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TEXT, TALK, ELITES AND RACISM

1. Introduction

In this paper I summarize some results of my recent research about the reproduction of racism through discourse and communication. The special focus of this research is on the role of the elites in this reproduction process.

I hardly need to recall that racism and ethnocentrism remain fundamental problems in Europe and North America. True, white people's understanding and tolerance, and even their acceptance (which is not the same!), of people of color have increased during the last decades. However, although discrimination and ethnic prejudice may gradually have become more subtle, more sophisticated and more 'modern' during the last decades, they most certainly have not disappeared.

On the contrary, both in Europe and in North America, there are developments that partly go against the modest gains of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Racist parties in several European countries, such as the Front National in France, and similar parties in Belgium and Germany, have drawn an increasing number of voters. Ideas and policies that hitherto were the doubtful privilege of such parties have infected also the more established parties. Thus, one of the reasons why the National Front in Great Britain has been less successful during the last decade was precisely because the Conservative Party, as well as the right-wing press sustaining it, adopted many of its tenets.

True, the time of racist lynchings is over. However, racial attacks continue to seriously undermine the general myth of ethnic and racial tolerance in several European countries, such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany and now also Italy. Similar examples maybe mentioned for the USA and Canada.

While these more extreme manifestations of ethnic and racial hate and resentment may be rather exceptional, and although they are certainly not an indication of a broader ethnic consensus among white people, it should be emphasized that less extreme forms of discrimination, prejudice and inequality are prevalent in virtually all domains of social life.

The subtleties of “everyday racism”, as Philomena Fessed calls it in her book *Everyday Racism* (Essed, 1984, 1991), continue to mark the lives of black people and other minorities, in politics, employment, education, research, culture, the media, the welfare system, housing, health care, and other domains.

In sum, the system of white dominance and ethnic inequality is still firmly in place, even when it has changed its nature during the last decades. Blatant color prejudice and overt discrimination policies and practices have given way to more indirect, cultural forms of racism, that is to ‘ethnicism’. Especially also among the elites, negative attitudes and discriminatory practices, now focus on ‘symbolic’ issues, such as affirmative action, busing, and all those policies that are seen as “favoring” minorities (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986).

Especially in the USA and Canada affirmative action and equal opportunity programs have set examples that deserve emulation in many European countries. However, opposition against such programs remains widespread. The Civil Rights Bill of 1990, which proposed a firmer stand against discrimination in employment, was vetoed by President Bush who claimed that the Bill would allow “quota”, a veto that was sustained by Congress. The 1991 Civil Rights Bill, that extended rights also to women who are victims of discrimination, was finally signed by Bush in the fall of 1991 after many compromises. At the same time, affirmative action programs often continue to problematize people of color instead of the organizations whose practices these programs sought to improve.

Against beautiful statements of principle, and sometimes honorable policies, the realities of the everyday life of racially based poverty, new segregation and discrimination show that principles and practices do not always match.

2. Discourse, communication and racism

Racism, defined as a system of white group dominance, requires daily reproduction, both at the level of action and interaction, as well as on the level of social cognitions. In my research of the last ten years I have tried to show that this reproduction process is crucially sustained by structures and processes of discourse and communication. Most white people, especially in

Europe, are not daily interacting with people of color, and the beliefs they have about “them” are therefore largely derived from text and talk about these “others”. These social cognitions in turn form the basis of the actions and new discourse of white group members towards minority groups and their members.

My research tries to uncover the detailed mechanism of these discursive, communicative and socio-cognitive reproduction processes of ethnic dominance relations in white, European or europeanized societies.

Everyday conversation

Thus, my studies about the ways white people speak about minorities in conversations (van Dijk, 1984, 1987a), show that immigration and ethnic relations are a prominent object of everyday talk.

Topics

Examining the topics of such conversations, it soon becomes clear that such thematic structures are hardly innocent, let alone neutral or positive.

What begins with a maybe ‘natural’ fascination with difference of appearance and culture, soon focuses on negative characteristics of resident minorities, refugees and other immigrant newcomers. Categorizations of difference deteriorate into attributions of deviance and threat, which are often summarized by such thematic statements as:

- They do not want to adapt to our ways.
- They don’t want to speak our language.
- They only come here to live off our pocket.
- They think our country is a social paradise.
- They take away our jobs.
- They take away our houses.
- They are engaged in criminal activities (typically: drugs, mugging, etc.)
- They don’t work hard enough to make it here.

and many other variations of the same topics.

Whereas everyday conversations usually have a broad range of possible topics, talk about minorities focuses on a highly selective number of topics. Theoretically speaking, these topics define the top level structures of mental models and social group schemata of white people about the “non-white” outgroups.

Stories

An analysis of the narrative structures that characterize the many stories told in such conversations, shows first that such stories have a very special function. They are told as a purportedly ‘factual’ –while experienced— premise in an argumentation that is geared to a negative conclusion about the other group.

