite discourse' (van Dijk, 1993). Although the *Times*' coverage of this issue draws on processes of humanisation and individualisation (Khosravini, 2009, 2010) that are less frequently applied to asylum seekers, it is argued here that the dual focus of newspapers on the activities of a 'rogue' landlord, and the 'popular racism' of a working class housing estate, actually works to obscure the existence of elite-driven cultural and institutional racisms which are a defining feature of Britain's asylum process.

Background: Asylum in Middlesbrough

The 'dispersal' of asylum seekers to the North East of England began in April 2000 with the implementation of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, and for much of the following decade the number of asylum seekers accommodated there fluctuated between 2000 and 3500, typically including 5-600 in Middlesbrough. Although traditionally the city of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne had been the main recipient of asylum seekers in the region, from 2012 onwards Newcastle was surpassed by the smaller southern towns of Middlesbrough and Stockton-on-Tees, and in 2014 it emerged that the number of asylum seekers housed in Middlesbrough – then approximately 800 – exceeded national recommendations based on the

number of asylum seekers proportionate to local population (Association of North East Councils 2014).

In January 2016, an investigation by the *Times* newspaper claimed that the homes of asylum seekers in Middlesbrough had been made deliberately identifiable by the distinctive colour of their front doors. It was alleged that the doors of homes occupied by asylum seekers had been purposely painted red by the landlord Jomast (subcontracted by housing provider G4S), and that red doors were known locally to signify asylum dwellings, making them easy targets for racially-motivated vandalism and abuse. In much of the media furore that followed, the plight of 'dispersed' asylum seekers was treated with outrage, with much ire directed towards the Chief Executive of Jomast, Stuart Monk, as well as the Commercial and Operating Managers Procuring Asylum Support (COMPAS) system used by the Home Office to acquire accommodation in some of Britain's most deprived neighbourhoods. The *Times* lambasted what it called 'a travesty of humane immigration policy' and spoke to a number of asylum seekers who recounted their experiences of living in Middlesbrough. Other news outlets followed suit, and Pete Widlinski, manager of Justice First and chair of Tees Valley for Sanctuary, later reported that he was called upon to participate in 17 interviews with the world's media in barely the space of a day (Tees Valley for Sanctuary, 2016).

In what follows, the *Times*' construction of this story is analysed in some detail, along with supplementary material from Middlesbrough's local newspaper, the *Gazette*, providing a local media perspective on what quickly became an international news sensation. Such notably sympathetic coverage of domestic asylum issues is so rare that it arguably merits critical scrutiny in its own right (Finney & Peach, 2004, p.44). However, as Khosravini (2009, p.22) warns, it is perhaps unwise to categorise media coverage of asylum on a linear spectrum ranging from 'negative' to 'positive' as this may lead to an 'an unhelpful simplification of the discursive and linguistic qualities of different accounts'. With this in mind, the following research draws on critical discourse analysis of media texts to examine some of the hegemonic ideologies that are woven into discursive accounts of the 'red door' controversy even in media stories which seem ostensibly to challenge racism and social inequality.

METHODS

According to critical discursive approaches, an examination of the variations in discourse which occur across the media's coverage of asylum is necessary to shed light on the 'opaque ways' in which power is legitimised and inequalities are reproduced in society (Khosravini, 2015, p.47). According to Wodak (2001, p.2), critical discourse analysis (CDA) is 'fundamentally concerned with analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language'. As Fairclough and Wodak (1997, p.258) observe, discourse is here seen as 'socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people'. Discursive studies of racism, therefore, generally agree that racism manifests itself discursively and that 'through discourse, discriminatory, exclusionary practices are prepared, promulgated, and legitimised' (Wodak & Reisigl, 1999, p.176). Indeed, for van Dijk (1993,

p.109), discourse is inextricably linked to the cognitive processes and representations underlying the enactment and legitimation of racism, particularly the racism of elite discourse – that is, the discourses of politics, journalism, business, academia and other socially powerful groups in society.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, numerous studies have drawn on CDA to explore the media's coverage of asylum in recent decades (for overview, see Khosravini, 2014), with much of this research highlighting the way asylum seekers and refugees are often constructed as 'bogus', threatening and numerically ubiquitous (e.g. Gabrielatos & Baker 2008; Lynn and Lea, 2003). As Khosravini (2014) points out media texts are shaped by (and embedded within) ongoing world events, and immigration discourses must therefore be considered in relation to their social, cultural, political and economic contexts. This is certainly true of the case study below, and as Khosravini (2009, 2010) and others (Finney & Robinson, 2008) have argued, the way in which asylum is reported in newspapers is inevitably shaped in different ways by local as well as national and international political developments.

