

DISPOSABLE LABOUR, PASSIVE VICTIM, ACTIVE THREAT:

Migrant/non-migrant othering in three British television documentaries

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This article analyses discourses about migration within three documentaries that were broadcast on terrestrial British television in January 2014: The Truth about Immigration in the UK and The Hidden World of Britain's Immigrants, both broadcast on BBC 2, and Episode 2 of Benefits Street, broadcast on Channel 4. The methodology involved a detailed analysis of the documentaries, situated within a Marxist analysis of British capitalism, the capitalist crisis, and the economic and political position of migrants. Amidst the contradictions and complexities that were identified within these documentaries, representations of 'migrants' can be grouped into three categories: disposable labour; passive victim; and active threat. We argue these discursive roles reflect and reinforce capitalist exploitation, by constructing 'migrants' as a mutable 'other' to divide the working class.

Keywords: migration, Marxism, discourse, media, Britain, racism, television, welfare, labour, documentary

Introduction

This article analyses discourses about migration within three documentaries broadcast on terrestrial British television in January 2014: The Truth about Immigration in the UK (TIUK), The Hidden World of Britain's Immigrants (HWBI) and Episode 2 of Benefits Street (BS). Bleich *et al.* (2015, 12) identify consistent differences between countries' media representations of migrants, supporting the value of a national focus. A small but growing literature analyses British media representations of migration (e.g. Gabrielatos and Baker 2008; KhosraviNik 2010; Philo *et al.* 2013; Caviedes 2015), following earlier work (e.g. Hall *et al.* 1973), but Bleich *et al.* (2015) note considerable unrealised potential. Most recent work focuses on newspapers rather than television, leaving a gap this article helps to fill.

The article employs a Marxist approach, which emphasises the economic role of migration. This has particular relevance for the contemporary British context, where economic

considerations are more prevalent in media representations of migration, compared to other Western European countries (Caviedes 2015) and earlier periods in Britain (Adams 2016). Skeggs and Wood (2011) note the prevalence of Foucauldian frames within recent research, and suggest the consequent ‘Attention on governance can deflect attention away from the reason for governance, which is to lubricate the operations of capital’ (15-16). Our approach recentres discussion of culture around the operations of capital, by considering how these documentaries are implicated in wider systems of exploitation.

Following a brief introduction to our analysis of the relationship between migration, welfare and labour, which provided the starting point for this research, the research methodology is explained. Findings are then discussed, organised around three migrant roles emerging from our analysis: disposable labour, passive victim and threat. We suggest these roles mark the ideological limits of migrants’ position in society, and facilitate capitalist exploitation by constructing ‘migrants’ as a mutable ‘other’ (Said 2003), to divide the working class.

Migration, welfare and labour

Discussions of migration are increasingly intertwined with discussions of state welfare and labour in statements of leading British politicians (e.g. Duncan Smith and May 2014; other examples in Moore and Forkert 2014). The media frequently draw similar connections, exemplified by Channel Five’s ‘Big Benefit Row Live’ (February 2014), which opened with a montage of headlines about welfare benefits and immigration. Drawing on Marx’s ([1859] 1971) insight that studying society’s economic base can help understand its ideological superstructure, we note some key features of the historical material context before analysing the discourses developing on this base.

Since the 1970s state welfare has been restricted in Britain and many other countries, with social exclusion increasingly treated as a behavioral and moral issue among an ‘underclass’ who are held responsible for their poverty and expected to take jobs of any type, no matter how low the pay or how poor the conditions (Schierup and Castles 2011, 27-28). Restrictions on welfare associated with immigration status further subdivide workers, as part of borders’ capacity to act as a ‘sorting mechanism’ to categorise workers (Andrejevic 2011, 61). Super-exploitation of migrant labour has facilitated the deregulation of labour markets and the presence of migrants has been used to justify restrictions on state welfare (Castles *et al.* 2014, 255). Today, drastic reductions in benefits and services affect large sections of Britain’s population, alongside falling wages and rising prices of necessities (Kitson *et al.* 2011; TUC 2013). Recent additional restrictions on migrants’ rights have been enacted through the 2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts, which restrict access to many benefits and services, and regulations restricting EU migrants’ access to benefits.

