Racism, class ethos and place: the value of context in narratives about asylum-seekers

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Abstract

The British public view asylum-seekers in generally negative terms. Yet whilst there are an abundance of reports and opinion polls that measure levels of hostility in order to fuel political 'debate' very little is known about how asylum seekers are spoken about in more quotidian contexts. Based on an ethnographic study of racism in Southend-on-Sea, Essex this paper identifies two kinds of narrative (abstract truths and context-dependent stories) commonly used by established members of the community to speak about asylum-seekers. The paper then seeks to explain why more affluent, suburban residents of the town tend to draw upon the abstract narrative while less wealthy, centrally located residents are more likely to regale context-dependent stories about asylum seekers. An explanation for this socio-spatial phenomenon is constructed around a Bourdieusian theory of practice that unravels local class relations and maps out a field for local symbolic prestige. Finally this microanalysis is used as a springboard to consider the wider relationship between racist narratives and social and cultural reproduction.

Introduction

74 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that 'too many immigrants are coming to Britain' and 52 per cent expressed concern that 'too many asylum-seekers are let in' (YouGov, 2004).

[. . .] it is impossible to have statistics on ways of thinking and single individual opinions [. . .] that give an organic and systematic picture of the real cultural situation and the ways in which common sense is really manifested (Gramsci, 2001a: 694).

It is widely acknowledged the British public are hostile towards asylum-seekers. Bauman (2007: 43) explains how 'asylum-seekers have replaced the evil-eyed witches [. . .], the malignant spooks and hobgoblins of former urban legends'. McGhee (2005) even coins a new term- 'asylophobia'- to account for populist fears. Yet, while reports and opinion polls (eg MORI, 2000; Saggar

and Drean, 2001; McLaren and Johnson, 2004; Finney and Peach, 2004; European Commission, 2004) measure levels of hostility in order to feed political 'debate', very little is known about how the public talk about asylum-seekers in more quotidian contexts. A more cogent examination should consider the social purposes of asylum-seeker speech and identify the structures that contextualise so-called 'opinion'. In contrast to the empiricist bias of the opinion poll the examination of racist narratives presented here considers language a fully 'social phenomenon [. . .] enmeshed in relations of power, in situations of conflict, in processes of social change' (Thompson, 1984: 7). This approach also avoids reifying language at the expense of other social structures.

The qualitative data presented here is the result of a community study conducted in Southend-on-Sea, an English seaside resort in Essex between 2003 and 2006.[1] The aim of the study was to provide a geohistorical analysis of racism in contemporary Britain. Almost forty in-depth qualitative interviews (with residents, asylum-seekers and local officials) were conducted with a purposive sample on the topic of 'community and social change'. Interviewees from the 'established' population were recruited via a postal screening survey while asylum-seekers were approached during voluntary work at an asylum-seeker day centre. The screening survey provided a balance of residents in terms of gender. The survey was sent to ten geographically discrete streets[2] in electoral wards that varied in socio-economic status (according to census data). Officials and landlords were approached directly. All interviews were conducted in the respondents home, apart from officials who were interviewed at their place of work.

An estimated 1200 asylum-seekers live in Southend among a population of approximately 160,000.[3] The centre of town where most asylum-seekers reside contains some of the poorest wards in the east of England and the nation as a whole (Roberts *et al.*, 2004). In fact, five of Southend's central super output areas fall within the ten per cent most deprived areas of England. Using the alternative Underprivileged Area Scale of Deprivation, the central ward of Milton is identified as the poorest ward in Southend, Essex and the South East (excluding London) (Rayner and Fryer, 2001: 1). The deprived picture in the centre of town stands in contrast to an affluent suburban rim, elongating along commuter lines to London, where many super output areas fall within the twenty per cent *least* deprived areas in England. As many inner cities undergo state-endorsed gentrification, suburbs, deindustrialised towns, and deserted seaside resorts increasingly provide an alternative entry-point into Britain for immigrants,[4] a trend intensified by dispersal strategies designed to prevent concentrations of asylum-seekers in London (see Robinson, 2003). The relatively obscure location of the study and the focus on what Sivanandan (2001) calls *xeno-racism* (where hostility is not colour coded) is somewhat emblematic of the changing contours of race relations in the UK as outlined in Vertovec (2007), where cultural diversity in each city can be viewed as 'a specific, context-dependent multicultural *problematique*' (Joppke and Lukes, 1999: 16). This aim of this paper is to provide a sociological understanding of

the things that people say about asylum-seekers in Southend-on-Sea. This entails being sensitive to the *variety* of racist or racial narratives deployed and a consideration not only of their *content* but also the *context* of these speech acts.

The article is organised as follows. The first section offers a discussion of narrative, class ethos and racism. This positions the paper and paves the way for the analysis that follows. The second section outlines two contrasting narrative forms that were found in speech about asylum-seekers in Southend-on-Sea. The third, and longest section is dedicated to understanding why these narratives are unevenly spatially and socially distributed. Finally, the conclusion considers the relationship between racism and social class in greater detail, pointing to avenues for future sociological research.