Secondly, such stories may lack the familiar Resolution category following the, invariably negative Complication category. Indeed, it would make the story less persuasive, if the storyteller had been able to resolve the predicament the story is about.

Stories about minorities, thus, become problem-stories, complaints that express similarly negative mental models of everyday experiences, and that exemplify more general negative prejudices about minorities.

Disclaimers

At the same time, norms and values in contemporary European and North-American societies have been changing towards a generalized, but abstract norm of ethnic and racial tolerance and equality.

Virtually all people we interviewed know, and mostly sustain these general norms. They also know that negative topics and stories might be heard as inconsistent with such norms, and they therefore use a complex battery of strategic semantic moves to make their negative statements socially more persuasive and acceptable. They make use of disclaimers such as:

-Apparent Denial (“I am not a racist, but...”; “I have nothing against them, but..”); -Apparent Concession (“There are also smart Black people, but...”); -Transfer (“I don’t mind that of course, but you know the neighbors / my colleague, /my clients...”); -Contrast (“And WE work our but off, and THEY only have to...”).

These and other moves textually implement the combination of two overall strategies, viz., those of positive self-presentation or social face-keeping, on the one hand, and negative other-presentation or derogation, on the other hand. We shall encounter this double strategy several time below.

These, and many other properties of conversation, including special repairs, hesitations, and false starts, may rather subtly show the structures and the strategies of the underlying (personal) mental models and the (social) group schemata that organize, at the cognitive or ideological level, the reproduction of group dominance.

Textbooks

Our beliefs and ways of talk about other groups are learned from the first years of our socialization. Research shows that ethnic prejudices may already be firmly in place in children between the age of 4 and 7 years old (Aboud, 1988). Apart from talk at home with parents, brothers and sisters, and besides white peer group conversations, children books, and television, textbooks at school are a rich source of prejudices and stereotypes about other groups and other peoples.

Adding to the already existing literature on stereotyping in textbooks, we examined all social science textbooks in use in the Netherlands in 1986, focussing on the passages about minorities, immigrants and more generally about third world peoples (van Dijk, 1987b).

The results of this analysis confirm in somewhat more discourse analytical detail what has repeatedly been found by other researchers, especially for European textbooks (Klein,1986; for French Canadian textbooks, see Blondin, 1990):

- (1) There is very little attention for minority groups in the first place: For many books, “our” societies seem to be exclusively white.

- (2) The same is true for the classroom presupposed by the contents and assignments of these books: children in the classroom are defined mostly as being white;
- (3) Minority groups, if dealt with at all, are primarily discussed from a cultural point of view, with special emphasis on problematic or strange habits, or on other stereotypes.
- (4) Negative prejudices may perhaps no longer be expressed in a blatant way, but negative attributions, blaming the victim, and other forms of negative other-presentation are still quite common. For instance, a few lines about the Chinese or the Surinamese in Holland may still prompt the stereotypical and irrelevant comment that some of them are engaged in the drugs business, a comment that may be followed by disclaimers like “Of course, we should not generalize...”.
- (5) Whereas nationalist pride is common in virtually all textbooks in most countries, the special contributions of immigrants or other minorities to the economy and culture of the country are seldom acknowledged.
- (6) There is a general parallelism between the ways minorities are treated and (other) Third World peoples are dealt with. In many subtle ways, not only well-known stereotypes about their poverty, illiteracy, or democratic and technological “backwardness” are stated or implied, but more generally the message that “we” are doing better on virtually all accounts than “they” is coming over loud and clear.
- (7) Finally, and perhaps most crucially, stereotyping is often accompanied by a systematic avoidance if not denial of racism, the mitigation of colonialism, and a general picture that suggests that, despite some regrettable incidents of discrimination, racism is not, or no longer, a fundamental problem of white society. Indeed, if racism is dealt with in Dutch textbooks, we mostly find a discussion of segregation in the pre-Civil Rights period of the USA or about Apartheid in South Africa.

The press

Finally, in a number of studies (see e.g., van Dijk, 1991), I examined what is probably the most crucial and pervasive means of the reproduction of racism, viz., the media, and in particular the press. Analyzing thousands of news reports and editorials of the British and the Dutch press, we learn how present day public discourse formulates the ethnic consensus—including some of its contradictions—of white society.

True, as is the case for everyday conversation and textbooks, we may also find liberal, more or less tolerant talk and text in the media regarding minorities, immigration and ethnic affairs. The British tabloids, in that respect, obviously cannot be compared to the Guardian, and the same is true for similar newspapers in France, the Netherlands, Germany, Canada or the USA (for the UK see also Hartmann & Husband, 1974; for the USA: Martindale, 1986; for Germany: Merten, et al., 1986; and for Canada, the voluminous Ph.D. Dissertation of Indra, 1979).

