Identity, Home and Asylum: A Psycho-Social Perspective

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Keywords: Identity, Home, Whiteness, Asylum, Entitlement

This paper explores through a psychoanalytic perspective the construction of ‘whiteness’ *vis-à-vis* Others in contemporary Britain. It is a tentative theoretical exploration of the subject of a three-year research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of the United Kingdom. The nature of immigration and asylum has changed over the past decade and different forms of hostility have arisen. Hostility now seems to have shifted to access to welfare, rather than simply employment. Processes of racialisation are more locally contingent and have become more dependent on the perceived presence of asylum seekers and the intense projective identifications between individuals and groups. This runs hand in hand with a growing suspicion of the state. In this paper we explore the implications of this for contemporary identity construction, in particular the way in which ‘white’ Europeans ‘other’ other Europeans, and the way in new stereotypical discourses of racialisation are emerging which abound with projective identifications.

So several strands of thought and questioning emerge in this research project. First, and this is the bigger research question, the way in which white identities are constructed, and are changing in subtle ways in the UK. Second, the nature of immigration into the UK has also changed: there is now more of a focus on *white,* with refugees seeking asylum from East European countries (Although the biggest populations are still from Iraq, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Somalia and China). Third, the construction or perception of asylum seeker identity is largely based in imagination and we would argue unconscious phantasy. The ‘asylum seeker’ has become a contemporary ‘folk devil’. The term has ceased to signify its original signified: it now covers anyone whether a labour migrant, student, asylum seeker or refugee, collapsing and amalgamating statuses. In one way, it doesn’t matter that the majority of asylum seekers are non-white, but that the term’s current popular and abusive usage seeks to situated its object as simultaneously unwelcome, suspicious and a drain on the public purse. Fourth, what effect does this have on the construction of British identity if any, and in particular to notions of nation and home? ‘Home’, we feel is a particularly poignant area because if we start to consider perceptions of how the British feel about others, in particular economic migrants and asylum seekers, there has been a sea change in attitude (Evidenced by continuing electoral success for the BNP and opinion polls, e.g. MORI 2004) which leads to our final point. It appears that in the general discourse, particularly in the media, that arguments around entitlement, in other words *who gets what*, have shifted from access to employment, to encompass the question of who is entitled to welfare benefits – who gets housed, who receives a home?

The research project focuses on two major cities in the South West of England. Both with very long histories of immigration, transition and trading, both sea ports with a seafaring tradition that is as old as British history. The big difference being that one city has a long history of multiculturalism and a relatively high population of minority ethic groups, the other is largely white. The first city is Bristol, once at the heart of the Atlantic slave trade, famous for its imports and exports of tobacco and sherry. Once home of the Merchant Venturers and John Cabot, and now a modern business centre within easy reach of London. The second is Plymouth, again with a very long seafaring tradition, synonymous with the name of Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Francis Drake, the famous pirate, circumnavigator of the world (1579) and mayor of Plymouth, as well as John Hawkins, the first licensed English slave trader. Plymouth is the home of the senior service, the Royal Navy and has been so since the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. Devonport – HMS Drake is the largest naval port in Western Europe. Plymouth is very much white and we sense because of the long history of seafaring has a very strong identification with ‘home’ for its inhabitants.

We have therefore chosen two sites with different welfare and labour markets and also with different histories of minority settlement - Bristol, which has a tradition of limited but real multiculturalism (8.2% of Bristol’s population being ethnic minorities and Plymouth, which remains overwhelmingly monocultural (2% ethnic minorities, according to the 2001 Census). Both cities are ports and have a long tradition of transition. Bristol also has a long history of immigration and emigration. whereas in Plymouth this has been limited. Recently the *Observer* newspaper (2003) reported that Plymouth had become a ‘city of hate’ with on average 22-30 racist attacks per month, many of which involve asylum seekers. Refugee groups claim that as many as 6 times this number may go unreported.

We hypothesise, but we have to stress, we are very much working from the position that theory and ideas will be grounded in the research, that processes of racialisation are locally contingent, in other words, who gets ‘othered’ in Burnley may be significantly different from Reading, or Barking. The arrival of new migrants may paradoxically facilitate the inclusion of longstanding 'black' minorities into the indigenous ('white') 'us'. It appears that a central locus to these processes is still very much centred on entitlement, but entitlement to welfare rather than employment.