Narrative, class ethos and racism

The figure of the asylum-seeker as an impoverished immigrant scrounging from European welfare states became eminent in the late 1990s (Kundnani, 2007: 4) and remains a familiar persona in political, media and popular narratives today. Race is a commonly narrativised topic during periods of demographic, economic and political change (Hewitt, 2005: 70). A narrative is an act of productive invention, an attempt to order and integrate the world using our imagination: it 'draw[s] a unified and complete story from a variety of incidents [transforming] this variety into a unified and complete story' (Ricoeur, 1984: 8). A narrative is an act of mimesis that seeks to represent, or define reality. Yet 'likeness' is not the only consideration in judging a narrative's worth. First and foremost, a narrative must be accessible and have practical import; it must *work*. A narrative must also be *a work*, a text with merits of its own. A further dimension of mimesis exists where narratives are applied to the world as it is experienced, 'the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader' (Ricoeur, 1984: 71). Narratives therefore provide reference points with which to interpret a world that may (or may not) eventually appear in mimesis of narrative. As such racial or racist narratives first and foremost make the complexity of social reality *knowable*. People deploy racist narratives in order to make sense of their own predicament and their position in the social world. Racialised narratives should also be gratifying in some sense; they should augment, justify or critique existing social positions and the differential symbolic prestige that these hold. Finally racist narratives play an important role in constructing a racially structured reality beyond language.

Yet, none of this is akin to the famous 'prison house' of language. Following Ricoeur (1984), the position adopted here insists the potential for narrativity is pre-figured and exists in human experience; a relation of belonging (to a class, a culture) *precedes* narrativisation. Helpful here is the notion of 'class ethos', a lesser-known concept used by Pierre Bourdieu to convey the ethical

dispositions that social classes possess, almost certainly unconsciously, about reasonableness. Class ethos is therefore the learned resources we fall back to assess what to make of a particular discourse (whether it is 'for us') or whether we should articulate it in order to achieve our practical goals. In the narratives we deploy to explain reality the social conditions of production of our ethos are revealed. Here, according to Bourdieu (1991: 77) necessity becomes virtue and our utterances appear as if they are the result of original or individual deliberation. In this way, the things we say are embodiments of value: 'the strength of the ethos is that it is morality made flesh' (Bourdieu, 1993: 86).

It is often suggested there is a distinction between older forms of racism based upon biological, or 'scientific' differences between humans and more contemporary forms of racism focused upon cultural differences and the threat these pose to an imagined community of similitude. As such asylophobia and Islamophobia are portrayed as distinctly modern forms of racism since hostility is not directed towards racial others, but towards 'foreigners' identified by their cultural difference. Of course, the notion of foreigner, or 'stranger' (Bauman, 1990), is intrinsically tied to the idea of nation-state. Sivanandan (2007) explains how since 9/11 and 7/7 the British government have engendered a populist anti-Muslim and anti-asylum sentiment. This is the kind of hostility that Balibar and Wallerstein (1991: 21) calls '*racism without races*'. The logic of 'cultural racism' is defensive; it is concerned with preserving a territory and 'way of life'. Yet it is also about articulating and asserting the legitimacy of a *white* national identity (see Barker, 1981 and Hage, 1998). Indeed, race, nation and culture create effective (and affective) chains of association and this is why it is misguided to exaggerate the divide between old biological racism/s and newer cultural racism/s (Rattansi, 2007: 99).

A further distinction concerns the juncture between *institutional* racism-referring to inequalities in employment, housing, education etc., and the racism found in attitudes and beliefs. Opposition to institutional racism is closely associated with the anti-racist movement (see Mullard, 1984; Troyna, 1987) who argue that racial inequality does not arise because of individual prejudice. Rather it is endemic to the structures, rules and practices of *institutions*. Racism is therefore concealed in exclusionary practices or made real through established 'ways of doing things' within institutions. Racism may therefore be 'silent' yet *embodied* in practices or discourses that are ostensibly non-racist or even multiculturalist (Miles, 1989). For many anti-racists, racism is primarily an ideology; a *false* way of seeing the world rooted in broader economic and institutional structures as well as material interests. Whilst many would agree that racist narratives are inadequate explanations of social reality, Rattansi (1992: 31) points out that a problem with this model is that it conjures the archetype of the white working class racist as a 'cultural dope'. Whether racism is viewed as an attitude, 'bad science' or the outcome of institutional practices, it is important to recognise that the analytical task at hand is to begin mapping what Goldberg (1990: xiii) calls the 'multifarious historical formulations of *racisms*'.

Stuart Hall (1996) argues that the humanist Marxism of Antonio Gramsci contains the potential to aid analysis along these lines. Gramsci's emphasis on historical specificity leads Hall (1996: 435 original emphasis) to argue it is misleading to assume that racism is 'everywhere *the same*- either in its forms, its relation to other structures and processes, or its effects'. Ghassan Hage (1998) offers a compelling account that 'sets to work' many of the imperatives outlined in Hall's proto-Gramscian project. Certainly he historicizes and spatializes racism, whilst also demonstrating how racism is entwined with the 'relatively autonomous' processes of ethnic, class and nation formation. Hage also explains how racism has *uses* beyond the purposeful subjugation of a perceived biologically or culturally inferior subject. Racism is shown to play a part in hegemonic struggles that may not themselves be defined by race. The belief here is that Hage's approach (which is greatly inspired by Bourdieu) enhances a Gramscian perspective on racism.[5]

Hage's goal, adopting Bourdieu's method, is not to detest or deplore racism but to *understand* it. People use racism to make their lives *viable*; the aim is to understand why and how and with what effects (Hage, 1998: 21). This does not entail that the sociology of racism should cease to be critical. Rather it can provide a critique that illuminates how one person's attempt to make a viable life prevents another's struggle for a viable life from being successful. The job of the sociologist is markedly different, in this respect, than of the activist.

