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The Scarman Report, the Macpherson Report and the Media: How Newspapers Respond to Race-centred Social Policy Interventions

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with tracking the shifts in media discourses surrounding issues of race and social policy interventions through an examination of the newspaper media responses to the Brixton Inquiry and Scarman Report in 1982 and the Lawrence Inquiry and Macpherson Report that appeared eighteen years later in 1999. Brought about by two very different sets of historical events, albeit events which shared certain common features, this paper argues that the Scarman and Macpherson Reports have framed the changing story of 'race relations' in Britain in the last quarter of the twentieth century. While there have, inevitably, been comparisons between the content of the two Reports there has not been a comparative focus on the media reception of the findings and recommendations of the Inquiries. Using written and visual media text from five newspapers the paper seeks to map the extent to which media narratives around both race and race related policy-making have shifted during the course of almost two decades. The paper questions the boundaries of any such changes and examines what remains unchanged.

Introduction

At the end of February 1999 a routine walk into the everyday location of a newsagent shop involved witnessing rows of newspaper headlines, tabloid and broad sheet alike, declaring the existence of institutional racism and describing Britain as a sorrowful and shamed society. The nature of the newspapers' response to the publication of the Macpherson report seemed to mark a shift in media discourses around race and social justice. Indeed Michael Mansfield, QC, argued that the media response to the Macpherson inquiry and report could be identified as 'the biggest sea change in media coverage of race' (*Guardian*, 19.4.99).

Through an examination of the newspaper media responses to the Brixton inquiry and Scarman report in 1981 and the Lawrence inquiry and Macpherson report that appeared nineteen years later in 1999 this paper is concerned with the extent to which such a 'sea change' has taken place. Brought about by two very different sets of historical events, albeit events that share common foundations,

this paper argues that the Scarman and Macpherson reports have framed the changing story of 'race relations' in Britain in the last quarter of the twentieth century. While there have, inevitably, been comparisons between the content of the two reports (for example O'Bryne, 2000) what has not received a comparative focus is the ways in which the media initially responded to the publication of the findings and recommendations.

A number of events since February 1999 – the implementation of the 1999 Asylum and Immigration Act, the criticisms of Macpherson's definition of a racial attack by the judge of the Leeds footballer trial, the Conservative MP 'race row', the strong electoral support for the BNP in Oldham during the 2001 general election and the 'race riots' in Oldham and other Pennine towns in the same year – make it difficult to recall exactly what was significant about the way in which the media responded to the publication of the Macpherson report. Yet it is this, i.e. the constantly shifting morphologies of race that lie at the heart of the concerns of this paper – what happens to media discourses around race when the broader social and political contexts in which it operates appear so temporary? How did newspapers receive Scarman's findings on the day they were published and what were the differences and similarities in the media's responses, eighteen years later, to the publication of Macpherson's findings?

The data on which this paper is based is primarily taken from the visual and written text of five newspapers – the *Guardian, Times, Mail, Express* and the *Sun* on the day the reports were launched: 26 November 1981 (Scarman report) and 25 February 1999 (Macpherson report). The selection of newspapers was based on a mixture of political balance[1] (the broadsheets) and the reputations of the three tabloids. The *Mail* and *Sun*, in particular, have had a long association with, and are known for, their hostile reception of multicultural and race related issues. The *Express* has, if not to such a high profile extent, inhabited the same discursive landscape. However, it was also important that the *Mail* and the *Express* were both in the sample, first because of the role that the *Mail* played in relation to the Stephen Lawrence campaign and, second, because the *Express* shifted towards a more liberal-leaning perspective towards the end of the 1990s. One of the most prominent indicators of this political repositioning was the (brief) editorship of Rosie Boycott but it was also apparent in the coverage the *Express* gave to the Macpherson report (and the Parekh report, see below).

The sample is not meant to be fully representative of daily newspapers as such but rather reflects a concern with continuities and changes in specific papers in a particular time frame. The focus on the day of publication is motivated by the need to examine the significance of the political *moment*. The methodological privileging of the immediacy of the newspapers' responses to publication of the reports allows an analysis concerned with the initial reactions. The exact contours of initial reactions are at risk of being lost in subsequent debates and patterns of media coverage. Given the extent to which race is a 'shape shifter',

then the political moment, as reflected in a methodologically narrowly delineated time frame is a valid terrain for empirical investigation. Of course, political moments do not emerge from nowhere and reference to the wider context remains central to understanding a particular period. For example, the media's immediate response to the Macpherson report was influenced by their support of the Lawrence campaign and family and also, in part, by a familiarity with the contents of the report which came about via a series of unidentified leaks prior to its publication (McLaughlin and Murji, 1999). The analysis of a political moment needs to be 'bedded down' in the broader milieu if it is to make sense.

Brixton to Bexley 1981–99: commonalities, differences and responses

In some ways the urban unrest that took place in Brixton in 1981 could not appear as more removed from the murder of a black teenager waiting at a bus stop in Bexley in 1993. Yet both of these events generated the two highest profile public inquiries in relation to race in Britain. Headed by judges, both inquiries had a dual remit to 'fact' or 'truth find' and make policy recommendations. The reports produced by each inquiry were publicly heralded as documents to usher in fundamental change in the ways in which the issues of race were approached in British society and widely referred to as 'watersheds' and 'turning points'. However, despite the reports' authoritative, official status and the political rhetoric surrounding their publication, the extent to which such documents do bring about any such change in political, public and policy arenas is questionable. In part this is due to the fixed 'crisis' parameters of the public inquiry model and in part to the documents' vulnerability to the whims of political agendas. Certainly Thatcher paid little heed to Scarman after 1981, and Macpherson, while bringing about legislative reforms, has been subject to police and media challenges since its publication (Solomos, 1999; McLaughlin and Murji, 1999). Nevertheless, the reports, and the events which engendered their existence, act as historic markers in the relationship between race issues, policy-making and service delivery in a multicultural, postcolonial society. There was a commonality in the use of a public inquiry process for both Scarman and Macpherson and there was commonality in the key area of consideration. As Bowling notes:

For both Scarman and Lawrence, the issues of central concern related in some sense to a failure in policing. Each inquiry probed established police procedures and the extent to which paper policies have been carried out into practice. They have brought to the surface fundamental issues concerning police powers, competence, accountability, personnel and training. (1998: xiv)

The focus on policing was not the only shared ground – both inquiries engaged, albeit in limited ways, with the wider social policy areas. For example, Scarman

and Macpherson both commented on the need to address the relationship between race, education and housing.