However, despite these differences of style, rhetoric and political orientation, there are also fundamental resemblances. They are all white newspapers, and they show it. Let us summarize a few results before we focus on the topic of elite racism.

Hiring

Especially in Europe, virtually all journalists and certainly all leading editors are white. This is also the case for the liberal quality press. Affirmative action policies for the recruitment and promotion of journalists are as absent as in most business corporations, and usually found inconsistent with the celebrated value of the “freedom of the press” and the well-known excuse of “quality” (“They don’t speak the language well enough,” etc.).

Even in the USA, where the situation of recruitment of minority journalists, is comparatively better, more than 60% of all newspapers do not have a single black journalist, whereas discrimination in promotion has been extensively documented. The main way the U.S. media operate is through carefully selected token minorities. In Europe, even the tokens are mostly absent.

Access

Whereas in this way minority journalists have limited access to the news room, the same is true for those the news is about, that is, news actors and sources. In many ways, the everyday routines of newsmaking operate in a social framework that gives preferential access to elite sources, institutions and other actors that have well organized press offices, and are able to manufacture newsworthiness through carefully managed press conferences, press releases and other strategies to reach reporters, and hence the news reports.

It is not surprising that since minority actors and organizations are, on the whole, less powerful, they also have less resources to organize their access to the press. Consequently, they are less subjects of news stories, and less a source of opinions, and hence less quoted. Also, they tend to be seen as less reliable, and as “partisan” as soon as ethnic events become newsworthy. White speakers are never presumed to be partisan about ethnic affairs. Indeed, they are not seen as an “ethnic” group, with its own interests, at all. Apart from liberal or less liberal social cognitions shared with others in their class and ethnic group, most white journalists also lack the socio-cultural knowledge and experiences as well as the necessary intercultural competence to adequately interview people of color.

Topics

Research on news values and the conditions of newsworthiness, also in my own work on discursive news analysis, consistently shows that the selection and textual prominence of topics in the press are neither free nor arbitrary. Values of social and political “interestingness” characterize professional myths of which news is “fit to print”, and which isn’t. In reality topics rather faithfully reflect the patterns of access mentioned above, as well as the power and influence of elite actors. If news topics reflect the societies of which they account, they most certainly have special interest in the top levels of society.

It follows that since the white group is in power, and virtually all influential elites are white, a black face, opinion, or action are topically as rare in news reports as they are in government, the corporate boardroom, the courtroom or, indeed, in the news room itself.

Systematic study of the main topics of news coverage of ethnic affairs shows that although the last decades have shown increasing interest in ethnic and racial issues, the focus remains on a very limited number of often highly stereotypical topics.

While some of these, such as violence, crime and serious social conflict, nicely dovetail with more general news values, the organization of such topics may nevertheless be rather specific for “ethnic” or “racial” news. Violence and crime is not simply violence and crime, but black violence and black crime. They are attributed special dimensions that invite special treatment in the media.

As Stuart Hall and his associates in their famous book, *Pacing the Crisis* (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke & Roberts, 1978), already showed more than 10 years ago, the media construction of crimes such as mugging is specifically geared towards the criminalization of black youth. In the 1980s, this has been more specifically the case for drugs.

In my own analysis of the British coverage of the ‘riots’ in some British cities in 1985, we similarly find a prominent topicalization of civil unrest. However, not in terms of urban decay, poverty, unemployment, police harassment or the overall position of the black community, but primarily in terms of the seemingly irrational criminal violence of young black males, and as an attack on the dominant white order and British values.

Conversely, many topics that are routinely covered for white actors and institutions, such as economic and financial life, political organization, social issues, culture and especially everyday racism, are systematically “under-reported” when minority or immigrant people or organizations are involved as main actors.

Finally, many topics in the press that could be covered as they are for whites, tend to be irrelevantly culturalized. In Europe it is quite common that minor problems or conflicts are attributed to the presumed cultural background of ethnic news actors. Thus, the position of Turkish or North African women is not described primarily in terms of male chauvinism, which would too much emphasize the similarity in the positions of European and non-European women, but in terms of a “backward” Muslim culture. The same is true for problems at school, which are never attributed to biased textbooks or discriminating teachers and students, not to the conditions of poverty of their families, but virtually always to the cultural problems experienced by “children living between two cultures”.

In the USA, according to a study of Boston newspapers, Blacks often appear in sports and entertainment news (Johnson, 1987). His conclusion, as well as that of many other authors, is that the press, until today, contributes to a reproduction of stereotypes, while at the same time systematically denying the prevalence of racism in society.

Indeed, such is also our major conclusion of the analysis of the Dutch and the British press, namely that the topics of white prejudice and discrimination, especially when conceptualized as institutional everyday racism, are under- reported, ignored or vehemently denied or mitigated.

