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Book Review

***Bad News for Refugees* by Greg Philo, Emma Briant and Pauline Donald**
London: Pluto Press, 2013. 203 pp. (ISBN 978 0 7453 3432 5)

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A project of researchers associated with the Glasgow Media Group, *Bad News for Refugees* seeks to shed light on the role of the media in shaping public opinion of refugees in the United Kingdom. Activists have denounced the increasing vilification of refugees by politicians and the press over the past decade and a half, and highlighted its coincidence with a shift towards a more punitive state response (Webber 2012). In view of the anti-migrant Ukip party's triumph in the EU parliamentary elections of May 2014, this book is an especially timely study that could prove useful in the fight against racist and xenophobic sentiment in Britain.

The underlying theoretical premise of the authors' argument is that news accounts work to establish specific ways of understanding in conjunction with the prevailing public discourse surrounding a particular theme. As such, the researchers first carry out a thematic analysis in order to identify six key perspectives on refugees and asylum in the UK. The majority of these are negative, such as the notion that refugees pose a burden on welfare funds and the job market, or that they constitute a "security" threat. Even the sole positive narrative, that immigrants provide a benefit to society in the form of multiculturalism or economic growth, is steeped in a neoliberal discourse that ultimately commodifies the human beings it purports to support. Each claim is eventually countered in an "Alternative Perspectives" section, but since it is virtually impossible to avoid partially justifying this dehumanizing logic without putting forth a radical critique of nation-state sovereignty and the global capitalist system, the book's fifth chapter is particularly refreshing because it amplifies the voice of both social workers and refugees themselves. Indeed, one of the main conclusions of *Bad News for Refugees* is that the overwhelmingly hostile coverage of refugees in the media is marked by the relative absence of their voices, and those of their advocates. This has negative consequences for refugee communities, including the decision of many to go further "underground."

Roughly half of the book (chapters three and four) is dedicated to an analysis of media coverage during short periods in May 2006 and June 2011. Press samples were drawn from the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express*, the *Sun*, the *Mirror*, *The Times*, the *Guardian*, and the *Telegraph*, while BBC1, BBC 2, ITV, and Channel 4 were the television programs studied. Given the authors' interest in the relationship between media agendas and the actions of the State, a brief description of each outlet would have been welcome, especially for readers unfamiliar with the UK media system and thus the editorial differences between outlets such as Rupert Murdoch's *The Sun* and the left-leaning *Guardian*. As one might expect, the latter was the newspaper most likely to highlight the problems faced by those seeking asylum in the UK, such as the use of excessive force by the private "security" firm G4S. Similarly, the Scottish regional BBC broadcasts stood apart for their total eschewal of the term "illegal immigrant," with one broadcast of *Newsnight Scotland* also notable for its framing of the issue of asylum in terms of Western responsibility, as well as its criticism of the EU's inconsistent treatment of refugees.

The authors note that *Newsnight Scotland* also made an “important distinction” between the concepts of migration and forced migration, and indeed “conflation of forced and economic migration” is the first of the eight key themes identified in the media coverage during the two periods researched. However, this point is not adequately addressed in the theoretical sections of the first two chapters. The researchers rightly single out neoliberal structural adjustment and institutions such as the IMF as key factors driving migration worldwide, and they emphasize that the Refugee Convention of 1951 does not concern those who have been displaced for these “economic” reasons, “who are often just as vulnerable as political refugees, and who may have as great a need for refuge.” (49) Yet instead of pushing this argument further by citing leading scholars who have convincingly argued that these “labor” migrations are not only “forced” but are in effect intricately linked to the expansion of neoliberal capitalist “development” (Delgado Wise, 2009), the authors refer to a less critical definition offered by the International Association for the study of Forced Migration. By largely accepting the binary of “economic” as opposed to “forced” migration, their justified critique of neoliberal capitalism consequently loses some of its bite, even if they do consistently critique the relative lack of reporting on the role of the West in causing migration.