A comparative analysis of the media responses to the reports is possible because of these various points of symmetry. Clearly, however, this paper is not claiming that comparing Scarman with Macpherson is comparing like with like. Despite the various points of commonality the differences between the reports are extensive. These differences exist in the distinctiveness of each set of events, in the processes by which each inquiry came about, in the contrasting economic climates of the early 1980s and the late 1990s and in the central political administrations of Thatcher's New Right and Blair's New Labour and in the differences in the discursive content of the reports themselves. Scarman's emphasis on prejudice and discrimination, on shared responsibility between the police and minority communities and on the adequacy of existing legislative systems reads very differently from Macpherson's emphasis on the notion of institutional racism, cultural practices within policing and the need for legislative change.

What becomes the key question in the light of the degree of distinctiveness between Scarman and Macpherson is not simply how did newspapers report the publication of these two reports but rather, are the changes and continuities in those media responses best understood as emerging out of specific sets of events (collective urban disorder on the one hand and the killing of a young black adolescent from a respectable working-class family on the other) or are those changes and continuities representative of more fundamental shifts in the media's coverage of issues relating to racial divisions and multicultural citizenship. Intrinsic to this question and the paper's attempt to answer it is the relationship between the media and the frameworks for the sense making of events that it offers its audiences.

Processes of sense making are multifactored and in the early 1980s and the late 1990s class is a largely silent contributor in persuasive sense-making processes. For example, in 1981 *all* explanations of the unrest borrowed to differing degrees from the concept of a disaffected urban underclass population (Scarman, 1981; Benyon and Solomos, 1986), although the downplaying of the extent to which the unrest was multiethnically constituted is indicative of the racialisation of the disorders (Kettle and Hodges, 1982). In 1999 class is present in the regularly repeated accounts of Stephen Lawrence's educational achievements and his career aspirations and of course in the dignity of his family. All this evidence of the 'right values' was crucial to the empathetic inclusion of the Lawrence family into the national collectivity (Yuval-Davis, 1999). Class is also very identifiable in the underclass/'white trash' representations that dominated the newspaper coverage of the five men suspected of Stephen Lawrence's murder and this article returns to these. It is the media's offer of sense-making frameworks and the socio-political contexts of these that the article now considers.

Media, social relations and race

The relationship between the media and the ways in which issues of race appear and are represented within the various and dramatically increasing arenas of media technologies has long been a focus of concern, research and theoretical debate (see for example Butterworth, 1967). The late 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of arguments which suggested that media representations of young African/Caribbean men not only criminalized them culturally but that this process had a very material effect on their experiences within the criminal justice system (Hall *et al.*, 1978; Gilroy, 1987; Solomos, 1988). More recent examinations of the media have begun to focus on how the concept of whiteness and the 'mainstreaming' of multi-culturalism have impacted on representations and news coverage of race related issues and events (Gabriel, 1998; Fiske, 1994, 2000; Ferguson, 1998; Neal, 1998, 1999; Cottle, 2000; Law, 2001). At the heart of this latest literature is a set of concerns with the often *contradictory* representations of race. This more recent research demonstrates how media discourses may reinscribe a familiar repertoire of racialised stereotypes *or* challenge and play with white cultural anxieties and fascinations with race and/*or* engage with a more inclusive and anti-racist rhetoric:

It is in and through representations, for example, that media audiences are variously invited to construct a sense of who 'we' are in relation to who 'we' are not ... By such means, the social interests mobilised across society are marked out from each other, differentiated and often rendered vulnerable to discrimination. At the same time, however, the media can also serve to affirm social and cultural diversity and, moreover, provide crucial spaces in and through which imposed identities or the interests of others can be resisted, challenged and changed. (Cottle: 2000: 2)

Ferguson similarly argues that 'media discourses have to be conceptualised as fluid, often contradictory and as one contributory element in the ideological formation and/or sustenance of an audience or society' (1998: 132). This position is also reflected in Law's suggestion that 'the growing strength of broadly anti-racist news values goes hand in hand with a significant core group of news messages which foster racism, animosity and hatred' (2001: 160). The complex co-existence of these tensions in media discourses surrounding race are identifiable in the newspaper responses to Scarman and Macpherson.

With the exception of the analysis of the media representation of municipal anti-racism in the 1980s and the related notion of backlash politics (Gordon and Rosenberg, 1989; Gabriel, 1998), what has been relatively under-examined in the more recent UK context has been the ways in which the media has responded to social policy interventions that specifically address racial inequalities. To some extent this relative under-examination can be understood in relation to the paucity of racial equality policies but it also reflects the limited populist appeal or 'newsworthiness' of such strategies. During the 1980s the newsworthiness of

racial equality initiatives was derived from their potential to be either ridiculed or presented as a threat to national identity.