Yet, like the anti-racists, Hage suggests that racism is too often presented as a matter of prejudice. This has led to an under-theorisation of the relationship between subjective classifications and the practices in which they are inserted: 'between what racists are thinking and what they are doing' (Hage, 1998: 29). Too often racial classifications are viewed as hanging 'out there' waiting to be falsified. Drawing on Bourdieu again Hage criticises the scholastic reduction of the 'logic of things' into 'things of logic'. Racial or racist narratives have a practical purpose- they enable individuals or groups to accomplish goals. Crucially, their ability to achieve such ends is not necessarily encumbered by the use of 'bad'- or false-knowledge. That racism may be used to achieve practical goals is rarely discussed. There is also little contemplation of how racist motivations, where they do exist, intertwine with other motivations. One of the great divisions in terms of the uses that racism/s can be put to is social class, or uneven power relations. As such the goal of sociological analysis should be to establish 'the way in which racist classifications of the powerful distinguish themselves from other racist classifications and reveal themselves to be forms of *empowered practical prejudice*' (Hage, 1998: 36 original emphasis).

Asylum-seekers and common sense

If asylum seekers did not already exist, they would have been invented (Kundnani, 2007: 5–6).

Established resident's narratives about asylum-seekers are organised here into two ideal typical categories. The first, referred to as *abstract truths*, are dealt with in this section. The second, *context-dependent stories* are examined later. Abstract truths have a general frame of reference and are largely context indifferent. Of course, they are not entirely context *free* (the nation-state is their referent) but are nonetheless abstract enough to be received and decoded by audiences in diverse locations in similar ways. Crucially, one does not have to be party to minutiae of local knowledge in order to recognise their sentiment. Abstract truths are removed from phenomenological time and share similarities with historical narratives in that they define a scenario that is relatively enduring.

To take an example, in just a short utterance Richard (below) combines abstract lines of reasoning on the themes of immigration, nation, welfare and social justice.

> Someone else is coming into the country and has got the NHS, free health care, free teeth and everything else that goes with it, they get clothing allowance, food allowance. So I say to myself, what am I doing wrong? It doesn't look fair from my point of view. (Richard, self-employed electrician, 30s)

Richard's narrative demonstrates how abstract truths are not isolated concepts (or, indeed, opinions). Rather, they flow into one another with a liquid logic that anaesthetises the listener to what are often dramatic changes in tack. Often, the rehearsal of just one truth is enough to intimate, in conversation, an adherence to and personal identification with a whole narrative on immigration, welfare etc. This effect is possible because abstract truths are components in a *narrative configuration* (Ricoeur, 1984) and share logical relations of compatibility. Abstract truths sustain, support and validate each another, establishing a durable way of knowing. Ricoeur (1984) calls this *emplotment*, the process whereby discrete events are configured into a coherent narrative with a sense of an ending. Emplotment is what 'stops us asking "But so what?" ' (Simms, 2003: 85). Abstract truths are self-evident and self-referential; they are descriptive comments about how things are, of what can be taken for granted. In this sense abstract truths affirm what is *already* known.

The task now is to expose in full the narrative that many residents draw upon when discussing asylum-seekers. This narrative bears many similarities to discourses that have made sense of previous waves of immigration to Britain. In this respect, Kundnani's (2007: 5–6) belief that '[i]f asylum seekers did not already exist, they would have to be invented' appears remarkably prescient.

> You've got Kosovans coming here and the government's giving them fortunes in payouts. (Eddie, banker, 50s)

> Why they would want to leave their own country and come here in the first place, apart from the fact of the handouts and somewhere to live? We put them right at the top of the housing lists and pay them so much a week. And they give them clothes. (Cathy, retired, 60s)

Eddie rehearses three abstract truths. The British government is *open-handed* and allocates 'fortunes' in benefits to asylum-seekers. Generous benefits provide an *incentive* for asylum-seekers to choose Britain ahead of other destinations. Bereft of 'genuine' motives the notion that most asylum-seekers are *bogus* is also sustained. Cathy widens the scope of bounteousness to support the notion that the government treats asylum-seekers better than its 'own' people. That 'they' are placed at the top of the list is an *injustice* that summons the conclusion that *resentment is inevitable* and fully justified. Martin's narrative (below) illustrates how this conclusion is reached:

> When you're riding a motorbike, being British you have to wear a crash helmet or you get arrested or get points. If you're – I'm not sure what the religion is – with the turban hats on, they don't have to wear crash helmets. Why is it different for them? We have to do it so why don't they?
> (Martin, insurance clerk, 40s)

Martin speaks in the third person, contrasting 'us' with 'them' confirming that the narrative is the product of collective rather than individual endeavour. 'Discrimination' such as that cited by Martin and the resentment this causes prompts Richard (below) to complain that racist conclusions are *forced* upon him, demonstrating the 'pull' of emplotment:

> I find it very hard not to be racist and I don't want to be racist but I find it very hard what with everything you hear. (Richard, self-employed electrician, 30s)

While many interviewees are wary of being judged racist and acknowledge the stigma attached to this, they are very keen to defend what they understand as the wisdom of *common* sense. In contrast to 'official' or 'politically correct' narratives on immigration, Scott (below) wants it known that he is describing things *as they really are*:

> The lefties in charge will shout you down and call you a racist but that's because they are frightened of the truth. (Scott, banker, 20s)