Methodology

The methodology was grounded in a Marxist epistemology, outlined below, but also drew insights from Critical Discourse Analysis’ (CDA) attention to what semiotic choices infer as well as what is said, absences as well as presences, and how particular media segments reflect wider discourses (Machin and Mayr 2012, 20). We shared some CDA researchers’ concern with multi-modal analysis, and considered combinations of images, sounds, and spoken language, as affording a set of semiotic resources that carry meaning within particular social and historical contexts (*ibid.* 17). We define discourses loosely, as systems of ideas arising from material conditions but impacting back upon them (drawing on Marx [1859] 1971, 21),

supplementing physical border controls with ideological categories of workers divided along multiple lines (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). We use the concept of ‘hegemony’, to examine the formation of discourses that are not linear or unitary, but set the boundaries of acceptable ideas (Gramsci ([1929-1935])). Racism facilitates capitalist exploitation by increasing pressure to accept lower wages, undermining solidarity from white sections of the working class, and further reducing access to state welfare (Miles 1986): hegemonic cultural processes are thus part of material exploitation.

Ethics

The authors’ ethical, political and scientific commitment to anti-racism informed the methodology, based on an understanding that racism is contrary to the interests of the majority of humanity, and that ‘The more social partiality (interests) represents the social majority...the greater the foundations for adequacy to the [objective] real’ (Wayne 2003, 221). A committed position in defence of the majority formed the basis for what Harding terms a ‘strong objectivity’, combined with ‘strong reflexivity’ and ‘strong method’ (Hirsh and Olson 1995). The different professional positions of the authors, one an academic and one an anti-racist educator, and their long experience of cooperation in anti-racist campaigning, provided a basis for reciprocal checks on the implications and relevance of the analysis.

Epistemology

The relevance of Marxism for analysing media is well-established (Wayne 2003) and transcends the conditions of industrial capitalism that formed Marx’s primary focus. Marx and Engels ([1848] 1969) define the working class by reliance on the sale of labour power

because they lack access to the means of production. Skeggs and Wood (2011) point to Marxism's distinctive emphasis on class as an antagonistic relationship, whose form may change but which under capitalism 'is always based on a struggle over the extraction and protection of value from bodies' (10). We agree with Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) that the Marxist analysis of material exploitation continues to have merit, even as the concrete form of the working class has become increasingly heterogeneous.

The documentaries that form the focus of this article were interpreted as part of an ideological superstructure arising from a material base, which Wayne (2003) suggests offers 'a methodology for linking (social) parts to the (social) whole' (123). As Jones (2004) argues:

'Marx and Engels approached...discourses of politics, political economy, or philosophy as specific forms of social consciousness and through which the real being of people was being exposed...To relate critically to these forms of social consciousness, then, is simply not possible without...grasping those really-existing, historically-formed practical relations in which people find themselves'.

(Jones 2004, 121-122).

This approach enabled an examination of the interconnections between people's physical movement across borders and the narratives that give their movement social and political significance.

Sampling documentary television

Three television documentaries were selected as a means of exploring the contours of hegemonic discourse. An extensive study of UK Twitter discussions about migration during the same period (Shah et al 2016) found tweets by mainstream media organisations were

‘retweeted’ more than any other group and a large proportion of tweets by individuals simply shared mainstream media headlines without additional comment. This suggests that mainstream media remains influential, despite the potential for social media to decentralise discourse. Television continues to be a significant medium across the UK population, with 94.2 percent of individuals watching some television each week (BARB 2014, 4). Television’s wealth of multi-sensory data, consumed in normal viewing practices at a pace unregulated by the viewer/listener, increases the influence of implicit messages buried in the ‘text’ and makes critical engagement more difficult (Selby and Cowdery 1995, 3).

Documentaries frequently claim to present a direct and therefore ‘authentic’ image of reality (Nichols 2010; also Wayne 2003). Ana (2013: 202) argues such claims are always false because the construction of a narrative inevitably involves choices about what to include and what to leave out, and the act of telling a story about ‘the facts’ necessarily transforms them. As Corner (1996) notes, documentary television is not just representational but ‘authorial’ in its presentation of a particular ‘vision’ of society (14). This is also true of reality television, which as Skeggs and Wood (2011) show carefully crafts ‘dramas through real people’ and attaches ‘value to certain modes of performance and behaviour over others’ (7-8). Historically, documentaries in Britain have had strong attachments to the political establishment, ‘frequently subject to considerable circumscription through a mixture of straightforward censorship and an unwillingness to offend senior political figures’ (Corner 1996, 23). All of this points to the importance of documentary television in producing hegemonic discourses.

