Government Perceptions of Asylum Seekers in the 1990s: Origins and Effects

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In October 2006, the Bureau of European Policy Advisers – a think tank for the European Commission that answers directly to President Barrosso – published a report entitled "Migration and Public Perception".[1] This report used mainly economic, cultural and security issues to express why public opinion had become so hostile to migrants, as well as pointing the finger of blame at the door of the media. However, it rarely mentioned governments' roles in harbouring such negative perceptions of migrants. Consequently, in an attempt to balance the argument somewhat, this presentation will focus on official representations of one particular subset of migrants who were perhaps the victim of the most negative publicity of all: asylum seekers. It is my contention that whilst governments may not have brought the issue of rising asylum applications to the attention of the public – anti-immigrant and opposition parties did this – they did respond to its manifestation by using increasingly ominous lexicology to describe asylum seekers, frequently terming them "bogus" applicants and "economic migrants." The purpose of this presentation is to show how this occurred and to underline what affect it has had on the asylum debate since the 1990s.

The first section of my presentation will be dedicated to outlining how official images of asylum seekers in the West changed during the second half of the twentieth century. This will show that western governments have not always had such an adverse view of asylum seekers. In fact from the 1950s until the mid 1970s, official representations of asylum seekers were mostly positive as numbers were small and politically opportune, leading these people to be 'endowed with protection and assistance that went far beyond the international obligations imposed on receiving states'.[2] However, this view was modified somewhat in the wake of the economic recession

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[1] Bureau of European Policy Advisers (Marcel Canoy et al), *Migration and Public Opinion*, October 2006. This can be accessed at:
http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/policy_advisers/publications/docs/bepa_migration_final_09_10_006_en.pdf.
[2] Christian Joppke, 'Asylum and State Sovereignty: A Comparison of the US, Germany and Britain', in C. Joppke (ed.), *Challenge to the Nation State*, Oxford/NY: OUP, 1998, pp. 109-152, p. 111.

caused by the oil crisis and rising numbers of applicants. Numbers continued to rise dramatically throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Between 1985 and 1994, over 3.4 million asylum applications were made in the EU alone.[3] This huge increase in applications was the result of increasing international conflicts (the break-up of Yugoslavia, in particular), the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet regime, as well as the increasing use of commercial transporters by global asylum seekers coming from developing countries in turmoil. Moreover, those migrants unable to access the West because of immigration restrictions had turned to asylum to facilitate their entry.

Not only did these asylum seekers initially cost governments money to house and feed but they were also regarded as being a challenge to a state's perceived sovereignty because of the protection they were meant to receive under the 1951 Refugee Convention. This led to charges against governments that they had lost control of their immigration policies from increasingly popular anti-immigrant parties.[4] To counter this, governments started reducing asylum seekers' allowances and interpreting asylum applications less sympathetically than before, in the hope of reducing asylum numbers. Concurrently, their descriptions of asylum seekers became more and more hostile so as to justify such changes.

The second section of my presentation will give an outline of what influence this has had on public perceptions of asylum seekers by examining the effect official representations of asylum seekers have had. This will largely entail a study of the media. The media, when dealing with the subject of asylum, represented different actors' interests, interpretations and opinions, as well as putting across their own spin on events. Reality was rarely represented.[5] Facts, when they did appear, were carefully chosen to coincide with the interest propounded.

Writing in the 1920s, Walter Lippmann was able to comment that 'the mass is constantly exposed to suggestion. It reads not the news, but the news with an aura of

[3] Eurostat, 'Asylum-seekers in Europe 1985-1995', *Statistics in Focus*, 1996.1, p. 1.

[4] Rachel Gibson, *The Growth of Anti-immigrant Parties in Western Europe*, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2002.

[5] As Guy Debord concluded: 'Just as one does not judge a man's value according to the conception he has of himself, one cannot judge – or admire – this specific society by taking the discourse it addresses to itself as necessarily true.' Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, NY: Zone Books, 1994 (1st pub. in French in 1967), p. 142.

suggestion about it, indicating the line of action to be taken.'[6] This, in my opinion, is also true for the asylum debate that has gone on since the 1990s. Although the ruling powers have much greater advantages in spreading their message to the public through the media - as Chomsky and Herman note, governments go to great lengths to oblige journalists by providing them with facilities, advance copies of speeches and scheduling press conferences at times that facilitate their inclusion in the next day's news[7] - it is nonetheless possible for groups to negate the information they receive and to put forward an alternative version. As Lippman outlined, 'the opportunities for manipulation [are] open to anyone who understands the process'.[8] In fact, the opposition groups in the asylum debate tend to use the same medium employed by official sources; the media, to dispute and debate the information that has been communicated by the state.

Asylum policy is a source of serious contention among a broad group of actors. While some of these participants might be in favour of enforcing a more restrictive asylum policy, like opposition political parties, other actors, like NGOs, can argue for a more expansive asylum system. Unlike NGOs however, who firstly have to rely on goodwill from governments and the public alike for finance, and secondly need sympathetic media editors to enable them to air their views, opposition parties attract a more precious commodity: voters. Thus, in an attempt to offset the loss of votes to opposition parties, governments have often attempted to modify and revise their ideas to attract new voters or recapture their old ones.[9] This has meant depicting asylum seekers in a progressively

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[6] Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion*, NY: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997 (1st pub. in 1922), p. 155. It is tempting to put Gramsci's almost simultaneous conception of hegemony alongside Lippmann's theory of the "manufacture of consent". However, Gramsci's theory was much more state-centred than Lippmann's. For more information on Gramsci's theory of hegemony, see Stuart Hall, Bob Lumley & Gregor McLennan, 'Politics and Ideology: Gramsci', in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *On Ideology*, Nottingham: Russel Press, 1977, pp. 45-76, and Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and transl. by Quintin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell Smith, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, especially p. 238.

[7] Edward S. Herman & Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent. The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, NY: Pantheon Books, 1988, p. 22. Herbert Gans also argues that powerful sources are the 'most easily and quickly available, as well as most reliable and productive, source of news. The most powerful sources are also the most efficient. This adds further to their power, for efficiency is the other major factor that explains the news.' See Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News*, NY: Vintage Books, 1980, p. 282.

[8] Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion*, p. 158.

[9] For more details, see Martin Schain, Aristide Zolberg and Patrick Hossay, 'The Development of Radical Right Parties in Western Europe', in Martin Schain, Aristide Zolberg and Patrick Hossay (eds.), *Shadows over Europe: The Development and Impact of the Extreme Right in Western Europe*, NY: Palgrave, 2002, pp. 3-17.

more negative light. In turn, this gave the media and the public further authorisation to express any hostility that already existed towards asylum seekers. If positive representations of the dominant group are subliminally communicated as a result of negative reports on asylum seekers, this serves to reinforce the majority's own ascendancy whilst simultaneously subduing the minority; in this case asylum seekers.[10] To summarise, my presentation will put forward the summation that whilst economic, cultural and social issues have given rise to much public negativity regarding asylum seekers, governments have not been anonymous in the materialisation of such views.

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[10] Teun van Dijk has written that when people in high office speak critically of one particular group, it serves to legitimate any negative attitudes and ideologies that are already present in the recipients' mindsets. See Teun A. van Dijk, 'Principles of critical discourse analysis', *Discourse and Society*, Vol. 4 (2), 1993, pp. 249-283, p.263 and p. 268 for more details.