Central to the narrative that is used by many when discussing the issue of asylum-seekers is the ideal of the *honest taxpayer*, a signifier of 'our' people and the traditionalist consensus of work, respectability and fair play. Yet the honest taxpayer is cast by Keith (below) as victim of a welfare state that acts with excessive benevolence towards the undeserving:

> I've paid into the country and the NHS and it cost me money and now we're supporting all these people. (Keith, fireman, 30s)

In addition to being a victim, the honest taxpayer is a we-ideal against which an abject other is imagined. Correspondingly then the asylum-seeker is portrayed as a sophisticated *conspirator* able to easily outwit *worthy but incompetent bureaucrats*:

> If I were an asylum-seeker and you're still in Albania I'd be on the phone to you saying what you have to do when you get into the country- 'This is what you're entitled to' – You'll end up knowing it better than the social services know it. They've cottoned to every bit of entitlement. It's passed on all the way down the line. (Derek, hotel manager, 50s)

It is often argued by residents that politicians and bureaucrats hasten the *decline of the nation* because of their incompetence and naive adherence to 'political correctness'. Collectively they are viewed as the embodiment of a 'great liberal conspiracy [holding] ordinary people up to ransom, making them fearful to speak the truth for fear of being called "racialist" ' (Hall, 1978: 32). Hewitt (2005) also acknowledges the prevalence of populist narratives that view bureaucrats as pursuing personal and collective power in the name of equality. This mood of betrayal and decline mixes nostalgia with resentment and is encompassing enough for evidence to be detected in a wide array of experiences. The following passage is taken from an interview with a retired couple:

> They've let it get out of control. They haven't got a clue how many people are in. The country's going to be no longer England. We've lost our nationality. Blair's not bothered about us or England. He doesn't give a damn. All our heritage has gone. (Anne, retired, 70s)

> I thought England would always remain England because we were a proud nation. Our pride has gone. You went to the cinema and they played God Save the Queen. They don't even bother playing it now. They don't play it at all. (Peter, retired, 80s)

Decline is recognised here in a loss of identity, heritage, tradition and pride. A *gut feeling*, perhaps indicative of her class ethos, is evident in how Anne feels that Tony Blair does not give a damn about 'us or England' (she is clearly positioning herself within an imagined notion of England). This passage is scathing of the perceived treachery of the state but is actually very conservative.[6] It pines for an authoritarian response to halt the perceived decline. Perhaps they sense the state is no longer doing their violence for them (Hage, 1998: 69). Notice also how emplotment enables the couple to 'leap' from discussing immigration to mourning aspects of 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1995) such as the national anthem no longer closing in British cinemas.

The narrative of abstract truths outlined above is strand of what may be termed *common sense*. Common sense operates as an organising principle in

hegemony, the concept Gramsci uses to explain how elites rule by consent. This is not simply a matter of ideology. As Johnson (2007: 99) states, common sense marks 'the most concrete moment in the circuits of culture' and is 'tied up with physical and mental labour and local sociability'. Common sense is not simply a collection of false ideas but a performative, embodied practice. Actors in settings as diverse as the home, workplace or pub participate through stories, gestures and articulatory styles in exercising the voice of the 'silent majority'. Importantly, for Gramsci (2001b: 769) 'common sense is not a single unique conception, identical in time and space'. One reason for this is that 'every social class has its own common sense' (Gramsci, 2001a: 698) and this is why the 'ruling ideas are rarely *precisely* the ideas of those who rule' (Balibar cited in Zizek, 2006: 153 original emphasis).

The narrative outlined here is the lore or sense of reasonableness of a propertied, mainly suburban *petite bourgeois* (Savage *et al.*, 1992) comprised of City-employed white-collar workers and self-employed, self-made Essex men. The narrative outlined above has therefore more to do with an articulation of class ethos- a making sense of oneself and ones own position- than it is simply an articulation of *racist* beliefs. This 'contradictory class' (Wright, 1985), whilst socially and spatially distanced from working class roots in London[7] are not legitimated by the professional and cosmopolitan middle class. The contemptuous mocking of Essex girls and Essex man, who are seen to possess economic capital but lack cultural capital, is evidence of this.[8] As a consequence the 'class ethos' of the *petite bourgeois* revealed during interviews demonstrates conflicting tendencies of both deference towards and insolent repudiation of established middle class values, practices, and institutions. This propensity for belligerence may be viewed as a 'hidden injury of class' (Sennett and Cobb, 1972) resulting from the diminishing political worth of this 'entrepreneurial class' following the brief period in the 1980s where they were the apple of Margaret Thatcher's eye.

Other stories

Not all residents speak about asylum-seekers in abstract terms. There also exists a vast sub-set of *context-dependent stories*. Whereas abstract truths are largely context indifferent, context-dependent stories refer to specific times, places, people and practices:

> There's a couple of them around here who've got a couple of Staffies [Staffordshire bull terriers] and they killed my cat outside here [her house]. They killed it, or they tried to, and then the dog chased it up the road and finished it off and my neighbour over there [points across her street] was a witness, and she tried to stop them and they attacked her with a broken bottle. (Diane, newspaper distributor, 60s)

Context dependent stories lose the temporal and spatial agility that is a feature of abstract truths. Rather they provide an immanent actualisation of events, plunging the audience into the 'here and now'. This is accompanied by a shift from the stereotyping of a generalised other to the humiliation of a proximate stranger. These idiosyncratic, almost Joycean narratives are lucid, itemised and what they lack in terms of emplotment is made up for by the melodrama of the storytelling itself. They also reflect an enchantment with the urban and are lost in detail (dogs, cats, broken bottles) and the mute language of things. This resonates with Bernstein's (1970) notion of *restricted* speech codes, found among the working class and limited to dealing with objects, events and relationships familiar to only a small social group. While abstract truths attest to speak for the majority, context-dependent stories have an exclusive audience that often extends no further than the end of the street.