Table 1 lists the documentaries and some key characteristics.

TABLE 1: Documentary characteristics

All three documentaries were shown during, or immediately after, the UK viewing peak of 9-10pm (Ofcom 2013, 182), suggesting they were prioritised by broadcasters. The narrow timeframe for the three broadcasts limits their usefulness for understanding discourses over time, but their close proximity to the lifting of restrictions on Romanian and Bulgarian migrants¹ enables a view of discourses at a key political moment. BS has been subject to considerable public and academic debate (e.g. MacDonald et al 2014). The BBC documentaries attracted smaller audiences, but the BBC carries additional hegemonic significance as the UK's only state-funded broadcaster. While Channel Four and BBC Two have similar UK audience shares, 6.1 percent and 6.5 percent in 2011-2012, ranking third and fourth, BBC Two attracts an older, more male demographic (Ofcom 2013, 200-201). Considering these documentaries together therefore enables some degree of breadth of audience, and consequently a broader perspective on hegemonic discourses. A more detailed discussion of audience engagement and reception is beyond the scope of this article.

The documentaries varied in their style of presentation. A significant proportion of BS and HWBI visuals take the form of what Corner (1996, 28) terms 'reactive observationalism', positioning the viewer as vicarious witness to apparently 'naturally occurring' events, interspersed with segments of 'proactive observationalism' in the form of interviews. TIUK relies more on structured presentations, sometimes to the point of overlaying statistics and other images on top of video, alongside structured interviews, direct address to the camera by the presenter, and only occasional reactive observational clips used for scene-setting. All three documentaries include a strong weighting toward a 'multivocal' approach, combining many voices and complicating the task of establishing which perspectives are privileged (ibid. 23).

BS adopts a reality television format. Although HWBI and TIUK present themselves as investigative journalism, they exhibit pronounced influences from reality television, part of a broader trend in which Skeggs and Wood (2011, 6) suggest reality television has encouraged documentaries to focus on the personal and intimate and to adopt techniques such as regular close ups, ironic music and juxtapositional editing.

Analysis

Our analytical approach aimed to respond to the richness of televisual data and to question their ‘common sense’ representations through a ‘close reading’: viewing, pausing, discussing between the research team, considering alternative interpretations, and re-viewing. Words, images and sounds were transcribed as ‘a first stage of complete and accurate description that then permits more complete and accurate analysis’ (Machin and Mayr 2012, 9). We employed ‘semantic deconstruction of texts (and sounds and images) to provide deep interpretative analyses that pay attention to metaphor, rhetoric and narrative’ (Bleich *et al.* 2015, 5), and posed the question of how these discourses reflect and contribute to material exploitation. Dichotomous themes emerged during preliminary analysis such as transience-continuity, dirt-cleanliness, and illegality-lawfulness, leading to a focus on processes of othering (drawing on Said 2003). These themes were used to code transcripts, with both authors coding and annotating using Nvivo software, comparing and discussing between themselves to strengthen reliability. Interpretative analysis was supplemented with a simple count of word frequency as an indication of *keyness* (Gabrielatos and Baker 2008, 10-12), a combination of methods common in discourse analysis (Caviedes 2015, 4).

Corner (1996) notes the importance of analysing documentaries in the context of their wider

'political, economic and social orders, within different landscapes of public knowledge' (11).

Responding to this, our analysis moved between the documentaries as concrete media products, to abstractions, such as discourses of race and systems of capitalist exploitation, and from there back to a more informed understanding of the documentaries (following Marx [1857] 1973, 100-102). Combinations of visual, audio, textual and spoken signs were analysed as 'multimodal blends' that constituted metaphorical representations of migrants (Ana 2013: 182). We aimed to identify recurring 'signs' within the documentaries, and their combination within systems of meaning, or 'codes' (Selby and Cowdery 1995, 41-48), with attention to 'framing' and 'tone' (Lawlor 2015, 10). This produced an interpretation of the documentaries in the context of wider representations of class, race and migration, and in relation to different class interests (Wayne 2003, 222). Our understanding of these wider contexts was informed by the literature and the authors' combined 26 years of experience discussing class and race with members of the public while engaged in anti-racist campaigning. This political experience acted as 'political pivot and editorial razor' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 12), to inform selection, interpretation and presentation of research materials.

