REFUGEE REPRESENTATIONS ACROSS EUROPEAN MEDIA: DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF IMMIGRATION

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Abstract

The present article analyses the ways migration and migrants, including refugees, are represented in the media in several European countries like Great Britain, France or Spain which, along their history, have often had to cope with multiple issues related to migration. These countries are considered to make up the group of 'old countries' confronting migration, whereas Central and Eastern European countries are referred to as 'newer countries' of both emigration and immigration. The analysis is carried out from a comparative perspective and the focus is placed mainly on the migration constructions established by the public political and media discourses on migration and various types of migrants. The method adopted by this paper is the discursive practice approach which allows a critical examination of the discourse on migration and migrants with a view to highlighting its specific features, but also the recurrent negative terminology and images used by this/these discourse(s).

Introduction

In the last ten years, European migration has been characterised by a permanent rising trend and it attained a climactic point with the ongoing Syrian refugees' crisis. Given the complexity of the

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problems it poses to the European countries, the phenomenon of migration has caused heated debates among theoreticians, academics, politicians and journalists around the world, who have returned to it with renewed interest. Public political and media discourses have also transformed migration into a topical issue, mainly because of the recent unprecedented and dramatic evolution of this phenomenon.

Many of the scholars dedicating their studies to issues related to migration have focused on establishing its main trends in Europe. These trends are the following: 1) the number of people from around the world coming to EU member states has constantly increased; 2) people moving from one EU member state to another ('intra-EU migration') have also been on the increase, from the year 2000 onwards and especially after 2004; 3) new migration categories, new systems and new policies have emerged in order to find better ways of coping with the newer, ever changing social realities generated by migration (Triandafyllidou, Gropas and Vogel 2014: 1). Thus, in parallel with these new trends and public policies accompanying them, public discourses have proliferated around the issues raised by migration. The present article places emphasis on the terminology and the discursive constructions of migration and migrants with special reference to the category of refugees, underlining the hostile and reproving attitude behind the written or spoken words used throughout different European media.

I. Migration and migrants – defining the concepts

Media reports on migration make use of various terms such as 'migrants', 'immigrants', 'asylum seekers', 'illegal asylum seekers' and 'refugees' to refer to the various aspects of this social phenomenon and the various categories of migrants. Specialists have remarked that often the terms 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' are used interchangeably in media or political discourse, although, as it

clearly results from international legislation, the two concepts have different meanings. They 'have become routinely devalued as deviant' (Pickering 2001: 172), despite their denoting a dramatic reality of enforced uprooting.

According to Article 1 of the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a 'refugee' is a person who 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it' (Santoro 2012: 2). An 'asylum seeker', instead, is 'a person who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum in another country but whose application has not yet been concluded' (Refugee Council Website 2016). One possible explanation for the undifferentiated use of the two notions has been offered by the literature in the field according to which the replacement of the term 'refugee' with 'asylum seeker' is purposefully done so as to diminish the legal rights that refugees have according to the 1951 Convention. Tony Kushner argues that 'the strategy that most Western receiving societies have adopted to oppose the entry of the refugees has been to reclassify them as something else' and use a linguistic instrument to justify the control 'the scale of the influxes' (2003: 264-265).

Keeping in mind this ambiguity in the use of the two terms, specialists in the field (Venir 2015, Marfleet 2006) consider that the dominant discourse on migrants, referred to as either 'asylum seekers' or 'refugees', has been predominantly negative since the 1990s. Other studies (Guedes and Harindranath in Allan 2005: 282; Malloch and Stanley 2005) prove that the media discourse on refugees presents them as elements of threat and risk. Along the same lines, recent studies insist on the fact that a specific feature of

public discourses on immigration is 'the framing of immigrants and asylum seekers as a threat (to everything from local to national security to the welfare state or to gender equality)' and that these 'securitizing discourses are also capable of incorporating new elements, such as the emphasis, in the context of financial crisis and recession, on the social and economic cost of immigration' (Luhman and Vuoristo 2015). In this way, the public discourse on refugees and asylum seekers is marked by hostility and rejection, reflecting, in fact, the attitude taken by the public authorities towards refugees, with a huge impact on the public opinion in general.

II. Discursive constructions of immigrants and refugees in Great Britain, France

The overview of several articles of the printed press in various EU states reveals the fact that the discursive constructions of refugees across European media present them in terms of 'needy', 'threat' and 'burden'. The analysis of these discourses becomes all the more important since they influence and shape attitudes towards refugees and the social policies which are meant to guide and support them to resettle and integrate into the host country.

Perhaps one of the most violent critical stances towards migrants, be they immigrants, refugees or asylum seekers, is to be found in the British press. Examples of different ways of reporting about migrants in the British media show, more often than not, that references have been made to 'refugees', 'asylum seekers' and 'immigrants' without a clear terminological distinction between these terms. At the same time, there has not been any emphasis on the idea that refugees are persons who are forced to leave their native countries and that they have to endure hardships and need help. One of the first remarks to be made about the press articles in Britain is that they refer to great numbers when they report about immigrants and refugees. The printed press often uses numerical references like

'thousands' and 'hundreds' when talking about refugees, a fact which is not backed up by statistical data. The Ipsos Mori Index 2011 (Santoro 2012: 4) shows that the public in Britain overestimates the number of refugees as a consequence of the media reports considering migration as the second important issue (following economy) which affects their life today. Syrian refugees are attached the same numerical determiner 'hundreds': 'The UK is to open its doors to hundreds of Syrians. What part of "*there are not enough jobs/schools/homes/places/hospitals beds*", do the politicians not understand? (*The Sun*, January 31, 2014 in Venir 2015: 13). Once again, the association of refugees with the idea of economic insufficiency and that of 'burden' can be easily drawn from the context. Along the same lines, it can be added that the Ipsos Mori Index shows that, according to statistical data, 48% of the citizens believe that immigration affects cultural life in a negative way (Santoro 2012: 4).