Lash (2007) believes *extensive* forms of ideological or symbolic domination (hegemony) are being replaced by a politics of *intensity* (post-hegemony). Whilst this analysis will show that both forms of dominance can happily co-exist, Lash's conception of post-hegemonic power is instructive in terms of understanding the uses and value of context-dependent stories. Whereas hegemony works epistemologically, through the production of knowledge (common sense), post-hegemonic power is about *being* and more importantly the penetration of being. Language remains important but is cabbalistic as opposed to semiotic, physical rather than metaphysical. Post-hegemonic power is less normative and based more upon facticity. Facts function, 'like armies, crushing the reader (viewer or jury) with their omnipresence and sheer mass. The graphics are in compelling colours and shapes, transforming the usual greyness of factual analysis' (Lash, 2007: 63). Mary's story below illustrates this intensive form of power:

> My friend down the end of the road, she lives at the end there [points], she had a – I don't know what you to call him, really – asylum-seeker, if you like, stood on her window sill one night. She leaves her curtains open of an evening because she's only got a small front room and she's a bit claustrophobic, but she sat in there with her young son – he's about 15 now but this is a couple of years back – and she saw this . . . as she looked up and he stood there and as he see her look he went and flashed at her and he's not got a stitch on underneath! Of course, she phoned the police but it's a frightening thing. She was absolutely terrified.
> (Mary, shop assistant, 50s)

Mary's narrative details events without recourse to normative (or abstract) notions about the bogus nature of asylum-seekers or their conspiratorial nature. Her own narrative presents a barrage of evidence with which to humiliate asylum-seekers. Context-dependent stories forgo the pretence of opinion and get straight to the evidence.

The value of context

Focus will now turn towards the concrete in an attempt to account for differences between how those in the affluent suburbs and those in the poorer central wards of Southend talk about asylum-seekers. The two kinds of narrative already identified (abstract truths and context-dependent stories) play a pivotal role in the explanation that follows. Broadly speaking, those in the more affluent suburbs are more likely to speak with recourse to abstract truths while those living in the centre of town closer in social and spatial proximity to asylum-seekers, whilst not immune from repeating such truths, were the *exclusive* narrators of context-dependent stories.

Although both groups are generally hostile to asylum-seekers,[9] those in the affluent suburbs display hostility with greater reserve. Tellingly, their enmity extends from immigrants to the '*class* of person' found in the town centre:

> When I was with my husband we used to come down to the High Street and he'd say, 'oh my God, look at the class of person here'. But they don't know any different do they? They probably come from single parents, the mother probably had four different husbands or boyfriends and they're on the dole – that's that type of person you get here. (Kim, banker, 40s)

Kim, who lives in a particularly prestigious suburban street, caricatures those occupying the centre of town as an indolent underclass that 'don't know any different'. This passage is crucial because it reveals the existence of a local symbolic struggle waged by those who consider themselves respectable against those (the poor, homeless and asylum-seekers) who they consider as not. Conflict between 'roughs' and 'respectables' has a long history in working and lower middle class neighbourhoods in Britain (see Elias and Scotson, 1965; Stacey, 1960). For respectables, maintaining 'group charisma' entails ascribing negative characteristics to the neighbourhoods where 'roughs' dwell. Their desire for distinction also engenders a 'civilised habitus'- a calculating, almost removed disposition that considers it indecorous to be *overtly* concerned with matters of community:

> I don't mix in community affairs. I don't go down the town unless I have to. There's too many yobs and too many [whispering] foreigners. But you can do nothing about it.
>
> GM: [referring to the whisper] It seems as if you were wary of saying that?
>
> Yes I would say so. You see I've got this contradictory side because in my work I mix with all sorts of different races, coloured people, and they're very, very nice. I get on with them all very well, all the ones that I have to work with. I have absolutely no problem whatsoever but when I was here in my teens there certainly weren't so many as there are now.
> (Interview with Barbara, nurse, 50s)

Barbara, who lives in a detached bungalow on the northern fringes of town, wishes to avoid making the 'wrong impression' and is cautious about revealing her prejudice. Although she believes there are too many foreigners in Southend she also wants it known that she works with 'all sorts of different races' who are all 'very, very nice'. The ability to be both cautiously racist and cautiously cosmopolitanism is what is implied by Barbara's acknowledgement of her 'contradictory side'. Her whisper is evidence of the 'hyper-correction' Bourdieu sees as common among the lower middle class, a divided class who strive to produce, at the cost of some anxiety, linguistic expressions which bear the mark of a habitus not completely their own.