While Law (2001) documents a shift towards an 'anti-racist show' within the media during the 1990s, the generally hostile reception of the Parekh report (2000) provides a recent example of the longevity of an anti-anti-racism discourse. Much of the media coverage focused, not on the recommendations for policy development, nor on the Parekh report's optimistic highlighting of the extent of the journey Britain had made towards embracing its multi-cultural identity but on the report's questioning of the exclusionary implications of the category 'British' – 'British is Race Slur' (*Sun* 10.10.2000); 'British is a Racist Word' (*Telegraph* 10.10.2000); 'British is a boo word in today's UK' (*Guardian* 13.10.2000).[2]

Published less than a year after the Macpherson report the dominant[3] newspaper response to the Parekh report is significant as it is illustrative of the limitations of the media's 'anti-racist drift' and the temporary nature of the media's responses to race issues. With its very different remit (i.e. it was not confined to a specific issue of criminal justice or law and order), and content (i.e. the report's methodology and concern with a broad range of policy arenas) and authorship (i.e. it was written by a mixed team of race experts and commissioned through the Runnymede Trust, an organisation with a long history and high profile in lobbying around racism and racial inequality) the Parekh report represented a more rounded analysis of, and wider-ranging recommendations for, a multiculturally inclusive Britain. While there is not space within this commentary to explore fully either the report or the newspaper coverage of its publication, it is important to bear in mind that some of this coverage demonstrated the contradictory tensions between the media's fascination with race and its relative neglect of, or hostility towards, race-related equality policy interventions. To some extent the lack of media interest in the policy details of the Parekh report can be seen as part of a wider neglect in the reporting of 'non-crisis' social policy-making and implementation. As Franklin (1999) argues, despite the huge level of expenditure on social policy, the central place of social policy on government agendas and the proximity of social policy to people's everyday worlds, media coverage of social policy worlds is limited. According to Franklin (1999: 2) the media's relationship with social policy issues is configured through constructions of crisis or near crisis: 'while a crisis is not always necessary to generate social policy coverage, reporting tends to focus overwhelmingly on the shortcomings of policy decisions and their implementation'. When the media does engage with social policy related arenas, that engagement can elicit a political reaction. A sympathetic media is a powerful lobby for policy generation. The *Mail*'s involvement in backing the Lawrence campaign was an important element in establishing the Inquiry. As I have argued elsewhere in relation to the Christopher Clunis case, in the early 1990s the *Independent*'s involvement in the call for an inquiry into the care and

treatment of Clunis played a key role in securing that such a process took place (Neal, 1998). In this context Scarman and Macpherson are significant because the reports were at the heart of key events about race and racism and they represented high profile policy documents intended to bring about social change in relation to racial inequalities. It is the media's reception of these that the article now examines.

Scarman: media narratives
Political crisis and social upheaval

In 1981 it was the then Home Secretary William Whitelaw's seeming *acceptance* of Scarman's findings that dominated the headlines of the tabloids and the broadsheets: 'Willie's Pledge to Heal the Rift' (*Sun*); 'Whitelaw to Act' (*Mirror*); 'Whitelaw Accepts Scarman's Challenge' (*Express*); 'Whitelaw Picks up Scarman Challenge' (*Guardian*); 'Scarman's Plans for Racial Peace Wins Wide Backing, "I'll act swiftly" says Whitelaw' (*Times*); 'Whitelaw Accepts Theme of Scarman' (*Times*). The image that frequently accompanied this rhetoric, providing a visual signifier of its official importance, was of Lord Scarman holding a copy of the report. While it was central government's willingness to accept the findings of the Inquiry that was most clearly represented by the media, what this rhetoric implicitly portrayed was a society deeply fragmented along racial lines. Scarman's observation that Britain 'is not one society but three or four societies' was repeatedly referenced in the newspapers. This initial political reception jars with the vantage of viewing Scarman twenty years later. The historical process has demonstrated how the Thatcher administration actually did little more than appear to welcome Scarman (Benyon and Solomos, 1986). As Solomos notes in relation to the publication of the Macpherson Report,

The experience of the Scarman Report should warn us against making any facile predictions about the nature of the policy response that we are likely to see. If anything the experience of the last two decades teaches us that the ways in which policy recommendations are translated into practice remains fundamentally uncertain, particularly as the nature of policy change depends on broader political agendas. (1999: 3.2)

However, in November 1981 it was the notions of political crisis and civil disintegration, which dominated political and populist discourse. For example, the *Sun* declared that racial hatred was, 'the hatred that is poisoning all Britain' and proceeded to explain how,

Britain is being poisoned by racial hatred in her cities, a top judge warned yesterday. Lord Scarman – the 70 year old judge appointed to probe last summer's riots in London's mainly black Brixton district – says the nation's 'very survival' is threatened.

Similarly the *Mirror* described Scarman as 'the final warning' and proceeded to explain,

it is the nation's choice. Either act on Scarman or put it on the shelf with countless others. But if we decide on the shelf it will not be dust that this report gathers. It will be blood.

The hyperbole continued on the following page where an article about life in Brixton was headlined 'Close up Special on the Disease That Threatens Our Survival', The collapse of social order was also the focus of the *Guardian*'s comments. Defining Scarman as a 'watershed' it stated,

It is hard to overestimate the shock to the British system of seeing those appalling scenes of violence and mayhem in Brixton and then in Southall, Toxteth and the Midlands. It was as if we had been bought to the edge of an abyss, beyond which lay anarchy, the breakdown of law and order and social catastrophe. There was as a result no little comfort to be drawn from the distinguished figure of Lord Scarman who was asked to investigate what had happened. He would tell us why it had occurred, provide rational explanation for a phenomenon which had baffled and terrified; he would suggest ways in which it could be prevented from happening again.

The *Times* directly echoed the *Guardian* when it commented on how,

bafflement followed the Brixton and other riots of the summer. Why there? Why then? The ferocity of the outburst and the complexity of its causes darkened the search for remedies. The appointment of Lord Scarman to inquire and recommend seemed like a promise of illumination.

