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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Social sadism and the migrant safari

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Abstract This paper considers the social sadism that informs the mediated discourse on migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in the UK media and public sphere. It will ask whether psychoanalysis has any additional insights to offer in relation to the xenophobic structure of feeling pervasive in media discussions of migration. Through a consideration of examples taken from UK broadcast news, it considers instances of splitting and projective identification in representations of the figure of the migrant, offered as a type of spectacle. In addition, the paper reviews relations of complicity between media, politicians and audiences as an example of perversion, in psychoanalytic terms.

Keywords Migration · Mediation · Projective identification · Hostile environment · Perversion

Introduction

As Aeron Davis argues, 'Like in the 1930s, nationalism is on the rise with populist leaders aggressively challenging other nations, putting up trade barriers and demonizing immigrants and minorities' (2019, p. 200). The purpose of this paper is to consider the structure of feeling (Williams, 1977) that emerges under such conditions in the context of the UK 'hostile environment' for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Often xenophobic sentiment expressed towards migrants in the public sphere is linked to certain political trends, as analysed in Davis's work, and in media scholarship, to misinformation (Tumber & Waisbord's (2021) edited collection includes several chapters bearing on migration).

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Migration is increasingly a mediated phenomenon, whether this be from the perspective of the migrant, those with whom they come into contact in their journey, or through the reactions of states and publics in print, broadcast and social media. As Radha Hegde points out:

> The media frame the very manner in which the contemporary realities of migration are articulated and publicized. … Issues about immigration and borders explode in transnational media space even as they are sensationalized in new echo chambers of convergent media. (2016, p. 2)

In this article, I will argue that existing accounts of mediated xenophobic sentiment fail to account entirely for the psychic and social phenomena involved in anti-migrant communication if they restrict themselves to attention to certain political styles (for example, 'populism') or in relation to misinformation of various types. Here, psychoanalysis can play a role in identifying psychosocial mechanisms that contribute to hostile environments in the UK and elsewhere. After a brief survey of some prominent examples of mediated xenophobia from the UK broadcast media, I consider some frameworks from psychoanalysis—and applications that have been made of the latter in relation to migration. This will allow us to evaluate the gains that an attention to psychic processes can provide in accounting for public perceptions and media representations on migration and related phenomena.

Social sadism

In an article from 2015, China Miéville identifies what he diagnoses as a widespread 'social sadism' at work in contemporary capitalist societies: 'deliberate, invested, public or at least semi-public cruelty' (2015, p. 19). Such sadism involves expressing negative sentiment towards marginalised people in a way that appears to relish the cruelty at work in scapegoating, victim-blaming and what we might term 'punching down'. Such bullying behaviour, according to Miéville, is designed to invite complicity on the part of audiences, in order to normalise such sentiments and encourage their legitimation (2015, pp. 45–46). Migrants are one of many such subordinated groups listed in Miéville's article.

Instances of anti-migrant social sadism are not hard to find in the UK media—and in broadcast or print interventions by politicians happy to express xenophobic reactions towards asylum seekers and refugees. Before citing some examples, we might point to the very notion of the 'hostile environment' issued in by Theresa May as UK home secretary. As Maya Goodfellow highlights:

> when Theresa May unveiled her flagship immigration package as home secretary, she didn't even attempt to hide its cruelty. She flaunted it. The aim was to create a 'really hostile environment for illegal immigrants,' she boasted. The plan was to make their lives unbearable. (2019, p. 2)

The hostile environment on one level is a product of a stubborn myth cherished by politicians and the media of irresistible 'pull factors' that draw migrants to the UK as a favoured destination. Making the UK an unwelcoming place for migrants is

proposed as a strategy to reduce the numbers hoping to settle or seek asylum in the country. Many experts have denied in fact that 'pull factors' are a decisive influence on the decision of migrants to select the UK as the destination of their journey (Yeo, 2020, pp. 127–129). Motives for selecting the UK chiefly involve having relations living there, or facility in the English language, for instance; there is also the legacy of colonialism in migrant journeys from countries formerly part of the British Empire.

It is worth pointing out that the hostile environment does not reflect broad swathes of UK public opinion. The World Values Survey (Duffy et al., 2023) found that only 31% of the public thought that there should be strict limits to or prohibition for inward migration to the UK. This is consonant with Hein de Haas's recent review of research from Oxford University's Migration Observatory, and survey findings from Ipsos MORI and the European Social Survey, all indicating that attitudes towards migration among the UK public have grown more favourable in recent years (de Haas, 2023, p. 282), even if opinion is nuanced and ambivalent at times. One would not guess this from political discourse from the previous or current governments. Evidence from the Migration Observatory (Richards et al., 2023) is admittedly more lukewarm, with 52% of the public stating that immigration should be reduced; however, even in this poll, only 32% were willing to assert that migration was bad or very bad for Britain—and attitudes had softened in recent years (despite the unabated hostility from politicians and the media, which might be supposed to have influenced public perceptions).

Quite apart from its representability in terms of public attitudes, it is also possible to construe the hostile environment as performing a certain 'surplus sadism' along the lines outlined by Miéville. The naming of an affective ('hostile') relationship as well as its field of operation (the refugee or migrant's receiving 'environment') in Theresa May's coinage, encourages this interpretation. Rather than reluctantly embracing its role to demonstrate hostility and cruelty to vulnerable migrants, one might see media, politicians and civil servants potentially coming to relish the expression of such sentiments, or at the least to perform this abject social function willingly. This is why we might invoke Raymond Williams's (1977) conception of a 'structure of feeling' to account for the hostile environment, since such structures are emergent, immediate and *affective* rather than presenting themselves as merely informative; and individualised rather than solidified into existing institutions (even if, as I suggest later, this might happen with time). Such emergent structures 'cannot without loss be reduced to belief-systems, institutions, or explicit general relationships, though it may include all these as lived and experienced' (Williams, 1977, p. 133).