In contrast, residents living cheek-by-jowl with asylum-seekers in the deprived central wards of the town are much less inhibited when it comes to regaling stories about asylum-seekers. Diane (below) lives in a house in the middle of a terraced street close to the town centre. During the interview she points to five or six houses in the immediate vicinity that supposedly house asylum-seekers:

> We've had a few problems here- you probably noticed the front door. The wood's all broken. It's yobs- I call them yobs- and foreigners, they just threw a pallet. I've got pallets out the front there where I do the papers, they just picked one of them up one night and threw it at the front door. They smashed the front door up and chucked all the leaflets up the street and smashed the pallet to pieces. We had to go down there and clear it up because it was then a hazard with all the nails and that all over the road. (Diane, newspaper distributor, 60s)

Similarly to the context-dependent stories reviewed earlier, Diane's tale is preoccupied with detail and facticity. Yet far more is disclosed here- the occupation of the narrator, the condition of her front door, her untidy street and her social and spatial proximity to asylum-seekers. From the perspective of more affluent residents this unselfconscious admission of lowly status is defiling. Close association with denigrated others and/ or degraded spaces contaminates one's own charisma. Yet, for this narrator the impulse to participate in a 'vigorous local economy of narrativisation' (Hewitt, 2005: 57) overcomes any hesitancy to disclose status details or to appear racist.

In order to identify conditions that may account for the uneven socio-spatial distribution of narratives, it is worth heeding Bourdieu's insight that speech acts are the outcome of two factors, *habitus* and *field*. *Habitus* refers to the structured mode of improvisation that enables individuals to conduct themselves appropriately in relation to context. In terms of a *linguistic* habitus this would encompass the propensity and competency to 'speak properly' *vis-à-vis* the demands of the immediate social milieu. This incorporates the class ethos, the principles that provide our *sense* or instincts of reasonableness. Linguistic practices are not only products of the habitus but also the homology between habitus and the context within which an individual speaks. Bourdieu calls these

'social conditions of production' a *field,* referring to any social arena where there is a struggle over one of four main kinds of capital (economic, social, economic and symbolic).[10] One of the most important properties of fields is the way they allow one kind of capital to be converted into another. For Bourdieu (1993: 79), a *linguistic field* exists 'whenever someone produces an utterance for receivers capable of assessing it, evaluating it and setting a price on it'. Over time, the logic of a field in which we are invested becomes incorporated into our habitus in the form of a *doxic attitude*, a belief in 'the game' and its stakes.

In complex societies it is impossible to place a limit on the amount of fields existing at any one time. The boundaries of fields are imprecise and determinable only by empirical research. Yet all fields are linked in some way and for Bourdieu, even the most obscure field is structured in relation to an *overall* field of power, an ever-changing political space defined by the balance between different forms of capital. This represents a sophisticated and sociologically amenable method of both conveying and analysing the relational, fragmented and differentiated nature of hegemonic struggle.

Differences in how residents talk about asylum-seekers can at least partly be explained by identifying a field for local symbolic prestige. An examination of this field enables a fully sociological understanding of racist narratives about asylum-seekers. As Savage *et al.* (2005: 9) state, it is important to understand how places are incorporated into fields and how fields themselves define hierarchical spatial positions. The remainder of this section takes up this mantle. The field for local prestige is based around *symbolic* capital, an accumulated prestige that appears as an innate *charisma* allowing its owners to impose symbolic effects upon other individuals or groups. It also serves to legitimate or *naturalise* differences in class or status:

> Symbolic capital is an ordinary property [. . .] which, perceived by social agents endowed with the categories of perception and appreciation permitting them to perceive, know and recognise it, becomes symbolically efficient, like a veritable *magical power*: a property which, because it responds to socially constituted 'collective expectations' and beliefs, exercises a sort of action from a distance, without physical contact (Bourdieu, 1998: 102).

Primarily narratives exist as forms of linguistic capital yet they may be traded for symbolic capital as residents seek, through narrativisation, to accomplish acts of euphemization or stigmatization. However, the success with which symbolic effects are imposed and exactly who or what becomes the derogated other depends on the narrator's *existing* position in the structure of the field and access to other kinds of capital, most notably economic.

The field for local symbolic prestige appears to be structured in the following manner. Affluent suburban residents act to preserve their social and spatial distinction from the '*class* of person' found in the central town. This is achieved largely through non-linguistic means although they occasionally resort to verbal slights as has been shown. Greater economic capital buys them property (the

most ubiquitous source of symbolic capital) in prestigious locations of town.[11] As such they benefit from what Bourdieu (1999:126) calls the profits of localisation- proximity to rare and desirable agents and goods, the distinction arising from a prestigious address and a reduction in contact with 'undesirables'. The legiti- macy of property as symbolic capital is rarely challenged. Indeed, many resid- ents of central Southend that currently rent homes from private landlords aspire to own properties in suburban locations of the town. By proxy, this strategy of (semi) detachment also attains distinction from asylum-seekers, who remain very much a distant (and largely imagined) other. Ultimately therefore it is economic capital that affords them the luxury of conceiving of immigrants in abstract, restrained and generic terms. Yet they are clearly not so distanced they can afford to ignore racist narratives entirely, especially narratives that share an affinity with their *petite bourgeois* ethos, narratives that one way or another 'hit them in the gut'. As such, they recount abstract truths under the pretence of defending common sense or simply offering an 'opinion' on for example, the state of the nation. In this way they recast local concerns about asylum-seekers in national terms, maintaining their distance whilst aligning themselves with an imagined national majority. Yet self-censorship and a tendency towards hypercorrection display sensitivity to the fact that there is little symbolic capital to be gained through appearing *too racist*.