In sum, the selection and prominence of topics (1) define how the white press defines the ethnic situation, (2) reflect the organized access of elite actors and sources to the news production process, and (3) express the top levels of often biased mental models of white journalists about ethnic events.

Local semantics

However, the specifics of the press contribution to the reproduction of racism are most clearly manifested in the way such topics are formulated, that is in local semantic, stylistic, and rhetorical structures of news reports.

It is hardly surprising to find at these more local levels of text organization, first, that minority actors not only speak much less frequently, but also with less credibility and authority. If quoted at all, they will virtually always speak in the presence of white news actors who may “balance” the opinions expressed.

Especially on “delicate” topics, such as prejudice and racism, quotes of minority people will be invariably signalled with quotation marks and doubt- implying words such as “alleged”. More often than not, it is whites who are found to be experts about such topics. To wit, on the topic of prejudice in the British press of 1985, we find some 100 quotes by white speakers, and only one single quote by a black speaker.

Local semantic analysis shows the now familiar pattern of strategic moves of disclaiming. Thus, the British tabloids assure the reader after a viciously negative account of the urban disturbances that they “have of course nothing against the black community, but... (and I summarize) “it should nevertheless realize that when it does not control its youths, the dark forces of right wing reaction may be unleashed, tolerance Aminish, and black people be thrown own of the country, or otherwise become further marginalized.”

Style and rhetoric

The style and rhetoric of news further enhances the negative picture sketched above. Again, the tabloids, read by many millions, and thus dwarfing the quality press, are expectedly most blatant. Interestingly, given the general hesitation to express blatantly racist evaluations, minorities may be generally dealt with in a direct or negative way, but the more aggressive style and rhetoric are reserved for the white anti-racists, in the UK usually identified with the “loony left”. Accusations of racism, as for instance in the notorious Honeyford affair (Honeyford was a headmaster who was suspended and finally fired because of his racist writings), are violently attacked, ridiculed, and the anti-racists deemed to be “busybodies” who are compared with pocket-Hitlers, Goebbels or other Nazis, and the struggle against racism with the practices of the inquisition.

Reversal

Thus we witness a general strategy of reversal: discrimination is mitigated or denied by focusing on “their” intolerance, and racism ignored and denied by redefining anti-racism as “inverse racism” or “black racism”. In other words, the threat of the white British order by black youths and white anti-racists, is represented as a battle between good and evil, between British hospitality and tolerance, on the one hand, and the criminal or intolerant nature of all who oppose British values and society, on the other hand. For the right-wing press, the question is also one of moral influence and competition, namely who has the power to define the ethnic situation, and who formulates the moral order.

3. Elite discourse and racism

From these various research projects, several major conclusions and further hypotheses emerge. One of these hypotheses is that the discursive and communicative reproduction of white dominance is not evenly or arbitrarily distributed throughout society. Since elites control the access to, as well as the major topics and style of the means of public discourse and communication, it may be expected that these elites play a very specific role in the reproduction of racism (for details, see: van Dijk, in preparation).

This hypothesis, made plausible by a large body of empirical results, also follows from the very structural analysis of racism. If racism is defined as white group dominance, and if the elites by definition control power in society and the polity, then the elites must also be involved in maintaining white group dominance.

Interesting for our inquiry is that the same should be true for the realm of discourse and communication. Political discourse, the media, educational materials, academic discourse, corporate discourse and most other forms of public discourse are after all also produced by the elites. Indeed, in many respects the power of elite groups may be measured by the amount of access to, topicalization in, and control over the formulation of public discourse.

Now, if control over public discourse and communication is a valid measure of elite power in contemporary 'information' societies, and if dominant white ideologies are primarily reproduced through discourse, our hypothesis about the special role of the elites in the reproduction of racism should be so obvious as to be virtually trivial.

However, politics and the media themselves, as well as a considerable amount of social research, typically tend to define the problem of "intolerance" (the concept of racism is usually taboo) in terms of "popular" resentment of ordinary people against immigration, against minorities in their neighborhoods, against busing or affirmative action, and against interculturalism generally. Racism is attributed to poor white people, working class people, or to the petit bourgeois.

It is true that traditional attitude research repeatedly finds that tolerance increases with level of education, and hence with class position and social responsibility. Racist parties and movements in Europe as well as in the USA seem to draw much of their voters from among the poor inner cities, as well as from the large lower middle class of those who say they feel "threatened" by the presence, competition or assumed favoring of minority groups.

It is often forgotten however, that the leaders of such groups and parties, and those who persuasively formulate and propagate their ideologies, are usually academics, politicians or other elites, as was typically the case with Enoch Powell in Great Britain, and Doctor Goebbels before him. In other words, the political, media and academic elites primarily search for intolerance, prejudice and discrimination elsewhere, and least among their own ranks.