The broadsheets' quasi-colonial rhetoric – confusion, fear, incomprehension, darkness and light – and the tabloid rhetoric of social breakdown were both reinforced by the visual text used by all the newspapers. For example, there was a widespread reproduction of the 'classic' images (burning police cars, injured police officers, 'rioting' crowds, destroyed buildings) of the unrest.

Contradictions: disadvantage and criminality

The newspapers reaction to Scarman's suggestions of social, economic and racial disadvantage provided some of the clearest glimpses into the seeming contradictions of the media coverage. Themes of empathy sat alongside themes of criminality. For example, the *Mirror* explained, under the headline 'Rebels in the Gutter' how 'Blacks suffer much more acutely than whites from the deprivations of city life' but went on to discuss the 'frustrations' of 'young blacks' and the 'problems of crime in the area, particularly mugging'. The word mugging was selected by the *Sun*, *Mirror* and *Mail* as a sub-heading, thus emphasising its place in the debate. Any limited media recognition of disadvantage was tempered with reminders of the consequences of having a criminally inclined, volatile population living in urban Britain. This position was illustrated in the *Mirror* that explained to its readers, 'Lord Scarman says that deprivation and frustration among young blacks of Brixton is more likely to lead to disorder'. In the same vein, the *Mail* gave a whole page to 'The Blacks of Brixton: the deprived who live their life on the streets'. This story also focused on 'frustration' and how this

was a 'recipe for a clash between ''young blacks'' and the police on the streets of Brixton'. The *Sun*, too, stated that although 'Scarman claims that all were to blame in some way for the savage outburst of rioting that stunned Britain', it emphasised how 'the police were faced with a still unresolved problem of how to cope with a rising level of crime – particularly mugging'. This was the concern of the *Express*, which pointed out the need for 'vigilance' against discrimination but concluded

nothing in Scarman's report can justify the criminal behaviour of those who rioted against the police – or of those who mug old people and maraud the streets at night. The police must be vigilant against racial prejudice. But they must be equally vigilant against crime.

The contradiction between the newspaper's discussion of social, economic and racial disadvantage and its repeated references to the criminal nature of inner city communities was reinforced by their extensive referencing of Scarman's denial that institutional racism existed in Britain. This denial: 'institutional racism does not exist in Britain: but racial disadvantage and its nasty associate, racial discrimination, have not yet been eliminated. They poison minds and attitudes: they are, and so long as they remain, will continue to be, a potent factor of unrest' was fully quoted in the *Guardian*, *Telegraph* and the *Sun*.

Ferguson makes the important point that far from contradictions upsetting sense-making they can actually assist such processes, 'racist ideology . . . can draw upon a discursive reserve which allows for different positions to be adopted as part of a unitary (if brittle) world-view' (1998: 260). In this context of both recognising/not recognising racism, the newspaper reactions to the policy recommendations of Scarman were framed not by social justice concerns but rather by anxieties as to how disadvantage had created dangerous communities. This was evident in both the *Mirror*'s prediction that 'Bloody race riots threaten to destroy our society if blacks are not given a chance' and the *Mail*'s assertion that 'deprived blacks must get a better deal than whites over the next few years if Britain is to avoid a racial holocaust'.

Police: heroes who made mistakes

The reception given to Scarman within the political, media and police arenas can be contextualised in part by first the report's denial that institutional racism shaped British society, and second in the report's comments and analysis of the Metropolitan police and policing practices in multicultural areas. The newspapers overwhelmingly interpreted the report as having made only mild criticisms of the police. While there were shades of equivocism in Scarman's examination of policing, the media and political response was unequivocal in its support of the police. The *Sun*, for example, explained under the headline 'Courage of the Riot Squads' how 'Police bravery during the riots is praised in the report. Lord Scarman said they stood between our society and the total collapse of law and

order in the streets'. For the *Mail* too, the emphasis was on the construction of courageous officers – 'The police of Brixton: alone they faced the threat to law and order'. The criticisms that Scarman had made of police practice became another element of police decency, i.e. that they accepted the report's comments; for example the *Mail* explained how the 'Police accept attacks and praise' and the *Express* captured the same theme in their exonerating headline 'How a mistake put cool heroes to toughest test'. The *Express* quoted directly from Scarman for its sub-headings – 'It is a tribute to their restraint that nobody died' and 'The social conditions in Brixton cannot justify attacks on police, arson and riot'. The paper reinforced this theme by highlighting the political consensus in police support, 'in the Commons there was loud support when Mr Whitelaw told MPs that the report had praised the courage and conduct of the police and emergency services over the weekend that horrified Britain'. For the broadsheets the concern with representing the report's support for the police was similarly dominant. In headlines the *Times* declared how 'Criticisms of police [were] tempered with support for Metropolitan Force', and in its editorial the *Telegraph* commented, 'Lord Scarman does not believe that the police dealt with the riots badly. He praises their courage'. The *Guardian* took a more solitary position with its headline, 'After Brixton, the Need for Radical Reform' and argued that the 'at times brilliant Report' paved the way for 'radical reforms in police training, recruitment and accountability'. While it was the *Guardian* that commented to the greatest extent on Scarman's concerns about racially prejudiced officers, at the same time it underlined Scarman's view that this 'prejudice' was both 'uncommon' and 'not found in the more senior ranks'.