The already subjugated position of established residents in the deprived central town is compromised further by the arrival of asylum-seekers, with whom they share an equivalent social and spatial position. The requirement to symbolically dominate asylum-seekers arises as objective differences between the two groups diminish. Signs of distinction are thin on the ground as central established residents are forced to share the same streets, shops, schools and doctor's surgeries with newly arrived asylum-seekers. It is this proximate stranger, from who distinction cannot easily be drawn, that poses the greatest threat to the integrity of the self (see Blok, 1998). The linguistic capital laboured for and expended by central established residents, in the form of context-dependent stories, is exchanged for symbolic capital. Narratives con- taining high amounts of facticity and regaled with panache achieve the highest symbolic reward, in terms of denigrating local asylum-seekers. Asylum-seekers are cast in the narratives as thieves, vandals, drunks, diseased, dirty, drug addicts, muggers, child abusers, flashers, rapists and killers of domestic animals. In the absence of objective differences, context-dependent narratives attempt to pinpoint a 'racial' essence through particularistic references to the smell, appearance, language and modes of association of asylum-seekers:

> You can smell the drugs as you walk past them, it's got a very strange smell, you know, it's not just cigarettes. (Laura, garage attendant, 20s)

> They are slightly tanned and, as I say, they have nearly all got leather jackets. Half of them talk their own language so you don't know what they're saying anyway. (Paul, warehouse assistant, 30s)

> I saw I group of them outside [a bed and breakfast], just standing around. I thought, 'This is a bit different, what the fuck are they doing?' It turns out they are listening to the radio. About six of them, crowding round a little transistor radio! (Steve, unemployed, 20s)

The above examples, as asides to longer stories, are symptomatic of this vicious discipline of detail whereby every minute aspect testifies to the imagined otherness of 'not quite white' asylum-seekers. The geohistorically positioned bodies of asylum-seekers become 'symbols of absolute cultural and moral difference' (Alexander and Knowles, 2005: 10). In this dominated linguistic sub-field where restraint is a luxury, abstract truths possess little value because anyone can reproduce a well-worn opinion. Simply put, abstract truths and the hegemonic narrative they comprise are not a scarce enough resource. Furthermore the staunch local-ness of context-dependent narratives perhaps indicates a sense of alienation, on the part of their narrators, from the wider national imaginary. As the stakes become higher the narratives required to achieve symbolic domination must be original and be full of facticity. They must also be recited with flair. *This is the value of context*.

Yet because context-dependent stories are conspicuous (ie not homologous with the cautious racism of *petite bourgeois* society), the exchange rate between linguistic capital and symbolic capital is low, providing deprived central residents with the capacity to attach negative signifiers only to asylum-seekers. Hence whilst this group produce and narrate context-dependent stories about asylum-seekers they unwittingly contribute to the reproduction of their own dominated position in the field for symbolic prestige. Their racist narratives are too crude for polite society and disclose status details that tarnish the narrator.

Bourdieu's suggestion that 'persons, at their most personal, are essentially the *personification* of exigencies actually or potentially inscribed in the structure of the field' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 44) is enlightening in terms of understanding how narratives are extracted from respondents during semi-structured interviews. For instance, the author's presence prompts some suburbanites to self-censor potentially racist statements. Conversely other residents feel free to disclose racist stories with abandon, either oblivious to the author's possible judgement or comfortable that the author's ear is genuinely sympathetic. Of course, precise interview effects are unknown (and unknowable) but it would be churlish not to consider how the author's status as white, male, with a local accent and in possession of local knowledge translates to exigencies inscribed in the field for symbolic prestige. The suggestion here is that the author's ambiguous position as '*almost* one of us' accords the presentation of a 'dual habitus' that non-consciously reproduces conditions of the field, thereby rendering the field visible for analysis. The author's personification of exigencies is therefore interpreted in contradictory ways, as both judgmental and encouraging of racist stories. With this in mind, the presentation here of resident's narratives in a 'scholastic' way remains a

source of unease. Yet the aim of this article is not to offer yet another compilation of reprehensible opinions that publicly disgrace the class fractions that feature here, but rather to pay enough attention to the context of racist narratives so that their full sociological meaning becomes apparent.

Conclusion

The conclusion begins with a summary. Surveys that gauge opinion on asylum-seekers and immigration impose upon the public an arbitrarily defined social problem, usually with the effect of reinforcing a popular authoritarian hegemony on immigration. Moreover commentary on such polls tends to strengthen the representation of a *lumpen* white (and racist) majority, a political construction subject to both ridicule and excessive pandering by the liberal political elite. Yet qualitative research delves beneath the veneer of the opinion poll and provides access to everyday racial narratives. Two forms of narrative are identified in this study of Southend-on-Sea. The first, *abstract truths* are neither disparate nor original insights into the social world but constitutive of the 'common sense' of the *petite-bourgeois*. The second, *context-dependent stories* are idiosyncratic narratives, obsessed with detail and seek to humiliate asylum-seekers by presenting evidence of their inferiority. An examination of why abstract truths are more prevalent in the speech of affluent suburban residents and context-dependent stories are more likely to feature in the speech of those living in deprived central wards is then conducted. It is argued that this socio-spatial phenomenon is explained, at least partially, through the identification and analysis of a 'field for symbolic prestige' existing between, broadly speaking, lower-middle class (or *petite bourgeois*), working class and asylum-seeker residents of the town.