Data

The research presented here begins with an analysis of those newspaper articles from which the 'red door' story first emerged in the *Times* on January 20, 2016, and then considers secondary coverage which appeared on the website of the *Gazette*, Middlesbrough's local newspaper, on the day the story broke. This sample is not intended to be representative of the press as a whole, but instead offers a snapshot of how this news event was constructed by the *Times* and re-articulated by GazetteLive, providing a local perspective on a national (and international) news story. Though this is a small sample, Vautier (2009, p.126) has highlighted the advantages of focusing on specific case studies in which 'specificity is central to the attempt to unravel how [a] particular discursive performance operates, the assumptions invoked and the significance of responses from a range of participants'. Furthermore, Neal (2003, p.56) has suggested that the ever-shifting nature of racist discourse necessitates research which examines 'the significance of the political moment' such as immediate responses to breaking news.

Analytic procedure

Influenced by van Dijk (1991) and Richardson (2006), analysis focused on such features of texts as lexical choices, topics, quotations and sources, naming and labelling practices and attributions of agency. In examining these features, particular attention was paid to any underlying assumptions and ideological inflections evident in sympathetic asylum coverage at a time when public and media interest in Syrian refugees were at their peak. This included considerations of how elite discourse could be used to articulate issues of racism, class and place in relation to the functioning of the UK's asylum process.

Finally, in combining discourse analysis of both newspaper articles and online news websites, the research is responsive to the way in which news events are constructed and circulated in the 'new communicative ecology' of the twenty-first century (Khosravini & Unger, 2016, p.209). Though initially published behind a 'pay-wall' on the *Times*' website in

the early hours of January 20, the story's main exposure came through its presence on the newspaper's front page the next morning, together with its appearance shortly afterwards on radio and television news bulletins, and on the websites of other news organisations. As Khosravini and Unger (2016, p. 214-5) point out, it is crucial that CDA studies pay adequate attention to the 'specific aspects of the medium and situation' of communicative events, particularly in the case of websites or social media where content may be ephemeral (i.e. subject to revision), multimedia-based (e.g. drawing on words, image, sound, video) and interactive (e.g. open and responsive to audience comments). Attempts have been made in the following analysis to pinpoint when and how such factors have shaped the discourses under consideration.

ANALYSIS

The Times

The 'red door' issue first appeared on the front page of the *Times* newspaper under the headline 'Apartheid on the streets of Britain', followed by the explanatory by-line 'Red paint used to brand asylum-seeker housing.' Its appearance was timely: in January 2016, news bulletins in Britain still regularly featured images of refugees crossing the Mediterranean, and immigration was fast becoming a key issue in debates about the forthcoming referendum on European Union (EU) membership later that year. Other national newspapers on the same day gave greater prominence to reports that changes in EU immigration rules were set to cause political embarrassment to Prime Minister David Cameron, who had previously adopted a 'tough' stance on the issue of Syrian refugee resettlement in Britain. It is in this macro-structural context that the emergence of the 'red door' story is best understood: between the latent but still significant public sympathy for refugees in light of the Syrian crisis (Amnesty International, 2016), and the newspaper's editorial position in favour of the UK remaining in the EU, the cautious sympathy shown towards asylum seekers as 'aspirant refugees' functions to simultaneously advance the newspaper's anti-racist credentials alongside a 'firm but fair' approach to immigration.

The leading front page article constructs the story using the 'inverted pyramid' style often found in traditional newspaper reporting (Bell, 1991), establishing the key important details as follows: asylum seekers housed in properties with red doors; red doors make them targets of abuse; houses owned by property developer Stuart Monk. The opening line of the report specifies that a 'secret apartheid policy brands hundreds of asylum seekers... by housing them in properties with red doors'. Though it is never explicitly stated whose 'policy' this is, the article carefully foregrounds the role of Jomast in painting the doors, and is equally critical of Jomast's contractor, security firm G4S. Throughout the coverage, for example, a stark division is emphasised between the opulence of Monk and the deprivation of his tenants. It is stated that Stuart Monk personally is 'paid millions of pounds a year to provide accommodation for thousands of asylum seekers' and that he is 'worth an estimated £175 million, according to *The Sunday Times* wish list'. Meanwhile, in the extended double-page feature inside the newspaper, Monk is described as a 'multimillionaire' and his home referred to as 'an early 18th century manor house' once said to be a "desirable country

residence for a genteel family”’. A photograph of Monk in a suit, superimposed onto an aerial photograph of his mansion, is placed strategically alongside a large photograph of several derelict terraced houses in Gresham, the area of central Middlesbrough where many of Jomast’s properties are. The disparity between rich (Monk) and poor (asylum seekers) is a central theme of the *Times* coverage.