Analysis developed a framework of three discursive 'roles' for working-class migrants:

- Disposable labour
- Passive victim
- Threat

Other categorisations would be possible, but we found these to be most helpful to make sense of the data. A fourth role, the migrant as capitalist entrepreneur, was identified in TIUK and HWBI as an 'other' counterpoised to working-class migrants, but is largely beyond the scope of this article. Furthermore, this category is associated almost exclusively with earlier periods

of migration, and more affluent recent migrants represent a ‘persistent absence’ similar to that identified by Andrejevic (2011) in his study of an Australian reality television show. The coded data was grouped within the roles identified above. For each role we asked a series of questions informed by our Marxist- and CDA-inspired epistemology:

- What is said?
- What is not said but implied, with attention to the current context?
- What are the absences, or ‘silences’?
- What are the contradictions?

Sections of annotated transcript were cut up and posted on a wall, grouped, rearranged, and argued over, as part of a dialogue between the researchers, to arrive at the analysis presented here.

Findings and discussion

The roles we present - disposable labour, passive victim, and threat - encapsulate multiple subsidiary roles, and at times overlap. They represent particular configurations of long-standing ‘topoi’, argumentative strategies constructing migrants in terms of usefulness/uselessness, burden, danger and threat (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 75-80 also Shah et al 2016) and discursively positioning them in relation to other parts of the population.

Migrants are constructed in all three documentaries as exclusively from poorer countries in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe, or in the Marxist frame countries occupying a relatively oppressed position within capitalism in its imperialist phase (Lenin [1916] 1975; Petras and Veltmeyer 2013; Vickers 2012), and the migrant roles they present are consequently racialised.ⁱⁱ None of the documentaries showed migrants from other imperialist countries,

such as the United States, France or Australia, despite significant numbers within Britain (ONS 2014, 25). The documentaries thus act as a means of mediation to produce migrants as a form of ethnic minority labour set apart from a British working class that is implicitly white, except when racialised minority workers are explicitly highlighted in order to present hostility to migrants as non-racial.

It is beyond the scope of this article to present all aspects of our findings, so instead we sketch outlines of the roles we identified and illustrate some key features.

Migrants as disposable labour

This section explores the construction of this role through: the definition of migrants by the work they perform; ascription to migrants of transience as an essential characteristic; blaming migrants when they fail to make themselves useful to employers.

In TIUK and HWBI the word ‘work’ is the second most frequent spoken verb. Migrants to Britain are disproportionately concentrated in particular types of low-paid, precarious work (Wills *et al.* 2010; Waite *et al.* 2015). The documentaries’ depiction of migrants through their work reflects and justifies such a position, through a heroised narrative of sturdy self-reliance. This follows a tendency for reality television to play a pedagogic role, lecturing the working class on how to improve their situation through ‘self-work and self-development’, using the personal immediacy of the individual to obscure historical context and structural constraints (Skeggs and Wood 2011, 15). For example, TIUK portrays a Kent farmer’s difficulties finding workers for fruit picking, counterpoising British workers’ refusal to do the work because it is ‘a bit hard, a bit uncomfortable’ with migrant workers’ smiling enthusiasm. The portrayal of

Romanians in BS offers another pronounced example:

‘(cut from a shot of unemployed British parents) Narrator: George’s family isn’t claiming a penny off the social. (images of people loading scrap metal onto a van) They’re hard at work (cut back to unemployed British man standing watching)...Building a business out of scrap metal...(scene inside house, a Romanian woman cooks on a portable electric hob) Unnamed Romanian [subtitles]: We’re not interested in hand-outs, we can manage on our own. We don’t need money or food. We just need permits to work’

This family is portrayed as active, serious and hardworking. ‘The Romanians’ represent the ideal workers from the capitalist perspective, taking care of the reproduction of their labour power privately, without making demands on the state. Yet despite their hard work the Romanian family are shown to be ultimately unable to pay their rent. Amidst these ambiguities is a clear warning: if British workers are not prepared to work on whatever terms employers choose to offer, somebody else will. The juxtaposed portrayals of British benefit claimants in the same programme as ‘work-shy’ (MacDonald *et al.* 2014), typically lounging on sofas or aimlessly socialising on the doorstep, underlines this warning: each category of workers is constructed through contrast with the other.