The history of western racism, research about the daily experiences of minority groups, as well as my own work, strongly suggest that the more serious, while more consequential, forms of racism are those engaged in by the elites:

It is well-known that European colonialism, exploitation and the slave trade were routinely legitimated by philosophical, religious, economic or anthropological discourse stating or implying the inferiority of non-European peoples (Barker, 1981; Said, 1979; Todorov, 1988)

Racist laws, in the past, were after all passed by prominent politicians, enforced by the courts, legitimated by the press, and presupposed by textbooks.

The dubious tenets of racial socio-biology continue to be formulated by scholars who have prominent academic positions until today (Chase, 1975; Haghigat,1988; Khouri,1990).

The stereotypes of contemporary news reports and textbooks are similarly formulated by an intellectual elite. The denial or mitigation of racism in both the media and in much white social research is hardly based on popular sentiment (see references given above).

Decisions to curb immigration of Third World people are taken and legitimated by prominent politicians, and usually endorsed by the press. Thus, political racism continues a long tradition of political involvement in the colonization, oppression or marginalization of non-European, non-white peoples. (Lauren, 1988).

Discrimination in recruitment and promotion are part of the organizational routines that are established and maintained by a corporate elite (Fernandez,1981; Jenkins, 1986).

Research repeatedly shows that black students' qualifications tend to underestimated by white teachers and professors (Essed,1991).

And so on.

In other words, despite a possibly more tolerant public image, which they carefully manage themselves, the realities of everyday racism unambiguously show that the elites are heavily involved in its reproduction, and more effectively so than a bigoted neighbor or aggressive soccer hooligans.

In many respects, thus, the elites are able to transfer racism to other groups in society by preformulating the elements of a discourse that may be taken up by segments of the public at large in a more blatant form.

When ex-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher referred to immigrants as “swamping” the country, and when Enoch Powell threatened with “rivers of blood” ensuing from ethnic conflict, the message to ordinary British people was hardly ambiguous.

Similarly, as we shall examine further below, when the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Mr. Lubbers, concludes after ten years of failing minority policies, that now the minority groups should take “their own responsibility” and “get out and more actively seek education and jobs”, such talk is correctly interpreted by ordinary people as confirming their common prejudices about “lazy” blacks or other minorities. Given the social norms, and hence the taboo to even denounce racism, it is not surprising that protests by the few anti-racist politicians in parliament against this form of barely disguised stereotyping, were furiously rejected as an insult against his integrity.

In the same way, critical analyses of the coverage of ethnic affairs in the press, are either fully ignored in that same press or heavily attacked, and thus marginalized by the very journalists who are engaged in such practices.

Thus, precisely because most elites have a self-image of liberal tolerance and broad-mindedness, any analysis of their ethnic attitudes and activities is resolutely delegitimized and marginalized. Such research will therefore not be covered in the press. And its chances of being funded in the first place are noticeably smaller than research about ethnic minorities that confirms prevailing stereotypes, e.g., about cultural problems of Muslim girls, criminal gang behavior of North Africans, or the drugs problems of black young men. These topics of research do get extensive coverage in the press, and hence are taken up again in political discourse and decision making, thus closing the circle of elite discourse. It is for that reason that unemployed young Moroccan boys in Amsterdam are systematically criminalized, instead of the Dutch employers most of whom even openly declare to prefer to employ white Dutch people.

Parliamentary Discourse

To further illustrate these points, let us finally examine the political discourse of the very top, namely the recent debates about immigration, refugees, and ethnic affairs in the parliaments of the Netherlands, the UK, Germany, France, as well as in the Congress of the United States. For

the book on elite discourse and racism I am now working on, I thus analyzed thousands of pages of parliamentary transcript and congressional records, in order to capture the official versions of public political discourse on race and immigration.

Note that such discourses, although spoken, are seldom spontaneous. Rather, most of the time they are carefully prepared, written statements, being read (or later inserted) for the record. We may expect that contents and style of such discourse are heavily monitored, both morally and politically, in order to avoid accusations of bias or racism by minority groups or by anti-racist white elites.

At the same time, however, most white politicians (and the representatives in most houses of parliament in Europe are virtually all white), also represent white voters, and presume —as we have seen— widespread popular resentment against further immigration or against improvements of the position of minorities, such as measures of affirmative action. How, then, do prominent politicians discursively deal with this conflict and how does their public talk thus contribute to the reproduction of the ethnic status quo?

Positive self-presentation

Parliaments or national assemblies are among the preferred places for nationalist rhetoric. In debates about immigration or ethnic policies, however, such rhetoric takes special features. What is at stake here is not just party or power politics, but moral values, fundamental democratic principles, and international prestige.