Media metaphors: the dominance of disease

What is particularly striking when reading the newspaper responses to the publication of the Scarman report twenty years on was the extent to which images of disease and sickness dominate the media reaction: 'The Hatred that is Poisoning Britain' (*Sun*), 'Scarman: The Final Warning': 'Close up Special on the Disease That Threatens Our Survival' (*Mirror*), 'Scarman tells of "Disease Threatening our Society"' (*Telegraph*), 'The Cures For Brixton' (*Mail*), 'We Must Cure this Disease: the sickness will become incurable unless immediate measures are taken' (*Star*). Gabriel (1998: 114) argues that 'the idea of "disease"' in racial thought has worked at both a literal and metaphorical level and has later noted how 'paranoias about bodies have fed paranoias surrounding the nation-state and vice versa to the mutual enhancement of both' (2000: 73). Gabriel is not alone in suggesting that disease and 'disease'-connected metaphors have long been identified within racial discourses. In his discussion of the process of constructions of Other, Gilman (1985: 130) notes 'the Other is . . . both ill and infectious, both damaged and damaging'. The salience of the disease metaphor is a reflection of the extent of racialised social anxieties in 1981 and it is significant that Scarman

too offered a pathologised psychological model for understanding the situation in Brixton when he described the area as being 'not unhappy but disturbed'. The language of sickness and illness (physical and mental), in the media narratives of Scarman creates elements of ambiguity as to the cause of an infected social body- is the 'disease' 'racial disadvantage' or multiculturalism? The reduction of race and nation into a medicalised, a-political framework of sense-making appears, two decades later, as particularly dated and simplistic. The discursive shifts away from images of illness and contamination is a pronounced difference between the newspaper coverage of Scarman and Macpherson although the Macpherson report itself alludes to racism as a 'corrosive disease' (1999: para 6.34) with an infectious nature – 'the police canteen can too easily be its [institutional racism] breeding ground' (1999: para 6.17).

Macpherson: media narratives

All the national newspapers apart from the *Sun*[4] devoted their front pages to the publication of the Macpherson report. There was a marked increase in the coverage given to Macpherson compared to Scarman. For example, while the *Express* gave three pages to Scarman it gave seven pages to Macpherson and the *Guardian* gave thirteen full pages to Macpherson when it only gave four to Scarman. The significance of this is open to a number of readings. Does it reflect greater levels of social uncertainty and tension about issues of race and multiculturalism, is it indicative of a rise in concerns with social justice and racial equality, is it a reflection of an emotional response to a particular, individual event or can it be understood as a convergence of all of these? It is to the qualitative content of this extensive coverage that the article now turns in order to address these questions.

Grief, empathy and institutional racism

The front pages of four of the five newspapers intertwined the theme of individual tragedy with a recognition of racism and the need for policy intervention and change. These converged themes are all present in the following headlines: 'Stephen Lawrence's Legacy: Confronting Racist Britain' (*Guardian*), 'Campaign to Banish Racism – reform of law to bring a new era' (*Times*), 'The Legacy of Stephen – Judges damning report will change Britain' (*Mail*'), 'Never Again – the Lawrence Report Highlights Racism in the Police and Many Other Areas of Society. Now it is the Duty of All of Us that Stephen Did not Die in Vain (*Express*). The *Sun* allocated the report a corner of its front page under the heading 'Straw War on Racism'. What was very dominant in the language of these headlines was the initial media receptiveness to the Macpherson report. This receptiveness existed in relation to the Scarman report but I have argued that that welcome was underpinned by Scarman's very cautious criticism of the police and the amplified public concerns about civil unrest. In comparison, it was the empathetic

emotionalism of the media receptiveness of the Macpherson report that appeared to mark a shift in media discourse around race. This empathetic emotionalism was expressed via the widespread use of the terms 'grief' and 'tragedy' and visually conveyed through the 'Remember Stephen' banner and repeated images of Doreen and Neville Lawrence, who were described by the *Mail* as 'an example to us all'. Although the empathetic discourses surrounding the Lawrence campaign were closely tied to the idea of the respectable family, it was this empathy that created a unique space in which broader questions about racism, multicultural citizenship and social justice could be legitimately raised. In this context the *Express*, for example, claimed that the Macpherson report was the 'historic report that condemned police racism' and could be 'hailed as a catalyst to wipe out the evil of discrimination in British society'. Similarly the *Mail* commented:

the most resounding finding of the Report is that not only the Metropolitan police but all the main organs of the state are infected with institutional racism and must be radically reformed.

The Macpherson definition of institutional racism was highlighted as a key text on the front page of the *Guardian*, and the *Times* declared, 'Racism to Blame for Failed Inquiry'. The Macpherson recognition that systematic processes of racial exclusion existed and that these were reinscribed by racialised cultures within organisations officially put institutional racism on the social policy map, bringing the concept in from the political cold of 1980s town halls. While the report's definition of institutional racism has been subject to criticism (Anthias, 1999; Solomos, 1999) it was the newspapers' willingness to engage with a concept so weighted down with political baggage as *the* explanation of events that was significant, particularly as other de-racialised factors, for example, an absence of documentation, of co-ordination, of professionalism – were highlighted in the report as contributing to the failure of the prosecution. As Anthias argues 'in the Report it is *not* accepted that racism was "universally the cause of the failure of the investigation" (46:27)' (1999:2.2, original emphasis).