The critical focus that emerges from this article concerns how racism is implicated in contemporary forms of social and cultural reproduction. Dispositions and attitudes towards 'multiculturalism' are increasingly used as a way of classifying people in ways that correspond, more or less, with already existing social class positions. Yet this remains relatively unexplored. Future research needs to consider relations between what may be called *unrestrained*, *restrained* and *concealed* racist or racial narratives. The two narratives outlined here (the restrained 'middle brow' racism of suburban residents and the unrestrained racism of centrally located and economically deprived residents) are implicated to the reproduction of these geohistorically inserted class fractions. Moreover *within* class fractions, displaying 'progressive' attitudes is viewed as a way to 'get ahead'. Tyler's (2004) study of working class racism shows how young people reflexively question 'outdated' racist attitudes in an attempt to gain distinction from their elders. In Southend some residents laughed off disparaging narratives about asylum-seekers, wishing to align themselves instead with tolerant or multiculturalist narratives. These possess greater symbolic capital, in legitimate fields at least, and are verbalised by some to gain distinction from their 'racist'

neighbours. In this sense, class ethos does not exert a determining influence. An alternative set of principles about reasonableness can be adopted, particularly if it is sensed this may help achieve practical goals or present oneself in a manner that confounds expectations and enhances status.

On a wider terrain, attitudes towards the other are regularly used as stick with which to beat subordinate social groups. Haylett (2001) notes how the whiteness of the working class has become shameful; they have become *too white*, embodying (if not pronouncing) a crude racism that is officially condemned. Derogation of attitudes ranges from mimicry of *petite bourgeois* caution to disgust at the vulgar prejudices of the white working class. There is even surprise- or perhaps delight- when opinion polls reveal African-Caribbean Britons are just as hostile towards asylum-seekers as white Britons. Standing at some distance from all this are the dominant political, media and business classes who, for the most part, censure or *conceal* racist language from their policies, surveys, mission statements and pronouncements and nonchalantly exhibit the cosmopolitan habitus befitting of mannered 'citizens of the world'. As Zizek (2006: 171) states, theirs is a 'privileged empty point of universality from which one is able to appreciate (and depreciate) properly other particular cultures [it is] the very form of asserting one's own superiority'. Lawler (2005) suggests this normative and normalised middle-class location assumes to espouse values that reflect 'true humanity'. In interviews these tolerant, 'politically correct' and bureaucratic narratives are alluded to (indeed the author was interpreted on occasion as their personification) but like most legitimate forms of power they are rarely grasped in their entirety, be as they are products of a *class ethos* predisposed to refinement and subterfuge. Hage (1998) interrogates the so-called tolerance or 'innocence' of official multicultural narratives, arguing that these are based upon an assumption or fantasy that the nation belongs to their author or narrator. They presuppose control over what is tolerated; tolerated others are imagined by definition to exist within the tolerator's sphere of influence. Multicultural tolerance therefore disguises and reproduces relationships of power. It is a form of symbolic violence in which domination is presented as a form of egalitarianism (Hage, 1998: 87). Tolerance is therefore an empowered practice and is never passive. To some degree those who are *not* as tolerant (perhaps they do not have this luxury) recognise this and sense the power discrepancy that makes a class ethos predisposed tolerance possible. And so in their own ways, unrestrained, restrained and concealed racist narratives are all, as Hage puts it, forms of [differentially] *empowered practical prejudice*' (ibid: 36 original emphasis). The central argument here is that narratives that take asylum-seekers as their object are not simply expressions of racist *opinion* but they are also obfuscations of complex relations of dominance and intertwined with subtle processes of class distinction.

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Notes

1 ESRC award number R42200154335
2 The locations of the streets roughly translated to three 'Chicago style' concentric zones. Four streets were located in what may be termed the zone in transition, three in an 'inner suburb' ring and three in the outer suburbs.
3 Initially (1997/98) the majority of asylum-seekers were Kosovar Albanians and Roma from Poland and the Czech Republic. Latterly (post 2000) many more migrant have arrived from African countries such as Zimbabwe, Congo, Angola and Togo, often via London boroughs. The legal status of *perceived* asylum-seeker varies enormously, with even the Portuguese community sometimes subsumed by residents into this catch-all category that appears to include all 'foreigners' regardless of skin colour.
4 Asylum-seekers and refugees arrived in Southend via two main routes. First, many nearby authorities to house asylum-seekers have used Southend to house asylum-seekers, refugees and homeless because it has surplus rented accommodation. Since 1996 London Boroughs have been permitted to disperse asylum-seekers by arrangement with local authorities possessing vacant housing stock. Second, due to the high amount of settled asylum-seekers and the provision of specialist social services in the town, the interim regulations of 2000 (introduced prior to Asylum and Immigration Act because many designated dispersal areas were insufficiently prepared) declared recent arrivals could be temporarily housed in Southend.
5 See Burawoy (2008) for a brilliant and thorough appraisal of points of convergence between Gramsci and Bourdieu.
6 Parkin (1971: 89) explains how subordinate value systems that express resentment to bureaucratic officialdom 'can hardly be equated with political class consciousness in the usual meaning of that term'.
7 See Watt (2008) and Watt and Millington (2009) for recent analyses of London's 'diasporic development'.
8 Skeggs (2004: 112–13) provides an excellent analysis of this phenomenon.
9 Certainly, not all residents were hostile towards asylum-seekers and as stated later in the article, some residents used progressive narrative about asylum-seekers as a way to distinguish themselves from others. However, this article focuses only on the racist narratives.
10 Bourdieu also recognises other 'minor' forms of capital such as linguistic or political.
11 There are of course considerable degrees of prestige *between* suburban locations in Southend and there are also central locations with high amounts of symbolic prestige. A closer inspection of the field, as it is inscribed spatially, uncovers a complex micro politics of distinction beyond which can justifiably be outlined here.

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