Limitation of the rights of immigrants or minority groups may be seen as an infraction upon such principles and values, and it is therefore crucial that politicians who favor such restrictions, or who oppose improvements in the situation of immigrants and minorities, should make it very clear that such policies are not inconsistent with their democratic or moral values. At the same time, those who do favor improvement of the situation and the rights of immigrants or minorities, may well appeal to the same values. Let us hear how politicians in several countries formulate such appeals to ideals:

(The Netherlands). Our party agrees that refugee policy should be developed in the perspective of a policy that promotes human rights and combats poverty, hunger and violence in the world. We support the international agreements regarding refugee policies..

(The United Kingdom). We in England are a gentle, kind, tolerant and peace-loving people. We have already absorbed large numbers of newcomers.

(France). Our country has long time been open to foreigners, and has a tradition of hospitality going back, beyond the Revolution, to the Ancien Régime.

(France). The French republic has, since its proclamation, affirmed its principles of hospitality and tolerance. Consequently, it prohibits and condemns, in all the territories where it has authority, racism, antisemitism and xenophobia.

(Germany). I know no other country on this earth that gives more prominence to the rights of resident foreigners as does this bill in our country.

(USA). (Mr. Engel). (...) It is very important for us today to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1990 and to show our commitment to civil rights and human rights for every one around the world, in Iraq, in Kuwait, in the Middle East, and right here at home in the United States of America.

(USA). (Mr. Foley). This is a nation whose values and traditions now excite the world, as we all know. I think we all have a deep pride in American views, American ideals, American government, American principles, which excite hundreds of millions of people around the world who struggle for freedom.

The denial of racism

In discourse about ethnic affairs, positive self-presentation may not be powerful enough to dispel doubts about the moral principles of speakers. Therefore, whether in everyday talk, in the press or in parliament, speakers have recourse to the fundamental strategy of denying intolerance and racism: "I am not a racist, but..."

It is however striking that such disclaimers are virtually only made by those who precisely do want to limit the rights of minorities or immigrants. Again, let us hear a few of such "honorable" speakers:

(The Netherlands) (Lubbers, the Dutch Prime Minister). It is intolerable that in the Netherlands racism would be able to become rampant.

(UK). I hope that people outside, whether they are black or white and wherever they come from, will recognize that these are not major changes resulting from prejudice.

(UK). My hon. Friend and I will continue to apply a strict but fair system of control, not because we are prejudiced or inhumane, but...

(France). France, which has shown the world the road to democracy and to human rights, France land of welcome and asylum, France present on five continents, could not yield to racial hate.

(France). (Le Pen) We are neither racist nor xenophobic. Our aim is only that, quite naturally, there be a hierarchy, because we are dealing with France, and France is the country of the French.

(Germany). A chill ran down my back when our colleague Mrs. Trenz said that this bill was a form of institutionalized racism. Whereas the older ones among us had to live twelve years under institutionalized racism, Ladies and Gentlemen, I beg you, and in particular our younger colleagues, to show respect for these terrible experiences, and not to introduce such concepts into our everyday political business.

(USA). Well, now can we also agree this afternoon that you can have different philosophies about how to achieve through law civil rights and equal opportunities for everybody without somehow being anti-civil-rights or being a racist or something like that.

Fairness & balance

Another keyword in parliamentary discussions is fairness. Immigration may be restricted, special conditions placed upon entry, or affirmative action policies rejected or watered down, but whatever the impact of such policies upon immigrants and minorities, they are always presented as fair.

This fairness implies a balance between rights and duties, between the interests of the original population and the newcomers, between the majority and the minority, between employers and unemployed discriminated minorities, between what other countries should do, and what we can do.

(UK). I believe that we are a wonderfully fair country. We stick to the rules unlike some foreign Governments.

(UK). It is fair to establish visa controls as long as there is mutual agreement about them between the countries involved. They are the best way to control immigration fairly...

(UK). If we are to work seriously for harmony, non-discrimination and equality of opportunity in our cities, that has to be accompanied by firm and fair immigration control.

(UK). It belongs to this fair balance of interests that the further immigration of foreigners must be limited, because for each society there are limits to the ability and the readiness to integrate.

(USA). (Mr. Moorhead): Mr. Chairman, this substitute offers the House of Representatives an opportunity to enact a landmark civil rights bill that is both fair and pragmatic.

(USA). It is neither fair nor sensible to give the employers of our country a difficult choice between using quotas and seeking a clarification of the law through costly and risky litigation.

This emphasis on fairness is often related to claims of realism or pragmatism. While beautiful principles and high morals are fine, we should also be realistic, which invariably means that “they” can not have all the things we would like to give them. Thus, realism itself is emphasized as an important political, social or economic value here, and a necessary correction of the ‘idealists’, or those (as one German speaker says) “who want to let everybody in”. In other words, we should be both fair and firm.

For their own good...