The research will have as its focus in depth interviews using psycho-social methodologies in the two locations. Two sets of people will be interviewed – owner occupiers and social housing tenants. This represents a sample which is slightly based in social class but predominantly based on access to social housing and home ownership. The specific research questions are as follows:

a) How do people construct their identities in relation to Others (groups and individuals), and why?

b) What are the most important sites of identity construction (Nation, Welfare, Employment, Europe, Class?)

c) Is there a difference in the methods and strategies of identity construction between owner-occupiers and social housing tenants? What is the relationship between entitlement to benefit and identity construction? How central is the question of ‘home’ to identity?

d) Are there local factors that differ between Bristol and Plymouth and which structure the way people construct their identities?

The interviews will be conducted in a way that we can elicit material that is open to a psycho-social or psychoanalytic reading and will be constructed along these lines

a) A biographical interview that will explore the respondent’s work, housing and life history with particular reference to social location, identity, community and belonging, whether real or imagined

b) A second interview that explores key themes such as nation, belonging, changing nature of Europe, welfare entitlement, identity and geographies of exclusion.

c) Emphasis in both interviews on both socio-structural determinants, and imagined, and phantasied attachments

Before turning to a theoretical discussion of sociological and psychoanalytic ideas around Otherness and the construction of whiteness, we want to outline some of the keys myths and distorted perceptions of immigration in the UK. Immigration to the UK is not a modern 20th or 21st century phenomenon. The history, or at least the early history of the British Isles is one of colonisation, first Celtic and Pict tribes and then the Roman's in 250 AD. Rome sent a contingent of Black Legionnaires drawn from the African part of the Roman Empire to stand guard on Hadrian's Wall against the marauding Celts (Scots) (Fryer, 1984: 1). When the Romans left in the fifth century the Germanic tribes, Jutes, Angles and Saxons colonised Britain. The largest immigration, which changed the face of law and culture in Britain, was that of the Norman invasion of 1066. This also saw the largest influx of Jewish people who William invited to England to take up positions in commerce and banking. In 1770s, largely as a result of the slave trade, around 14, 000 black people lived in Britain. The abolition of the slave trade in 1833 all but stopped black immigration to Britain. Between the two great wars many black people fighting on behalf of Britain (and Empire) settled and the culmination of this was the docking of the Empire Windrush in 1948 at Tilbury docks where hundreds of men came from the West Indies to join the RAF and take up jobs in the post-war days of labour shortage. They were followed by thousands of often skilled migrants of both sexes, many of whom were directly recruited into factories, the health service and the transport sector (Peach, 1968).

This is just a potted sound bite of the history of immigration and colonisation in the UK, but as you can see, with that sense of history, it would be very difficult to either define, or point too, a monolithic ethnic British identity. It's also difficult to imagine that sense of home and nation that is often portrayed by right-wing politicians (and not just those from the right any more) and racists. Britain has always been a multi-cultural community but, as MacDougall (1982) indicates, its identification is not simply with the Anglo-Saxon, stiff upper lip, village greens, fish and chips or warm beer, but also way back to its Celtic roots, King Arthur, the Welsh, Cornish, Scottish and Irish who became the oppressed minorities of Britain, as they were colonised by the Kings and Queens of Britain (England).

There is something quintessentially mad about British identity and it is based in thousands of years of hatred of the Other. Whether, contemporary racism is based in archaic phantasies around Britain's original occupations, a sense of what Freud (1919) would call the Uncanny, is another matter, but 'we' the British are forever living in fear of being swamped by aliens, who may be simply 'white' classed others (Young, 1997), despite strong evidence to the contrary. It seems that now, as opposed to the 1940's and 50's when people came over to 'steal our jobs', jobs that we didn't want to do in the first place, the new Other is here to steal our enjoyment, our welfare, our benefits – money and houses. Again, this is despite evidence to the contrary. Fact; asylum seekers are not entitled to council housing, they are housed in the private sector; fact: those who are granted asylum are allowed to work; fact: asylum seekers are not entitled to welfare benefits – income support or housing benefit. Until recently asylum seekers received food vouchers for essential living needs only.