In emphasising the asylum seekers’ victimhood, these discourses are marked by similar processes of humanisation and individualisation to those identified by Khosravini (2009, 2010) in press coverage of Kosovan refugees during the Balkan conflict in 1999. In this instance, however, the aspirant refugees are placed not in a distant setting but in Britain itself, and their discursive function here is to highlight the dysfunctionality of an asylum process which allows ‘millionaires’ like Monk to make profits in spite of their companies’ incompetence. This vulnerability is emphasised through the use of passive verbs and adjectives, as asylum seekers are said to be ‘cowering’, ‘terrified’, ‘traumatised’ and ‘stigmatised’. Constructing asylum seekers in this way arguably runs the risk of essentialising victimhood, evoking ‘a sense of universal primordial humanity, in all its naked helplessness’ (Rajaram, 2002, p.253; see also Steimel, 2010). Nevertheless, in the *Times*’ coverage the asylum seekers are given names, personalities and background stories, as can be seen in the following excerpt, taken from a small box titled ‘No escape from hateful badge: case study’:

It seemed like a good idea. If your red front door is a caste mark that invites daily scorn and contempt, why not paint it a different colour?

As they waited for their asylum claims to be processed, Yusuf Abdullahi and Ahmed Zubair grew weary of the insults hurled by thugs, sometimes children, at their terraced house in Middlesbrough. ‘Asylum houses have red doors. Everyone knows that,’ Mr Zubair, from Afghanistan, said. He was a student in Britain when he claimed asylum after, he says, his uncle in Kabul was killed by the Taliban. ‘People were shouting outside the house, calling us hate words, throwing things at our windows and banging on the door. We had the idea to paint it a different colour. We chose white because it was a peaceful colour.’

As Khosravini (2010, p.19) remarks, individualisation ‘assigns voices to different people and asserts the diversity of these people in terms of their lifestyles, education, professions, customs, ages, sexes and political perspectives’. In this example, we are given names, a background story, an identity other than simply ‘asylum seeker’ (i.e. ‘student’) and motivations with which the reader is invited to empathise through the use of pronouns (‘your front door’) and a rhetorical question (‘why not paint it a different colour?’). In this way, asylum seekers are humanised and their actions made normal and understandable. Importantly, asylum seekers are also constructed as actively responding to the challenges of their predicament, though any sense of agency is clearly constrained by both the draconian actions of Jomast (who in this instance re-paint the door red) and the harassment meted out by local racists.

Indeed, the way harassment is described by interviewees in the *Times* report is consistent with research by Goodman, Burke, Liebling and Zasada (2014, p.21), who note that it is difficult for asylum seekers to articulate criticisms of their treatment in the UK ‘as this potentially risks them appearing ungrateful (which can be particularly problematic in a hostile host nation) and can work to downgrade the issues that have caused them to flee in the first place’. In this sense, it is noteworthy that none of the *Times*’ interviewees appear to

invoke the words 'racist' or 'racism' and one interviewee ends her account of harassment with the caveat that 'not all cities are like this', thus downplaying the prevalence of such issues across the UK.

Implicit and explicit accusations of racism are instead made by the *Times* itself, for example in its many references to extreme historical forms of racism, including the front page headline 'Apartheid on the streets of Britain' (evoking apartheid-era South Africa), a comparison with 'Nazi Germany' (indirectly quoted by 'a local former MP'), and a later reference to 'a National Front symbol' scratched into the front door of an asylum seeker's home. Significantly, the report avoids attributing the formation of an 'apartheid policy' directly to Jomast, G4S or the Home Office, and the newspaper's editorial comment later acknowledges that 'it may not have been a policy, but it was a reality'. This apparent reluctance to explicitly and unambiguously identify what is arguably a form institutional racism (Bourne, 2001) is reminiscent of van Dijk's (1993b, p.180) claim that the term 'racism' is often seen to refer 'only to overt right-wing racism (or to racism abroad)'. Indeed, van Dijk argues that this is particularly true in elite discourse – the discourse of politics and journalism, for example – wherein racism is constructed primarily as a popular phenomenon residing in the working class. 'Elite assumptions about popular racism,' van Dijk argues, 'may well be a self-serving transfer and denial of own racism' (van Dijk, 1993, p.100).