Police racism, incompetence and shame

Alongside the recognition of institutional racism discursive shifts are identifiable in the media's willingness, in 1999, to criticise the police. For example, the *Mail* carried the headline across two pages 'Revealed in Damning Evidence, Gross Incompetence, the Blunders and the Shamed Officers' and the *Express* spoke of a 'Revolution in Training After Inquiry Reveals Catalogue of Failure'. For the *Times* 'Police Work [was] Incompetent and Biased' and the *Guardian* described a 'Sorry Police Saga of Blunder and Racism'. The newspapers' defence of the police in 1981 was relatively easy given the nature of Scarman's account. However, the extent to which the Macpherson report was critical of the police presented, particularly for those newspapers on the right, an unfamiliar dilemma in terms of

how to 'manage' such criticism. Part of this 'managing' process was to emphasise shame and incompetence as central articulations of the political response to the report. The discursive reoccurrence of the thematic of shame featured, for example, in the *Express* headline 'Home Secretary's "Sense of Shame"' and was continued in a full page of *Express Opinion* which highlighted racial equalities in education, employment and widespread racist violence and concluded, 'the greatest thing to come out of the tragedy . . . is if everyone of us begins to question British attitudes and our own to black people in this country'. The *Guardian* too made 'Straw's Sense of Shame' a headline and quoted extensively from the former Home Secretary's address to the Commons,

The process of the inquiry has opened our eyes to what it is like to be black or Asian in Britain today. And the inquiry process has revealed some fundamental truths about the nature of our society. Some truths are uncomfortable. But we have to confront them.

The political sketch of the Commons in the *Guardian* described the House as 'stunned into quiet unanimity'. This sombre description of the parliamentary mood differs markedly with the *Express*' accounts of the cheering that came from both sides of the House after William Whitelaw had detailed Scarman's exoneration of the police nineteen years previously.

Shame as an articulated response to Macpherson was not confined to politicians. Shame was similarly expressed by, and related to, the police – 'Condon tells of Shame over failures (*Times*); 'My Shame at Police Bungles', 'Police Shame and Stephen's Tragedy' (*Mail*), 'Sir Paul Vows to Stay on and Reform Shamed Force' (*Guardian*). The pervasiveness of shame in relation to Stephen Lawrence directly connects to the growing role shame, in the form of the 'naming and shaming' process, has begun to play in social policy interventions as seen for example in education and health (Alibhai-Brown, 2000). It is worth noting that as a political strategy 'naming and shaming' borrows directly from the media itself in terms of (the threat of) public exposure. In other words the use of shame as a tool for shaping social policy developments reinforces the potency of the media in the arenas of social policy delivery and implementation.

Absent media metaphors and shifting criminalised bodies

The visual text of the newspapers on 25 February was very different from that in 1981. While Straw and Condon were pictured, the most frequent image was of Doreen and Neville Lawrence seated with the report and the Remember Stephen banner behind them. In contrast to 1981 when the neo-colonial images of Scarman walking through 'urban interior' of Brixton, playing dominoes with the Brixton Domino Club or holding his report were widespread, in 1999 the newspapers rarely showed Macpherson himself. Rather it is the Lawrences who were shown holding the report. This, and the low visual profile of William Macpherson and

the common tendency to refer to the report as the Lawrence Report blurred its authorship and ownership. The pictures of Doreen and Neville Lawrence, of Stephen Lawrence, of Dwayne Brooks and the Lawrence's lawyer, Imran Khan shifted the visual volatile/dangerous framing of the black body which was so ubiquitously deployed in 1981 and has remained a regular feature of media representations of racialised bodies (Butler, 1993; Fiske, 1994; Neal 1998). Black bodies in February 1999 were inscribed with dignity, courage, restraint and perhaps most significantly *lawfulness*, and it was white bodies – the five suspects and the named police officers – that signified lawlessness, danger and incompetence. That the newspapers all used head and shoulders pictures reminiscent of 'mug shots' of the named police officers who were criticised in the report added to the visual construction of the criminalised white body.

Within this recoded landscape of representation, and at the same time that the media were engaging with the existence of more complex processes of racism, the five suspected men were, in many ways, 'reassuring' or 'easy villains'. They were figures whose racism could be identified with a particular form of white masculinity that was 'distanced from mainstream society' (McLaughlin and Murji, 1999: 377). For example, the *Times* declared 'Suspects: the *Type* to Commit this Crime' (emphasis added) and provided pictures of each of the five men, discussed 'their revolting racism' and gave biographic details of their deviant/'underclass' family backgrounds. The *Sun* quoted Macpherson with the headline 'Suspects are Evil says Judge' and the *Mail* described Neil Accort as 'the swaggering thug' and spoke of the 'five white thugs' who 'still walk the streets with little chance of facing charges'. Similarly, the *Express* argued that 'if they [the five named suspects] weren't involved there must have been *identical thugs* at large' (emphasis added).

If the dangerous black body was the absent visual image and Macpherson was the absentee author then disease was the absent metaphor. With the media reaction to Macpherson redrawn around themes of empathy and shame, disease metaphors, with their medieval allusions, did not tend to appear. There are only two occasions when racism as an illness did emerge. The first was in the *Express* which described the 'Five Suspects' as '*Infected* By Racism' and the second was in the *Mail*. While congratulating itself on its role in the Lawrence campaign the *Mail* revealed a more ambiguous response to the Macpherson report in its editorial which argued:

the problem is that the *prescriptions* needed to deal with the *cancer* of canteen culture do not apply to the rest of the country. Is it really the case that Britain is as *riddled* with racism as the report suggest?

Besides the evident unease in the *Mail* with Macpherson, what was significant was the inversion of the disease metaphor. Far from racial disadvantage threatening society's survival as the media predicted in 1981, the extent of its severity is subject

to doubt here. It was within the *Mail*'s raising of these types of questions that the boundaries of the willingness to accept the findings and recommendations of Macpherson emerged.