So, perceptions of otherness, ideas around difference, nation and identity are based not so much in any fact but in the human imagination, and asylum seekers are but one area of construction. So what has sociology got to say about this and how can psychoanalysis help us understand these complex dynamics of identity construction further? In a recent paper (Garner, 2005) in the journal *Sociology*, Steve Garner provides a useful outline of the concept of whiteness and how it has been used in North American sociological analysis. Garner argues that whiteness emerges as a fluid, contingent and contested identity that is fragmented into degrees of belonging (to 'home', class, gender, ethnicity, nation, etc.). It should thus be viewed as a set of contingent hierarchies, with co-existing external boundaries (whites/ non-whites) and internal ones (separating various racialised sub-groups from each other). The concept of 'whiteness' tells us something about acute types of struggle for social, cultural and economic capital. Deploying the concept as working tool focuses us on the more productive view of migration as a long process (of white Europeans moving across borders), rather than concentrating on the last fifty years or so. It should also be noted that majority of migrants to some nations in Europe are still white Europeans. We have also to be aware of the contingent nature of the relationship between 'whiteness' and non-whiteness and pose the question as to why some minority ethnic groups adopt the strategies and values of white groups, particularly when examining racist attacks and resentment to third parties. In particular, we are thinking of Paul

Hoggett’s study of the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets where the local community increasingly adopted the values of the white working class.

So, if we start to think about the construction of whiteness, and of British identity, then certain themes start to become clear. First, that Britain is made up of multiple ethnicities, and hierarchies. Second, immigration to the country, in a significant minority has been white European, and this has been a very long process. Third, white identity is contingent vis-à-vis the specific structural context, for example East European asylum seekers. Finally, the adoption of values taken on by some minority groups, in some sense reproduces the discourses of racialised exclusion used by dominant white groups. How can we think about this situation psychoanalytically?

In previous books and papers we have outlined what we believe to be a critical psychoanalytic theory of racism, and in doing so, we have written about identity construction. This however, has tended to focus on the construction of black identity by white people, but we feel it helps to think again about this psychodynamic process. We have suggested (Clarke, 1999) that Frantz Fanon (1968) in *Black Skin White Masks* gives some powerful examples of the lived experience of the victims of racism in an analysis of the psychic consequences of colonialism which resonate with the mechanisms of projective identification. Fanon's work concentrates on the psychology of oppression and on strategies to resist oppression. Fanon's understanding of the psychology of oppression is that inferiority is the outcome of a double process, both socio-historic and psychological: 'If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process: primarily economic; subsequently, the internalization, or better, the epidermalization of this inferiority' (Fanon, 1968, p. 13). Fanon illustrates this internalization of projection: 'My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recoloured, clad in mourning in that white winterday. The negro is an animal, the negro is bad, the negro is ugly...' (Fanon, 1968, p. 113).

If we refer to the breaking up of bodies, to distortion, as more than a metaphor, then these processes are the outcome of projective identification. White people make black people in the image of their projections. As Fanon notes: 'the white man has woven me out of a thousand details ... I was battered down with tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave ships...' (Fanon, 1968, p. 112).

The black person lives these projections. White people invented ‘black people’ as social entity, and in this very act, invent whiteness? Neither whiteness nor blackness have a priori validity as identities. Black people are trapped in an imaginary that white people have constructed and by economic processes and powerful projective mechanisms that both create and control the Other. What is interesting in Fanon's work is the way in which he gives us a sense of how the objectively real, the political economy of hatred and historical events are quite literally forced into people. In this way social reality fuels the projective identifications of racism. Society not only fails to contain the bad of racism, but in some sense encourages malignant projective identification.

Similarly, Paul Hoggett's (1992) study of white resentment of Bangladeshi communities in Tower Hamlets, London, illustrates the projective mechanisms that give rise to ethnic hatred. Social dislocation and a series of stabbings created a profound anxiety amongst the white working classes in the area, leading to tension between the two communities. The cockroach became a focus of paranoia and defensiveness. Despite evidence suggesting that a major cockroach infestation had very plausible structural causes -- the improvement of homes by introducing double glazing and central heating -- the white tenants refused to believe this to be the case. This small insect came to represent a complex body of resentment, fear and hatred. Indeed for Hoggett: 'The resentment the whites feel toward the Bangladeshi community is made poignant by the fact that the latter community has many characteristics -- extended and extensive kinship networks, a respect for tradition and male superiority, a capacity for entrepreneurship and social advancement -- which the white working class in the area have lost' (Hoggett, 1992, p. 354). In this sense, phantasied elements of the white working class community are projected into the Bangladeshi community. The white working class project their demoralised state into the Bangladeshi community in the form of hostility toward the lifestyle adopted by the community while simultaneously experiencing a loss of their way of life. Thus demoralization is anchored in objective historical developments, in a social reality that can only generate anxiety and fear, and with it malignant forms of projective identification. We wonder here, and we are indebted to Lynne Layton’s preliminary comments on this project, whether in some sense the disappearance of the white working class in this area is a loss that cannot be grieved because it cannot be named. It cannot be named because it is taboo to put the blame, for example on capitalism.