Indeed, van Dijk's observation that 'notions of "racism" and "racist" in European and US public discourse are reserved for others' (1992, p.93) is perhaps evident in the *Times*' construction of Gresham as a working class ghetto blighted by racism and criminality (e.g. 'the town's tumour', 'broken streets', 'night-time haunt of drug-dealers and prostitutes'). It is notable in this respect that those responsible for targeting asylum seekers' homes are referred to as 'racists', 'thugs', 'young thugs' and 'a teenage gang', drawing predominantly on discourses of criminality and social deviance. McGhee (2005, p.176) has noted how the poor are all too often 'pathologized as intolerant anti-integrationists' in matters of cultural diversity, and points to the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence as an example of how racism is constructed primarily as 'the overt and violent practices of a few dangerous people and not a social problem or a disease' (2005, p.26). As McLaughlin and Murji point out, the consequence of this focus on the criminality and extremism of perpetrators is a distancing of racism from 'mainstream society' and its identification as 'a surface excrescence'. In this sense, the *Times*' construction of racism perhaps functions both to deny racism's more structural aspects, and to distance its readers from the extremity of racist ideas and practices.

The Gazette

Given that the 'red door' story appeared prominently in national news bulletins early on the morning of January 20 (and continued throughout the day), the response of Middlesbrough's local newspaper initially came in the form of a page on its website with scrolling real-time updates as further information emerged. By lunchtime on January 20, the page consisted mainly of short pieces summarising the key points of the *Times* investigation, together with responses from G4S, Jomast, the Immigration Minister James Brokenshire, and summaries of other media interviews with key local figures such as activist Suzanne Fletcher on BBC Radio 4.

In breaking the story, the *Gazette*'s journalists drew on the same discourses of criminality as their national counterparts, describing asylum seekers in Gresham as being targeted by 'vandals and race-hate yobs'. In line with previous reporting on such issues (Panayi, 1991), their language constructs racism as the preserve of a violent minority. Indeed, throughout its coverage the *Gazette* can be seen to adopt a defensive posture against what is seen primarily as negative publicity for the town of Middlesbrough. As Aldridge (2003) has noted, the construction of a local or regional 'imagined community' is a market imperative for local newspapers, and local reporting of asylum is thus shaped significantly by discourses of community and belonging which draw on 'local power relations, particularly the relations between local politicians, council executives and editorial staff' (Finney & Robinson, 2008, p.408). In constructing these incidents as the criminal acts of an unrepresentative minority, however, racism is 'distilled into individualised forms' and structural elements disavowed (Troyna, 1992, p.87).

The *Gazette*'s original contribution to the unfolding story was to interview the former MP cited in the *Times* report, Ian Swales, as well as local campaigner Pete Widlinski, chair of Tees Valley of Sanctuary and manager of asylum support charity Justice First. Each of these is given a separate feature in their own right, the first of which states that 'Mr Swales insists he never believed it [the red painting of doors] was done deliberately but said it was "completely thoughtless"'. It is interesting to note that Swales appears to be distancing himself from his own earlier quotes and from the *Times*' more categorical description of the red doors as a 'secret apartheid policy', as indicated by the *Gazette*'s use of the verb 'insists', as well as the denial which is implied in the phrase 'never believed'. Much of the *Gazette*'s coverage continues in a similar vein, with interviewees seemingly reluctant to make any similar comparisons with 'apartheid' or 'Nazi Germany'.

The interview with Pete Widlinski, for example, appears under the headline 'Teesside is a welcoming area' and its opening sentence, offered without quotation marks, is the declarative statement: 'Teesside is a welcoming place for asylum seekers'. This is immediately followed by the explanatory assertion: 'That's the view of Dr Pete Widlinski, who has been working with those coming to the Middlesbrough and Stockton area since 1992'. However, the quotation on which this statement seems to be based is somewhat less categorical:

'None of this reflects well on Middlesbrough – but it is an issue that has only been resolved because it has been highlighted nationally and internationally.

'I know that Teesside is quite a welcoming area. I have been working in the community since 1992 and there is a huge amount of support locally for the work we do.