Ambiguity and tension

The tensions in the media reception given to the Macpherson report were most apparent in the *Mail*, the *Times* and the *Sun* and least evident in the *Guardian* and the *Express.* In some ways, while it would appear that the *Mail* is the newspaper that has changed most dramatically in its response to race issues the differences in the paper's reaction to Scarman and Macpherson are not as marked as may be imagined. The *Mail* devoted twelve front page issues to the Lawrence case since 1993 and most famously printed the five faces and names of the suspects. However it was the *Mail* that most extensively outlined a series of warnings about the report. These ranged from the need for vigilance against an 'over-zealous CRE', to asking whether Macpherson has 'gone too far' in terms of his non-police-related recommendations, and, with a stunning lack of irony, urged caution in any social reflections as 'questions of race could come to dominate our national life'. The *Mail* concluded that it would be a 'disservice to Stephen's memory if we were to fall into the grip of racial McCarthyism'. The invoking of McCarthy here is of course another ironic sleight of hand in the *Mail*'s display of unease about the particular can of worms it has had a direct hand in prising open. This unease is clearly expressed in the newspaper's anxious assertion that, 'if all 70 of his [Macpherson's] far reaching recommendations were to be implemented they would spark a politically correct purge across the country and irrevocably change the British way of life'. In 1981 the *Mail* had been unequivocal in its support of the police. In 1999, while it expressed anger that the officers involved would not face charges, at the same time the *Mail* quoted former Conservative Cabinet member Norman Fowler's concerns about accusing the police of institutional racism when they 'are the best in the world'. As McLaughlin and Murji note, the *Mail*'s criticism of the police was in no small part shaped by the fact that police failure had 'given the anti-racist lobby the excuse for an unprecedented attack on British society' (1999: 378).

The *Mail* sought to reaffirm 'British pride' on more than one occasion. In its editorial its audience was urged to 'remember that Britain is, for all its faults and appalling crimes, a fundamentally decent and harmonious country'. A complete page was given over to an article titled 'Why I Don't Believe that the British are Racists' which – and the audience's attention was drawn to this – was written by the paper's African-Asian columnist Mihir Bose. Bose offered an account that reassured the reader that, despite the findings of Macpherson, Britain was a society where 'different colours and cultures can truly live in harmony'. The authenticating black voice that is presented by the *Mail* has been a consistent

feature of white backlash politics. As Gabriel notes, 'the role of key black media spokespeople has been crucial in the legitimisation of white knowledge. The advantage of using expert black testimony has been to make the case appear epistemologically neutral rather than reflecting dominant white "interests" . . . Adding the odd black voice to the white backlash seemingly takes race out of the equation' (2000: 72).

While tensions in the newspaper reception of the Macpherson report were most evident in the *Mail* the *Times* too displayed uncertainty and doubt. The *Times* also cited Norman Fowler and his warning about 'legislating in anger and living to regret it' and in its editorial comments the paper looked back at the Scarman report and argued that much of Scarman was implemented in terms of police training and 'forces have made progress'. The *Times* examined the extent to which Britain had avoided the replication of the racial divisions seen in the United States despite the severity of the situation in the early 1980s, and concluded by posing the rhetorical question: 'will the soul searching resulting from the Macpherson report lead to defensive reactions by the police making the streets less safe for people of all races?' This question works to both suggest that Macpherson may impact on police effectiveness and raise the spectre of the connections between black communities and criminality.

The tensions and contradictions of the *Sun*'s coverage of Macpherson were played out on the paper's front page in a way that was both more overt and covert than in either the *Mail* or the *Times*. The Macpherson report was relegated to the physical and political margins as the story that took centre stage was the results from the *Sun*'s own opinion poll on the Euro debate:

121,764 Vote to Save £ – a massive army of Sun readers voted to save the pound yesterday in our biggest you the jury poll response ever. An incredible 121,764 of you called our hotline to back keeping OUR currency.

The irony of this nationalistic positioning extended to the *Sun*'s coverage of the Macpherson report in its centre pages where the main headline declared that 'Racists Won't Win' and the sub-heading, selected from Straw's speech, also sought to capture a nationalistic mood: 'We Must Make Racial Equality a Reality in This Country . . . Let Us be a Beacon to the World'. That the *Sun* used this particular selection from the speech and then made this a key heading again is indicative of the ambiguity in national identity, i.e. that for the *Sun* anti-racism or at least racial equality – formerly a notion viewed with suspicion and derision – should become reconfigured into the pivot around which British pride could now be hung.

Comparative conclusions

The data from two days of immediate newspaper coverage of two of the highest profile reports on 'race relations' revealed that the trajectory that media discourses

had travelled between 1981 and 1999 was one in which it was possible to identify a 'changing same' (Gilroy, 1993) process.

Scarman's denial that fundamental and systematic processes of racial exclusion existed in Britain and his conclusion that policing practices were misjudgements rather than a consequence of racist attitudes and assumptions dominated the newspapers in 1981. Visual images and editorials in the tabloids, broadsheets and middlemarket papers emphasised a common agenda in which the Scarman report offered a possible *cure* to the nation's problem of an albeit disadvantaged but nevertheless threatening urban population. In contrast the newspaper data in 25 February 1999 supplied a narrative in which British society was identified as institutionally racist, as racially violent and policed by discriminating and incompetent officers. Shame and empathy dominated the common agenda between the five papers in the sample and drove a, albeit fragile, consensus as to the need for at least some of Macpherson's recommendations for change. In 1999 the apocalyptic images of a diseased Britain that the media disseminated in its coverage of the publication of Scarman were very much in retreat. In 1999 the need for policy interventions was placed within a broader context of concern for criminal and social justice whereas in 1981 policy intervention was narrowly related to the need to avoid further civil unrest.