We have also suggested the way in which projective identification is useful in understanding the construction of colonial identity (Clarke, 2000, 2003). Using again, the work of Sartre (1976) and Fanon (1968) we have argued that phantasy provides a vehicle for the construction of identity and otherness. Indeed, the internalisation of projected phantasy is implicit in Fanon's work. Black identity is a false identity for Fanon. It is a construction of colonial phantasies about otherness. The black person is literally battered down by the projective identifications of the white oppressor. Black identity has been so powerfully constructed by white culture that the black person adopts a 'white mask'. Again, projective identification is driven by very real environmental influences. Phantasies about black identity and processes of projective identification, which fuel racist ideology, emanate from the need to dehumanise the victims of colonial exploitation.

We can start to think about using some of these ideas to conceptualise the way in which not only asylum seekers are perceived, but the way in which the sedentary population constructs its own identity in relation to often white Others. If we think about British identity and the question of immigration then it would be easy to get drawn into Zizek’s (1993) notion of the ‘Theft of Enjoyment’, where we fear the theft of our way of life and our imaginary notions of home by some other, while simultaneously projecting our fear and loathing onto some other group – ‘asylum seekers’. This is then justified in terms of something stolen – our entitlement, our welfare benefits, thus we have the circular motion or cycle, of decantations of the theft of enjoyment, classical Freudian projection really when you think about it. We think this is far more complex though, and hopefully the research project will untangle some of the psychodynamics at work. The problem as we see it, is that many of the new groups of immigrants to the UK are very similar, not only in skin colour which we know is a major symbolic referent, but also in social (but often not economic) background to those that feel threatened. They are young white people seeking shelter and asylum. They are more akin to Bauman’s (1989, 1990) ‘stranger’.

‘Strangers’ are not *unfamiliar* people, but they cross, or break the dividing line of dualism, they are neither ‘us’ nor ‘them’. There is a clear definition of the social and physical boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’, both are subject to the same structures and ideas, they define good and bad, true and false, they stand in polarity creating an illusion of order and symmetry. The stranger violates this structure and order, to paraphrase Bauman; ‘they (the strangers) bring the ‘outside’ ‘inside’ and poison the comfort of order with the suspicion of chaos’. The stranger has been persecuted as Jew, as Gypsy, as Muslim, as victim and as potential victimiser, and this is even before we start to think of indigenous peoples who have had their basic rights stripped from them by colonial powers and settlers, including their right to their own land, sacred places and their own sense of history. More recently the notion and actuality of a fortress Europe has created a rift between the 'West' and the 'rest' and we have argued (Clarke, 2002) this is nowhere better demonstrated than the way in which refugees have been perceived in the United Kingdom and demonised in the popular press as outsiders who have penetrated the inside, becoming fifth columnists (Lea and Lynn, 2004). This then feeds into distinctions made by the public about what discourses are legitimate: neutrality over equal opportunities but no holds barred over immigration, for example (Statham, 2003). The dispersal of refugees from Kosovo and Somalia, North Africa and the Middle East around the country has, if we were to believe the media, planted a stranger within our community who lives off us, whilst returning nothing. It is no wonder that media coverage has concentrated on policies for sending ‘them’ home, rather than understanding the position that another human being finds him- or herself in. They, the stranger, the refugee, represent all our fears of displacement, of chaos, and represent a threat to our psychic stability.

We should not forget that Britain has a very, very long history of hating, destroying and denigrating any Other that tries to cross our shores. That Other, whether Irish, French, Spanish (Catholic) or German, or more ancient peoples, have almost exclusively been white. Therefore, phantasy and reality collide head on, while we unconsciously create our perceptions of otherness, these perceptions are also fuelled by a real political economy, a history of the construction of whiteness in Britain.

Acknowledgement

This research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of Great Britain (ESRC): Project No: RES-148-25-003.

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