'Most people who are unsure, are unsure because they do not understand the issues.'

Widlinski notably uses the hedging phrase 'quite a welcoming area', which is reformulated by the newspaper in such a way as to remove any qualification or restraint, making for a far more categorical statement in the article's opening line. Of further interest is the interviewee's apparent division of local people into two groups, supportive and 'unsure', with no reference to ingrained prejudice or overt hostility. This unsureness is then linked to a lack of understanding and lack of information rather than racial prejudice or hatred; as Kirkwood, Goodman, McVittie and McKinlay (2016, p.124) comment, this construction 'presents the dissenting minority as both less morally culpable for their views and as having the potential

to change'. The high number of asylum seekers residing in Middlesbrough is raised with Widlinski in a peculiar fashion: 'Asked whether this proved the tolerance of the Teesside public, Dr Widlinski continued: "It is partly to do with that. One of the main issues is the cheaper property here"'. Again it can be seen how the *Gazette* frames the issue as one of local pride and self-image, presupposing that 'the Teesside public' is tolerant, thereby downplaying the existence of racism and reassuring its readers that the 'race hate jobs' are a minority.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

These complex and contradictory ways in which racism is constructed add weight to Khosravinik's observation on the essentially problematic nature of categorising asylum reporting as 'positive' or 'negative', as even the most sympathetic of media stories can perpetuate classificatory and exclusionary discourses. The *Times*' investigation led to a focus on the plight of asylum seekers which provoked political anger at their treatment, and Jomast was quickly forced to repaint the doors of homes belonging to its asylum seeking tenants in across the Teesside area. Local charities and refugee organisations later reported that there was a 'mood of support for asylum seekers' and that the 'red door' issue had highlighted the need for an independent forum where issues could be raised directly either with accommodation managers including representatives from G4S and the Home Office (Tees Valley for Sanctuary, 2016). In this sense, the story clearly had some positive consequences. Nevertheless, the media's dual focus on the activities of a 'rogue' landlord and 'popular racism' on a working class housing estate also served ideological purposes, obscuring the existence of structural racism and confining its existence to 'Broken Britain', a place populated by a morally degenerate and racist 'white working class' (Tyler, 2015). Furthermore, although the actions of Jomast and G4S were severely criticised, many of the fundamental injustices of the asylum process – including destitution, arbitrary detention, denial of employment, and the Home Office's 'culture of disbelief' – were allowed to pass without comment (see Crawley, Hemmings & Price, 2011; Gower, 2016; Souter, 2011).

Significantly, the *Times*' editorial strikes a note which is far more symptomatic of media reporting on asylum in recent decades, with references to a 'broken' asylum system, damage to 'community cohesion' and 'social cohesion', and declarations that 'bogus asylum claims must be discouraged' and 'it is right to take a tough line against those who would abuse the system'. As Lynn and Lea (2003) observe, this dichotomy between genuine and 'bogus' asylum seekers functions to make all asylum seekers potentially suspect. It also perpetuates the misleading belief that asylum seekers whose claims are rejected are in some way dishonest, despite much evidence to the contrary (for example, see Trueman, 2010). The *Gazette*'s coverage, meanwhile, is shaped by its commitment to a localist agenda in which the town of Middlesbrough is constructed as a 'welcoming' place, while 'racism is seen as aberrant, not integral to the way society is organised, structured and legitimated' (Troyna, 1992, p.87).

An alternative interpretation of events in Middlesbrough might proceed from the premise that 'the racialisation of asylum seekers depends on this spectacularly diverse

category being filled with homogenous characteristics through a complicated process involving a number of actors' including 'the State, the media, political parties, independently organised campaigning groups and only marginally asylum seekers themselves' (Garner, 2010, p.34). It could be argued that the 'racialisation' of this group in elite discourse is both fuelled by and actively enabling of their treatment as second class citizens, and that Jomast's actions in this instance were simply an expression of these deeper social processes.

It may be the case, as Cottle (2005, p.65) has suggested, that racist incidents perpetrated by individuals who are easily identifiable as 'criminals' (or prominent politicians or businessmen) are easier for newspapers to visualize than 'the more diffuse processes, practices and outcomes of institutional racism'. There can be little doubt, however, that examining such processes would be ideologically troubling for the newspapers cited above, as it would inevitably involve confronting their own role – and perhaps even their readers' role – in the processes of racialisation to which Garner alludes.

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