An interesting variant of the fairness move, is the one that argues that restrictions of immigration or minority rights are not only good for “us”, which would be a selfish argument indeed, but that it is rather for their own good. This apparent altruism often appears in everyday conversations, but is frequently pre-formulated by the elites:

(UK). Surely common sense says that there must be strict immigration controls, in the interests not only of the indigenous population but of immigrants.

Particularly persuasive is the argumentative move that pleads for immigration restrictions because it would favor the resident minorities, or because it would prevent further resentment and discrimination against them. The same is true for the frequent rejection of affirmative action policies because these would first of all be bad for minorities themselves. These arguments have the nice ring of concern for minorities, while at the same time showing concern for the interests of the majority. Such moves are particularly common in Dutch and other European parliaments, as well as in official talks of cabinet members or other high officials at other occasions:

(The Netherlands, Minister of Foreign Affairs). The government is confronted with a Dutch society which reacts divisively to the increasing number of asylum applications. (Some people want a liberal admission policy). On the other hand, there are more or less latent movements who consider the influx of aliens as a threat for Dutch society.

(The Netherlands, Official of the Ministry of Social Affairs). This again may lead to stigmatization. All qualified foreign employees get a label saying that they only got the job because they belong to a minority group.

(UK). Those who do not qualify avoid the disappointment, expense and inconvenience of being refused entry after their journey here.

(UK). If we are to work seriously for harmony, non-discrimination and equality of opportunity in our cities, that has to be accompanied by firm and fair immigration control.

(UK). They believe that the job market would be unable to sustain it, and that several balances of social life, in the large urban agglomeration, could be broken or, at least, degraded.

(UK). (...) An uncontrolled increase of foreigners from non-European cultural backgrounds would further exacerbate the integration of non-European citizens, which is already difficult enough.

(USA). This nonsense about quotas has to stop because when we begin to hire and promote people on the basis of their race, we are going to bring to our society feelings of distress, feelings of unhappiness, and these emotions will accumulate and ultimately explode and destroy us. (Follows an example about state child care in the USSR).

(USA). Any honest liberal would have to admit that affirmative action has been a dismal failure. (...) Instead of advancing the cause of blacks, affirmative action has hurt the cause of blacks. Why? Because racial preference implies inferiority. And this implied inferiority actually aggravates the white racism affirmative action was designed to eradicate. That is why there has been an increase in racial incidents, for instance on college campuses, around the country. Affirmative action also produces self-doubts in the minds of black people (...).

In other words, the rhetoric of legislation requires a strategy of legitimation. There are moral values and democratic principles, there is tolerance and there are rights to be respected, but there are also many white voters, business corporations and other vital interests. The latter are seldom made explicit, but are formulated indirectly or in general terms: "It is good for this nation...". Thus, the fundamental ideological principle of disguising conflicts of interests between "us" and "them" becomes one of the ways the ethnic consensus is political managed and legitimated.

Negative other-presentation

In this series of strategies of political discourse we finally encounter the core of dominant group cognition and discourse: negative other-presentation or even explicit derogation. The "others", for whatever reason, are no good, a threat, or at least a big problem. This is the content that follows the inevitable but in the nice sounding disclaimers. Since official, public discourse is involved, such negative other-presentation may be highly subtle, indirect or veiled. Explicit derogation

virtually only appears in the words of the extreme right, which is usually placed outside of the consensus. Indeed, the more democratic forces in parliament can make a good showby protesting against statements like:

(UK). (...) one in three children born in London today is of ethnic origin (...). That is a frightening concept for the country to come to terms with. We have already seen the problems of massive Moslem immigration (...) unless we want to create major problems in the decades or the century ahead, we must not only stop immigration but must move to voluntary resettlement to reduce the immigrant population.

(France). Integrating immigrants in a regularized situation will not make them French, but means that we make place for those who want to conserve their own identity, their culture and their customs. Mister Minister, integrating immigrants is creating a multicultural society (...). We don't want anything to do with such a multicultural society, for that would be the end of the unity of France, that would be the end of civil peace.

The discourses of the moderates are more veiled, and sometimes extraordinarily sophisticated. Their implications and upshot, however, may not be very different, namely to stop immigration, to prevent affirmative action, or to deny racism or the need for serious improvements of the position of minorities. All in the interests of 'our nation', 'our group', 'our interests', 'our voters', and of course our privileges and dominance.

Last year, the Dutch Prime Minister, Mr. Ruud Lubbers, in a notorious radio interview, announced changes in his government minority policies. Extant policies have failed, he claims, because minorities have been "pampered" too much. This well-known ideological argument, also voiced by a broad spectrum of media and political groups, including the social democrats, buttresses the no-nonsense policies of the last Center-Right government. Thus, Lubbers claims, minorities not only have rights, they also have duties.