Migrants’ supposed transience emphasises their conditional position. Repeated oppositions are created between a settled British population and new migrants whose presence as individuals is always under question although their presence en masse is permanent. Movement and change are thus ascribed to migrants as essential characteristics. This essentialisation serves to alternately elevate and denigrate migrants and British workers: in some places portraying migrants as transient, disconnected and selfish, using a negative tone, versus British workers as consistent and responsible, while in others portraying migrants as

dynamic and flexible, using a positive tone, versus British workers as stagnant and stubborn. Such moralising reflects the needs of capital for ‘flexible’ labour with limited social rights (Standing 2011).

Explicit expressions of migrants’ transience are backed by metaphorical associations. For example, images of rubbish are repeatedly juxtaposed with migrants in all three documentaries (e.g. TIUK 06:38, BS 07:15, BHWI 15:44). In BS, the word ‘rubbish’ is mentioned 13 times, the fifth most frequent noun in the programme. A central plot line involves a Romanian family who the presenter claims rip apart the bin bags of ‘the residents’ looking for scrap metal and leave rubbish strewn across the street – the ‘dark side’ of the portrayal of migrants’ resourcefulness discussed above. This is presented as leading the council to refuse to collect rubbish from the street, with images of mounting piles of refuse threatening children (BS 08:46). The signifiers of ‘the Romanians’ and ‘the residents’ again emphasise migrants’ transience: migrants cannot be ‘resident’ because they are defined by their movement. In the same programme Britain in Bloomⁱⁱⁱ is used as a contrast, with rubbish trucks frequently sweeping the area on the day of the competition, representing white British cleanliness and continuity. This produces second order meanings through the combination of elements (Selby and Cowdery 1995, 58-59) and the exploitation of symbolic connotations (Corner 1996, 29), playing on longstanding dichotomies within discourses connecting migration to poverty and disease, including stability/transience, dirt/cleanliness, and familial care/neglect (Andrejevic 2011).

Where migrants’ labour is no longer needed, all three documentaries suggest they are individually responsible for the problems they face. In the following example HWBI presents a young single man who initially found work in construction but has since been unable to get

work and has turned to hard drugs and theft:

‘(shots of the outside of Shanki’s house, then inside, the dirty state of which was focused on earlier in the programme) Presenter: Shanki didn’t blame anybody else for his situation, he clearly felt embarrassed he’d come to Britain, and ended up a failure. (interview in a car park) Shanki: I am ashamed to go home, you know why? I am spending fucking nine years in this country, I have fucking zero’

This follows the tendency in reality TV ‘to melodramatise all “fates” as ultimately a matter of individual responsibility, while obscuring the structural factors that still largely determine them’ (Morley 2009, 490; also Skeggs and Wood 2011). Andrejevic (2011) suggests this operates in particular ways within reality television programmes about border enforcement, which make pedagogical examples of those who are supposed to have failed in self-management and thus require intervention by the state, marking out ‘borderlands’ between classes as well as nations. In the passage quoted above, by ascribing self-responsibility to Shanki the presenter silences the role of immigration controls in producing conditions for exploitation and destitution (see Lewis *et al.* 2014; Waite *et al.* 2015).

Migrants portrayed as failing to make themselves sufficiently useful to capital may be relegated to the second role: passive victim.

Migrants as passive victim

This section discusses how this role is promoted through: suggestions that migrants are inherently helpless; the idea that Britain is an alien environment for migrants; portrayals of migrants as childlike.