Other key narratives were the supposedly threatening numbers of refugees or so-called “asylum seekers” arriving in “floods” or “waves,” their putative involvement in crime and “terrorism,” and the need for immigration control. Reporting obviously reflected contemporary developments. For example, the period of May 2006 was chosen because it coincided with the forced resignation of Charles Clarke as Home Secretary in the aftermath of the revelation that foreign nationals had been freed from prison without being considered for deportation. Headlines during this sample ranged from “A thousand foreign criminals released by mistake” (*Channel 4 News*) and “Revealed: how asylum seekers use your taxes to smuggle in relatives” (*Express*) to “Comment and debate: ignorant opposition: the prime minister is undermining public confidence in the rule of law and the judiciary” (*Guardian*). We thus see how a political scandal opened the door to a general demonization of refugees and fueled partisan bickering. In turn, the authors selected the period of June 2011 because this is when the government announced that its backlog in asylum cases had finally been cleared. Yet this also came on the heels of May's coverage of displacement from the upheaval of the so-called “Arab Spring,” and on the eve of a drought crisis in Somalia. While there were no stories discussing the West's responsibility for forced migration during the narrow sample period in June, there were alternative reports by both the *The Guardian* and *The Independent* that did highlight the role of the West in the aforementioned crises.

Unsurprisingly, the researchers found that migration and refugee flows were routinely presented in the major press outlets in terms of the so-called “national interests” of the UK, and in this regard the “Who Speaks” sections at the beginning of each content analysis chapters are enlightening. For the 2006 sample, four out of every five quoted statements were attributed to politicians, while a mere three percent of the 99 total statements came from refugees. Only five comments were positive, while more than eight times that many were negative. The authors also managed to interview seven journalists under conditions of confidentiality, who spoke of an “authoritarian” atmosphere in which reporters had to fight hard to portray refugees in a positive light. When one young reporter complained about consistent negative coverage, she was assigned every anti-Muslim, anti-refugee story as punishment until she eventually resigned. On the other hand, the prominence accorded to Sir Andrew Green of the anti-migrant think tank Migration Watch in political debates mirrors the role of FAIR (Federation for American Immigration Reform) and the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) in the

United States. As platforms for right-wing academics and elites with strong ties to government officials, these think tanks provide a sheen of scholarly legitimacy to what are often thinly-veiled racist attacks, and ultimately work in conjunction with television programs such as *UK Border Force* and *Homeland Security USA* to manufacture public consent to increasingly militarized immigration enforcement. The authors conclude that the British series plays a key role in the creation “a perfect circle of media coverage, government and 'official' action” by recycling footage of immigration officials mounting high-profile raids in pursuit of “illegal migrants” or “failed asylum seekers.” (167)

For readers who are not very well-informed regarding UK asylum procedures, the first chapter's “Asylum and Immigration in the United Kingdom” section and the “Guide to the Asylum Process” appendix are extremely helpful, especially since relevant legislation is almost never referenced in the mass media. Once again, transatlantic parallels can be drawn between the Asylum and Immigration Act in the UK and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act in the US. Both were passed in 1996 and severely limited access to formal jobs and public benefits for those seeking asylum (even legal permanent residents were affected in the US). On the other hand, there is no discussion of the sweeping changes that have occurred in the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) during the same time period, with the agency being presented instead as a steadfast supporter of refugees. However, Jacob Stephens (2006) argues that the UN agency's mandate was transformed under the direction of Sadako Ogata during the 1990s, with it gradually coming under the influence of United States and subsequently NATO military strategy. This has resulted in its participation in forced voluntary repatriation and a shift towards what often amounts to indefinite imprisonment in sprawling refugee camps. Stephens states that “the only real problem [with the 1951 Refugee Convention] is that what began as a self-interested European approach to dealing with the mass displacements of the Second World War now has to operate in an increasingly unequal world, in which Western powers do not want to take responsibility for the results of their military interventions and destructive economic policies.” (64) While the references to international political economy in *Bad News For Refugees* could use some stronger and more cohesive theoretical grounding, after reading this book no one can seriously doubt that the mass media is utterly complicit in the shirking of this responsibility. Considering how dependent the United Nations is upon rich Western countries for funding, this is very bad news indeed.

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