Another remark to be made is that the language used to report about immigrants and refugees is often intended to induce the idea of some dangerous event threatening the well-being of British citizens. Water metaphors and other imagery that highlights the great number of unwanted people 'invading' the country are often present in various depictions of migration and refugees. The most common are 'flood', 'river' , 'tide', 'wave' of refugees, which, added to expressions like 'swarms' or 'hordes' of refugees (Gabrielotas and Baker 2008: 22), create the picture of some catastrophic events of apocalyptic proportions since these metaphors may so easily act like reminders of the biblical flood or plagues (of Egypt!). Suffice it to look at some samples of British articles that, back in 2013, were spreading concerning news about the Romanians who, according to them, were about to 'flood' Great Britain. 'Thousands of Bulgarians and Romanians plan to flood UK in 2014…' (Mail Online, 27 Jan 2013); 'An Immigration Calamity Looms' (Express UK, 16 February 2013) are only two of the frightening headlines announcing an

invasion that never took place in 2014 anyway. Comparing the discursive constructions of Syrian refugees with those of other immigrants, it may be stated that the overall impression is one of hostility and rejection which leaves no room for compassion or other more indulgent attitudes towards immigrants of any nationality.

In France, the discourses on immigrants and refugees include in their turn negative evaluations and have to be often interpreted and understood against the country's colonial past. 'Securitization' – a process by which immigrants are presented and treated as an economic and security threat – is one of the key features of political and media discourses on immigration in France (Luhman and Vuoristo 2015). French authorities have established a set of securitizing measures such as "the establishment of an obligatory contract of integration, the reinforcement of citizen surveillance, and increased criminalization of illegal immigration" (Luhman and Vuoristo 2015). A media report from 2011 points out the fact that the French media coverage of immigration is marked by many stereotypes focusing on the *banlieues* (outskirts of the city) and on poverty and unemployment which are obviously associated with immigrants (Chareton and La Porte 2011: 7).

In Spain, media discourses on immigration often concentrate on the topic of health with the media translating popular preconceptions about the immigrants' unhealthy habits. Immigrants are viewed as carriers of *muchas enfermedades* (many illnesses) ever since the 1980s and the association of immigrants with contagious illnesses continues to be prioritised even in the 21st century (Banon, Requena and Gonzalez 2013: 117). The authors previously mentioned state that, many times, discourses around immigration contain negative connections and evaluations. Examples of headlines from the Spanish press are very suggestive: 'Immigrant people are the major group at risk of getting tuberculosis' – *La Voz de Almeria*, 4 April 2002; 'Maximize the cleaning of the rest areas in the motorways frequently used by Maghribian people' – *La Verdad*, 19 August 2002

(Banon, Requena and Gonzalez 2013: 117-118). In concordance with the media discourse, the political discourse sends clear messages that immigrants cannot receive health care because they have not contributed to the system by paying the usual taxes and as such the state cannot sustain them economically.

If Great Britain, France and Spain make up the group of the so-called 'older countries of immigration' (i.e. countries that have gained experience in this domain and have established well documented social policies), other countries like Lithuania are referred to as 'newer countries' of immigration. Lithuania has been confronted with bigger immigration issues since 2004, the year of its joining of the EU. Luhman and Vuoristo (2015) state that the public discourses on immigration are, in general, marked by a negative opinion and 'strong emotions' around the subject of economic migrants. Klementjeviene, in an article on immigration in Lithuania, shows that the largest number of immigrants comes from Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, and more recently from Turkey and China (2010: 1). The author distinguishes between three categories of immigrants which are treated differently by the media. In this sense, a first group of immigrants coming from other EU countries are positively represented in the media, are well received and their integration takes place in an almost automatic manner. Immigrants that form a second category are those coming from Ukraine and Belarus and the discursive constructions around them are rather neutral; they are neither utterly rejected, nor absolutely welcome. The third category of immigrants, considered by the media to be the most 'exotic' and problematic group are third-country immigrants. The discourse around them is full of 'stereotypes' and they are treated in a 'mistrustful' and 'openly fearful manner' (Klementjeviene 2010: 6). Some of the negative headlines using 'a frightening rhetoric' are: 'Flood of Migrants', 'Immigration – a Time Bomb', 'Lithuanians Become a Minority' (Klementjeviene 2010: 7).

Conclusions

The role played by the media in the public sphere is definitely a very complex one since their impact on public opinion is so great. At the same time, politicians and public authorities have often used the media as a publicity and legitimizing instrument for their programs and policies and this is also valid for issues related to migration and immigrants. European media, especially the British one, have manifested a negative attitude towards immigrants, their discursive representations having been constructed, on many occasions, around negative metaphors and images. Although it may be argued that hostility, mistrust and fear mark most of the European media discourses on immigrants, it can also be stated that some of the printed journals in EU countries, even in Great Britain, have slowly integrated more positive and compassionate views towards immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. This change of perspective has taken place as a consequence of the increase of the number of migrants in Europe and to Europe and of the Syrian refugees' crisis that continues to be a topical issue in the media. The present article analyses mostly negative discursive constructions of immigrants since it is based on the assumption that hostility and lack of compassion are still prevailing attitudes adopted by the European media and that these attitudes have to be replaced in a more obvious and vigorous manner in order to become the rule.

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