Across all three documentaries, migrants not fitting the roles of successful middle class entrepreneur or dutiful worker are overwhelmingly portrayed as helpless and passive, or if active then criminal. This resonates with longer histories of helplessness as a condition for receiving state or charitable resources, with marginalised groups presented as either victim or problem (Gilroy 1998, 11). In HWBI, we are told a couple were brought from Lithuania by an agent who abandoned them, leading to homelessness and dependency on charity while they applied for state support. A history of heroin addiction is provided as further evidence of their inability to 'cope'. The HWBI presenter suggests migrants whose labour is unwanted and face such problems would be better off leaving Britain:

(interviewing charity manager) 'If you're here and you're destitute, dependent on drink or drugs, or frequently trying to get work that isn't there, you'd be much better off going home wouldn't you?'

He follows by suggesting such people should be forced to return whether or not they consent, providing a 'humanitarian' justification for deportation.

In some places migrants' helplessness is associated with a lack of suitability for urban British environments. In BS, we are told a group of Romanian men were 'trucked in from their village and promised a job' by a faceless 'boss' who makes them work 17 hours per day and withholds their wages. After fleeing their house, some of them sleep in a park, which the group's main spokesperson assesses positively:

(outside at night, under street lights) 'I like this lifestyle. It represents me, a bit of adrenaline, a fight for survival (pans to other Romanian men, smiling)...It's how we were brought up. This is our environment, we're used to it.'

This resonates with the orientalist idea of migrants from less economically developed countries as 'backward' or 'primitive' (Said 2003, 40), more at home in the open air, similar to

prevalent narratives on Twitter during this period, portraying immigrants as ‘uncivilised’ (Shah et al 2016). Similarly, in TIUK positive representations of EU migrants in the fields of Kent (TIUK 06:14) shifts, with the help of some dramatic guitar music, to the streets of Sheffield (TIUK 06:25), where a story is told of groups of Roma disrespecting English people, urinating in the street and dumping rubbish. These portrayals silence the ways that government policies have deliberately transformed Britain into a ‘hostile environment’ for migrants (Aliverti 2015).

Migrants’ apparent helplessness within urban Britain is contrasted with romanticised depictions of migrants’ countries of origin. In HWBI, Satpal is followed making the return from Britain – where he is shown unemployed, sleeping rough, drinking heavily, with only a single friend – to India, where he is surrounded by a caring family. The colours of each scene further emphasise the contrast, from the grey back streets of London, with many scenes shot at night (e.g. 20:28, 39:30), to images of sunshine, communal eating and brightly coloured fabrics in India (e.g. 55:21, 56:21). Although Satpal travels under the ‘Voluntary Returns’ programme, his conditions of destitution in Britain make the voluntary character of his return questionable. The documentaries are all silent about less positive consequences of forced return, including difficulties reintegrating and pressures to migrate again (Schuster and Majidi 2013).

There are persistent indications across the documentaries of a ‘British dream’ that migrants believe to be real, which is then dashed by reality. HWBI’s presenter describes in melancholic tones migrants ‘battling to survive in a hidden world of poverty, crime, and broken dreams’, having ‘fallen so far from the path of normal life that it’s almost impossible to imagine what the way back for them is going to be’. In BS the presenter melodramatically sums up the

experience of a group of Romanian men:

‘The 14 Romanians came to James Turner Street with hopes of the good life. (street shots of children in the sun change to images inside the house – a picture of Jesus on the wall, a narrow corridor, a room with mattresses on the floor) But they found only slave labour. They left in fear’ (final shot outside the house, window ajar)

This contributes to an impression of childlike naivety, resonating with long-standing portrayals of the inhabitants of oppressed countries used to justify colonialism and imperialism (Young 2001, 40).

As detailed above, the passive victim role suggests migrants whose labour is not needed must submit to becoming charitable objects, and ultimately to return ‘home’ under the justification that their migration has rendered them helpless. Those refusing to accept such a passive role and to leave Britain are portrayed as a threat, justifying the use of force against them. These alternative roles, of passive victim or active threat, parallel EU border authorities’ ‘dual coding of travellers’ (Feldman 2012, 93), illustrating the ways media reflects and legitimates state practices, as part of a hegemonic superstructure.

Migrants as threat

This section discusses the threat migrants are supposed to pose to ‘British workers’ and earlier migrants and their descendants, representing the sharpest opposition between the interests of these categories of workers, and the threat it is suggested migrants pose to the rule of law (also see Bleich *et al.* 2015; Caviedes 2015; Lawlor 2015; Shah *et al.* 2016).

