4

Anti-Racism and the News

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the meaning of anti-racism and the nature, extent and implications of anti-racism in news reporting. The primary focus here is British news, but a series of questions about the extent to which US news either denies or highlights racism, racial discrimination and ethnic diversity are also raised. In Chapter 2, about three-quarters of race-related news items were identified as broadly presenting an anti-racist message. Anti-racism has been defined rather narrowly and a-historically in the British context (Law, 1996), particularly through its linkage to municipal anti-racism in the 1980s. The term is used here, in a wider sense, to refer to media frames (Wolfsfeld, 1997) which seek to expose and criticise racist attitudes, statements, actions and policies, which address the concerns of immigrant and minority ethnic groups and show their contribution to British society, and which embrace an inclusive view of multicultural British identity. It has been established that media coverage of race issues in the British news has undergone a substantial shift in the last decade moving in many ways to become an ‘anti-racist show’. The dominance of racist discourse, particularly in the press, in the 1980s has been replaced by a more ambivalent set of news messages, many of which contain and exhibit a preoccupation with exposing racism. This trend has run parallel to marked continuities in the transmission and reproduction of racist messages, which were demonstrated in Chapter 3.

This process of change may reflect a more untested set of propositions about a wider set of structural changes in ethnic relations in Britain. A wider shift in material conditions and political agendas which gave voice to issues of difference, diversity, cultural hybridity and multiple subjectivities through the 1980s and 1990s has been
examined elsewhere (Gilroy, 1990; Bonnett, 1993; Gillborn, 1995; Law, 1996; Modood, 1996; Mirza, 1997; Mac an Ghaill, 1999). Some of the key factors here include the increasing divergence of material conditions across ethnic minority groups, the exhaustion of municipal anti-racism, critiques of black homogeneity and renewed political, institutional and professional pressure for the recognition of ethnic difference from minority groups themselves. The resurgence of ethnicity as a totem in social and political movements combined with the rapidly shifting construction of new forms of hybrid cultural identity and theoretical reflection on the reworking and renewal of concepts of culture, ethnicity and ethnic identity have impacted unevenly across many arenas.

The rise of ethnic managerialism, which combines the privileging of ethnicity and ethnic diversity in British social policy and its intertwining with new managerialist ideas, in the 1990s has been identified (Law, 1996, 1997b; Mac an Ghaill, 1999). It has been seen to have established an important place in Benefits Agency policy, child-care policy, community-care policy and health policy amongst others. The attempt to construct ‘consociationalism’ (Lijphart, 1977) where the liberal democratic state accommodates ethnic pluralism, at the same time as attempts are being made to construct more ethnically exclusive criteria in the specification of citizenship in Britain and Europe, characterises not only the ‘liberal settlement’ of the 1960s but the appeal of the ‘management of ethnic diversity’ in the 1990s (Parekh, 1997). Increasing institutional and social engagement with ethnic and cultural diversity is acknowledged in a recent article by Stuart Hall, who proposes that this has led to a turning point in white people’s perceptions of other ethnic groups in British society:

There are three key moments. The first was the Powell moment, when the notion of closure and a homogenous culture, of their culture versus ours, was at its height... The second moment was when Tebbit issued the cricket test. People were very confused by it; they felt there was something in the argument, but they also sensed it didn’t quite hold any longer. And now with Tebbit’s latest outburst in October, they feel it’s like a dinosaur speaking out, that it belongs to yesterday. [This refers to front-page coverage in the Daily Mail which referred to Norman Tebbit as a dinosaur due to his call for reassertion of white Englishness during the Conservative Party Conference in 1997 (March of the Dinosaurs, 8 October 1997), also see Ferguson (1998) for a full discussion of Tebbit’s statements.]

That doesn’t mean Britain isn’t still a racist society or people no longer attack black kids standing at bus stops. [This refers to the Stephen Lawrence