Further echoing common sense prejudices and stereotypes he also implies that many of the immigrants only come to the Netherlands because of the free welfare handouts they expect to get. Henceforth, good minority policy should be 'tough' –of course 'for their own good'. Only in this way are we able to prevent discrimination and resentment by the majority:

In practice, we should come to opportunities and possibilities for them, but in practice we should also come to a less soft approach. There should be a line like: we also hold them responsible (literally: "we address them"). (...) But minority policy as care-policy, minority policy as prevention of discrimination, as only offering things, is insufficient. Minority policy begins by

taking each other totally serious, in rights, and those who live here have the right to the same rights, but those who live here also have the same obligation to fulfill their duties. (...) Well-meaning policies in favor of minorities will have reverse effects, therefore we should have a mature approach. (...) They said: you work to gain your bread, and if you can get bread from somebody else, then you need not work. That is obviously the meaning of Dutch society. (...) because people think that because you have this color you are unable to do something, and we have to conquer this together, but the starting point has to be: On with the job!

Thus, failing economic and minority policies, and one of the highest unemployment figures among minorities in the western world (in excess of 40% on average for most minority groups, but running up to 60% and higher for young blacks), are blamed to the victims, to the 'passive' attitudes of black people, and their reluctance to get a better education and to take a job.

Such elite rhetoric, which also addresses broad common sense resentments against "foreigners" in the Netherlands, primarily conceals that the Dutch government so far did not even consider legislation or regulations that would put pressure on, let alone force, employers to hire more minorities. With business only "gentleman's agreements" are made about such issues, agreements that ask employers to 'try' to hire more minorities. Any form of affirmative action, quota and even monitoring is being rejected. After all, moral values are involved, and according to Dutch moral politics, attitudes have to change voluntarily and not because of law or force. Economic *laissez faire* is thus coupled with moral *laissez faire*.

Conclusions

I have argued that ethnic prejudice and racism, and hence white group dominance, require a reproduction mechanism that involves discourse and communication. From the socializing talk of white parents, and with white peers, from children books, textbooks and television programs in their youths, to the press, and conversations with friends and colleagues, when they are adults, white group members are daily confronted with persuasive talk about "us" and "them".

Overall, such text and talk, either subtly or more blatantly, employs a double strategy of positive self-presentation and more or less negative other- presentation, thus legitimating white group prominence and dominance.

Virtually all of the influential discourse in our societies are conceived, produced and distributed by various elite groups. We have seen that the politicians, in or out of parliament, begin by defining the “problems” of immigration, of “true” or “economic” refugees”, and of “unacceptable quota” in policies of ethnic and racial compensation and redress.

This discourse, however, becomes public and legitimate only when the media report and support its main messages, which they do. Textbooks and scholarly research may further add the educational and professional dimensions to these forms of public discourse about race.

The public at large is thus confronted with a powerful and ubiquitous message telling them

that “we” are a tolerant country, in which there is no place for discrimination and racism (and therefore, they do not exist, and those who say so are the real racists),

that minorities and immigrants are dealt with fairly, but firmly, for their (and our) own good,

and that we should be realistic in trying to realize equal rights, because after all there are natural limitations such as economic necessities, as well as the well-known deficiencies of the minorities themselves (in language, learning, religion [Islam!], adaptation, motivation, modernism, culture, etc.).

Although this dominant elite discourse and ideology may occasionally be challenged by a few soft-hearted liberals, loony leftists and “hare-brained” anti-racists, and although some uneasiness may remain about the real ethnic situation (such as poverty and high unemployment among minorities), it is this message that reaches and persuasively affects the attitudes of the white population at large. It is in this way that the ethnic consensus in white societies is manufactured by the elites.

Its sometimes subtle preformulation may then be expanded and be made explicit by the sometimes more forceful and mundane talk and practices of everyday racism in our societies.

I am convinced that both popular and elite racism will only be definitely eradicated when the white elites fundamentally change their ethnic ideologies, discourse and practices, in an anti-racist perspective. Critical discourse and argumentation studies of present discourse on ethnic and racial affairs, may be one the ways to contribute to such change.

On a more positive note we may therefore end by saying that the white elites are not only primarily involved in the reproduction of racism, together with the leading elites of minority groups, they often are also a major force in the reproduction of anti-racism.

Biographical note

Teun A. van Dijk is professor of discourse studies at the University of Amsterdam. After earlier work in literary studies, text grammar and the psychology of text comprehension, his research in the 1980s focused on the study of news in the press and the reproduction of racism through various types of discourse. He is specifically interested in the relations between various discourse structures and ideologies and other the social cognitions (mental representations) about 'other' (mainly Third World) groups and peoples, including minorities, refugees and (other) immigrants in North- western countries. His present research focuses on the role of (white) elites in the reproduction of racism in society and on the relations between power, discourse and ideology more in general. In each of these domains, he published several books. He is founder-editor of the international journals TEXT, and *Discourse & Society*, and editor of the *Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (4 vols. 1985).

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