The claimed threat to British workers is predominantly economic, although this takes a

different tone in each documentary, from representations of hard working Romanians showing up ‘lazy’ British claimants in BS, to migrants unable to help themselves and reliant on hand-outs in HWBI, to sheer numbers of people competing for jobs and public services in TIUK. Despite these differences, the antagonistic competition for resources is consistent, part of what Moore and Forkert (2014) describe as ‘an emerging populist media consensus...that working-class people are not only anti-immigration, but also that immigration is fundamentally bad for working-class people’ (500). For example in TIUK, the presenter positions himself as a spokesperson for ‘the worst off’, complaining in an indignant tone:

(presenter walking toward the camera down an ornate stone staircase) ‘Immigration was supposed to benefit us all, and the better-off certainly noticed, they noticed that cheaper Polish plumber or decorator, they enjoyed that nice new delicatessen down the road, but the worst off in society...thought that their job was at risk, they thought their wages were being undercut, they often thought that their identity was being threatened’

As Sohoni and Mendez (2014) identify in their analysis of media representations of migration to Virginia in the United States, such representations draw on anti-corporate and anti-government discourses, claiming to speak for the interests of poor people while undermining solidarity against reductions in wages, services and state welfare (for UK context see Kitson *et al.* 2011; TUC 2013).

All three documentaries suggest recent migration is fundamentally unlike previous migration, not only quantitatively but qualitatively, and this provides the basis for suggesting new migrants threaten earlier migrants and their descendants. In TIUK contemporary migration is described as ‘unprecedented’, and in BS as a ‘new wave from the East’. HWBI covers at length a robbery carried out by a recent migrant on a shop owned by an earlier migrant, and in

interviews the presenter generalises by suggesting such incidents may be a reason ‘some people’ want migrants to leave the country. In TIUK a more general sense of economic threat is expressed, for example in this interview with an unnamed South Asian man against the backdrop of a cultural festival, emphasising his minority status:

‘The frustrating thing about it is our communities, our British-born, cannot get the job, and the Eastern communities, the European communities, can get a job’

The presenter does not question the implied causal relationship between Eastern European migration and employment difficulties facing British South Asian people. Suggestions that migrants are harming longer-established Black and Minority Ethnic communities emphasise and legitimate defensive responses to migration by established minorities and downplay inclusive responses (Kymlicka 2001), thereby discouraging solidarity and undermining claims that immigration controls are racist.

Depictions of different periods of migration are strongly classed. In BHWI and TIUK earlier migration is frequently embodied in middle-class or capitalist migrants. The dependency of recent destitute migrants is contrasted to the self-reliance of earlier successful entrepreneurs: each category of migrants is discursively produced through the other. In HWBI irregular migrants with a background in construction are introduced through contrast with migrants whose professional qualifications provided a basis for a more stable legal and employment status:

(cut from shots inside an Asian solicitor’s comfortable home to Shanki walking along residential streets, snapping something in his hands and throwing the bits away, kicking a can) ‘While Kamal represents successful, legal immigration from India, further down the road...It’s illegal immigrants, a group whose presence causes most public concern. We wanted to gain access to their underworld’

This accommodates the apparent contradiction between migrants' historical contribution to Britain (Fryer 1984), and the narrative of migrants as a burden (Reisigl and Wodak 2001), by suggesting that while migration may have 'worked' in the past, this is no longer the case. All three documentaries are silent on the agency exercised by working-class migrants in Britain to wage collective struggles, for example in recent years the Latin American Workers Association (Però 2008), and the 3Cosas campaign (<https://3cosascampaign.wordpress.com/>, accessed 30 June 2015).