Do these shifts represent a disruption to what Foucault (1979, 1981) has called 'regimes of truth'? In some ways, yes. Law argues that 'the attention, space and sympathy given to Doreen Lawrence in news coverage . . . is indicative of a wider acceptance of black people in a variety of roles across news coverage (2001: 121). McLaughlin and Murji similarly suggest that there has been a 're-coding of race in Britain' and continue that even the right-wing press now 'acknowledge that blackness and Britishness are not mutually exclusive' (1999: 377). However, it is clear from the newspaper reactions to Macpherson that disruptions to 'race truths' have to be understood as partial, conditional and contradictory. What the campaign by the *Mail*, the widespread public support for the Lawrence family and the tone of immediate newspaper response to Macpherson demonstrated was a retreat from normative media and political discourses of the Scarman coverage that readily related black communities to criminality and a range of social problems. This retreat reflected the extent to which 'given that they are of the right class and values blacks are now accepted as a legitimate part of the British national collectivity and crude racialised behaviour towards them is not justified anymore by large sections of the British population' (Yuval-Davis, 1999: 3.10). Within this context newspapers offered their audiences an account of Macpherson that, on the one hand, agreed that social policy interventions for racial equality were both desirable and necessary; yet, on the other hand, certain newspapers (the *Mail* and the *Times*) simultaneously questioned the implications of that acceptance. There was a limited consensus in the initial reception given to Macpherson's findings but there was already a distinction between the liberal leaning *Guardian*

and *Express* and the tensions evident in the conservative papers, particularly in terms of their reaction to the Report's *policy* recommendations. This is an area of particular continuity in 1999 and 1981. For example, the *Mail*'s hostile (front page) headline description of Scarman's recommendations as 'Reverse Discrimination' was recaptured in the paper's editorial descriptions of the Macpherson recommendations as 'politically correct purges', and 'race relations revolutions'. For those newspapers on the right, expressions of unease and doubt about both Scarman and Macpherson were articulated around the reports' proposed policy interventions. While there may have been a shift in aspects of media coverage of race issues this shift is less apparent in relation to media coverage of racial equality policy-making.

Given that Scarman and Macpherson were both 'crisis' reports, another area of continuity is in the media's efforts to reassure their audiences. However the process of reassurance takes on a very different character. In 1981 reassurance was drawn from the spectacle of Scarman himself. In 1999, when confidence in public figures was low, newspapers did not tend to use Macpherson[5] himself as a way of reassuring audiences. Instead the *Mail*, the *Times* and the *Sun* in particular, emphasised how Britain could be 'proud of its record on race' and reminded readers that Britain had managed, post Scarman, to avoid reproducing a 'United States race relations situation'. While this reassurance was contradicted by the findings of Macpherson (and the sheer number of recommendations), at the same time the very existence of the report directly fed the reassurance discourse. The nature of this reassurance process provided an early indicator of the limits, for some of the newspapers, in their acceptance of the need for social policy interventions to achieve racial equality.

Compared with the early 1980s, contemporary media, in newly multifarious forms, saturates both political and everyday worlds. Within this context central government and policy-makers have increasingly sought to mobilise and gain media approval for social policy interventions (see Franklin, 1999). In relation to race issues, demonstrated in the newspaper receptions of the Scarman and Macpherson reports, policy interventions, tend at best, to be viewed ambiguously and approved only partially. In 1999 there was public and political acceptance that racism existed in Britain. However this acceptance can be understood to be highly context, and issue, specific. Such a selective approach to racism, which is especially limited given the variety of its formations, is by no means confined to the media. The publication of the Macpherson report and the development of new immigration legislation in the same year demonstrated New Labour's 'non-joined up' strategic attempts to delineate and separate issues of race.

Since 1999 the hostile reaction to the Parekh report and the engagement of the middle market papers[6] particularly with an extreme anti-refugee position illuminates the fluidity of racist discourses and the paradoxical discursive landscapes that newspapers are able to inhabit. This fluidity is itself a reflection

of the wider political uncertainties. Unlike in the early 1980s, in the late 1990s the absence of an effective Conservative opposition, Scottish and Welsh devolution, the asylum issue, and the European Union have all posed a set of challenges, especially for a predominantly right-wing media, as to the meanings of 'Britishness', 'Englishness' and 'citizenship' and the constituencies of these categories. Given the extent of such uncertainties, newspaper responses to political moments and particular events may appear to present windows through which to glimpse, and mark, degrees of social and cultural change but these responses do not necessarily reflect shifts that are stable or permanent.

Notes

1   This is not to argue that the political liberalism that is associated with the *Guardian* should not be subject to scrutiny or accepted as unproblematic. The apparent liberalism of the *Guardian* relates to the broader context of the generally conservative tendencies of the other main daily newspapers in Britain. Certainly sympathetic coverage of race issues cannot be taken for granted within the *Guardian* as the article later notes in relation to both the Parekh Report and the Scarman Report.

2   The Guardian's leader writer ('British tag is coded racism', 11.10. 2000) reaction to the publication of *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* closely followed the *Telegraph* that claimed that the Report stated that the term British had *racist* connotations (whereas the report talks of 'racial connotations'). This claim led, despite some inside page supportive voices, to a generally hystericised and hostile media reaction to the report. The Runnymede Trust (2000: 15) argued that the *Guardian* 'failed' those audiences, including 'many people professionally associated with racial equality issues' who sought more accurate reporting of the Parekh report.

3   In contrast to the *Guardian* the *Express* welcomed the Parekh report and argued in its main editorial that 'ending prejudice will certainly not be achieved by damning a report which highlights the problems' (12.10.00).

4   The *Sun* did not make the Scarman Report front page news either.

5   Macpherson was to become the subject of personal criticism in the weeks following publication. For example, the *Sunday Telegraph* (28.2.99) referred to him as 'a useful [i.e. to the 'race relations lobby'] idiot' (cited in McLaughlin and Murji, 1999: 384).

6   While the *Express* was the paper that repositioned itself the most in terms of its coverage of Scarman and Macpherson, more recently, the paper has increasingly reverted back to a right of centre position, particularly on issues of asylum and immigration.

Acknowledgements

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