Beyond the supposed threat they pose to particular groups, the documentaries present migrants as threatening law and order. As Sohoni and Mendez (2014) identify in the US context, 'the 'master frame' of criminality [is mobilised] to link diverse issues and discourses in constructing anti-immigrant positions' (512). In HWBI and TIUK migration is repeatedly associated with crime, both in what is said and through association, with images of police vans with flashing lights, drug use, and spotlights shining on migrants. This is represented in different ways in the opening imagery of each programme: HWBI opens with migrants scaling a wall into a boarded-up house; TIUK opens in the darkened cockpit of a patrol boat; BS opens with a series of short clips, including a police car with flashing lights eight seconds in. As with Andrejevic's (2011) study in Australia, irregular immigration status is ascribed to an individual failure to 'abide by the rules' rather than a consequence of state policy, and this individual culpability is used to justify repression. In HWBI the word 'illegals' is used 11 times as a noun to describe migrants, presenting illegality as their defining characteristic. In BS, criminality is mainly associated with working-class British people, othered through their contrast with law-abiding if helpless migrants. The exception is the Romanians' boss, who we are told is exploiting the workers who fear him. The focus on crime within documentaries about immigration contributes to the criminalisation of immigration itself. The state is

portrayed as weak and ineffective, as expressed by the presenter of HWBI, when he concludes ‘how difficult the authorities find it to deport illegals’. Similarly, in TIUK the presenter emphasises there is ‘so much beyond the government’s control’, and in BS the presenter tells the audience ‘There’s no hard evidence against the boss, so the police leave the street’. Such portrayals of a weak state help build a case for increased repressive powers.

Portrayals of threat are used to justify the criminalisation of certain categories of migrants, which can increase vulnerability to exploitation as well as deportation (Lewis *et al.* 2014). The precarity of this section of workers is deepened by a constant churn in its constitutive members, as individuals are deported, incarcerated, or flee Britain, and others arrive, driven by desperate conditions in other parts of the world. The possibility of lifting restrictions, to enable people to gain a measure of protection from exploitation through equal rights, is a further silence in these documentaries.

Conclusion

The discourses emerging from these documentaries are multiple and contradictory, but amongst them a coherent narrative emerges: where migrants’ labour is needed, they might be tolerated; where their labour is unwanted, they will inevitably degenerate and would be better off back in their country of origin; if they refuse to leave, they pose a threat justifying further restrictions. Moore and Forkert (2014) suggest that:

‘Work, for British citizens, is a moral duty; but for migrants it is seen as morally wrong to come to the UK and work, and indeed, immigrant workers are seen to be depriving British citizens of a moral duty to work’

(Moore and Forkert 2014, 499)

Complicating this picture, our analysis shows migrants discursively constructed in multiple and shifting ways: sometimes as morally superior to British workers, sometimes as inferior. We found migrants consistently portrayed as distinct and separate, reinforcing Moore and Forkert's argument that depictions of migrants disidentify them from the working class and thereby mask their exploitation and undermine the potential for class-based solidarity. 'Migrants' and 'British workers' are constructed as antagonistic categories, something reality television is well suited to (Skeggs and Wood 2011, 2).

Processes of othering are built around categories of 'migrants', 'British workers' and 'established ethnic minorities', which are constantly shifting: migrants act as a mutable 'other' against which categories of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' British workers can be constructed. Within a Marxist frame this may be understood as aiding the ruling class in managing the oppression of the working class in order to increase exploitation. For example, the unemployed are stigmatised as 'shirkers', despite evidence to the contrary (MacDonald *et al.* 2014), through contrast with hard-working and self-sacrificing migrants, and this increases pressure to accept jobs however terrible the pay and conditions. In other cases migrants are presented as a threat to settled British workers; this is used to justify restrictions on the rights of some groups of migrants, removing protections from exploitation, for example by limiting their ability to change employer. In a different but complementary way, pressure is placed on earlier migrants and their descendants to distance themselves from more recent migrants lest they become associated with 'immigrant failure'. Schierup and Castles (2011) argue that established ethnic minorities have weaker claims to social citizenship than the ethnic majority and so are moving closer to the situation of temporary migrants or refugees (24). This threatens them with super-exploitation, which could be responded to either through solidarity with recent migrants, or by distancing themselves and reaffirming their loyalty to the British

state; the narratives of othering described here serve to encourage the latter.

i From 2007-2014 employment was restricted to skilled roles and the agricultural and food processing sectors (MAC 2011).

ii Based on an understanding that racism can operate based on different signifiers, whether skin colour, accent, nationality, religion or other markers.

iii An annual competition organised by the Royal Horticultural Society.

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