Conceiving of social sadism towards migrants as a structure of feeling allows us to articulate individual psychology with social structures in which subjects live and develop. Maya Goodfellow's (2019) study elaborates the way in which UK migration law, from the Aliens Act 1905 (p. 54) to the present day, has effectively been enacted in order to reduce certain categories of migration into the country, stratified along the lines of race and class: 'By 1952, both Tory and Labour governments had implemented clandestine processes to keep out people of colour' (p. 56).We can see Enoch Powell's notorious 'Rivers of Blood' speech and the

hostile environment (not to mention the Rwanda plan) as just some of the most salient publicly mediated projects that might foster individual feelings of antipathy or hostility. Apparently individual, affective (rather than reflective or considered) responses to migration along the lines of 'sadism' or aggression might arise in an environment in which xenophobic sentiments form part of the background noise. Further, it is my contention that psychoanalytic concepts in particular can help us to elaborate some of the mechanisms that might drive such a structure of feeling as it manifests in this intersection between individual development and wider social structures.

Migrant safari

The media texts that I wish to consider are taken from the 'hybrid media system' outlined by Andrew Chadwick, highlighting the 'asymmetrical interdependence between older and newer media logics' (2013, p. 209). That is, although media convergence means that legacy and new media are circulated on digital devices and platforms, nonetheless, influential media organisations retain their gatekeeping function in a way that allows their agenda-setting power to persist. This accounts both for broadcast media often following the lead of newspaper editorials; and for the dominance of clips from broadcast news in social media interactions with current affairs.

In order to find evidence of the UK media's anti-migrant sadism, one would not need to look far; and one might find examples going back 'decades' (UN News, 2015). Perhaps the most abject example would be the notorious article by Katie Hopkins in *The Sun*, where she opined: 'Show me pictures of coffins, show me bodies floating in water, play violins and show me skinny people looking sad. I still don't care' (see Plunkett, 2015). However, I will restrict myself to examples from recent UK media, in particular from broadcast clips from mainstream media, circulated thereafter on platforms such as Twitter/X. In particular, I have selected examples from 2020, which came to be discussed in terms of 'migrant safaris' or 'refugee safaris' on social media platforms; as well as one related clip from 2022; restricting the selection in this way will allow for close textual reading of the clips concerned and will render the discussion more manageable. Before examining three case studies, I will mention some other recent interventions from senior UK politicians that contribute to the mediated hostile environment, just as some of the most highly visible instances of what I am discussing.

Reference should be made to the much-circulated image of then home secretary, Suella Braverman MP, visiting the construction site for asylum seeker accommodation outside Kigali as part of the government's Rwanda plan. An image of Braverman laughing like a pantomime villain was widely circulated; some argued that the cropping of those accompanying the home secretary from the photo skewed public interpretation of her expression (as gleeful anti-migrant sadism); a HuffPost article allows comparison of the cropped and uncropped version, as well as social media responses on Twitter/X (Nicholson, 2023). A charming example was provided by Lee Anderson MP, whose political trajectory has taken him from

Labour to the Conservatives, and now to Reform UK. In August 2023 while still deputy chairman of the Conservative Party, Anderson expressed his frustration at the last-minute reprieve for 20 asylum seekers destined to be housed on the prison ship, the *Bibby Stockholm*, through his assertion that the latter should 'fuck off back to France' if they did not like their new accommodation. Downing Street backed Anderson (Mason et al., 2023).

Anyone hoping for a change of tack from the new Labour government will have been disappointed with the new home secretary's 'plan to reduce net migration' (Home Office and Cooper, 2024), as well as the proposed Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, described by writers from the Migrants' Rights Network as 'just another chapter of an increasingly cruel, racist and Islamophobic trajectory in the immigration system' (Tinsley-Kent & Qureshi, 2024). This is a rapidly evolving context and it is rather early to reach a definitive judgement on the new government's policies, even if they appear to be in line with the previous few regimes so far.

The broadcast clips I wish to discuss in more detail reflect the implicit hostility outlined above, as well as an associated process of dehumanisation or outgroup projection that is its inevitable corollary. The first two as stated are examples of news items that came to be referred to as 'migrant safaris' or 'refugee safaris', featuring as they did journalists on boats following migrants crossing the English Channel on dinghies. The two clips in question were screened by the BBC on 10 August 2020 (BBC News, 2020); and by Sky News the day after (Sky News, 2020). The extracts were widely circulated on Twitter/X. Together they seemed to constitute an abject new subgenre of news item, following vulnerable migrants on dinghies from the vantage point of a secure vessel that was steered to within shouting distance so that various superficial questions could be posed to those making the crossing. The broadcasts were criticised as 'grotesque reality TV' by Labour MP Zarah Sultana (Waterson, 2020). We might also characterise them along the lines of what De Genova has termed 'journalistic "participant-observation"' (De Genova, 2002, p. 436).

The BBC item features Simon Jones reporting from the English Channel to cover a boat crossing with migrants. It was broadcast on *Breakfast*, the early morning BBC News programme on Monday 10 August 2020 (BBC News, 2020). The first outside broadcast segment is 6:35 a.m., where we see a rubber dinghy with migrants in life jackets. Jones observes the pretty calm conditions, albeit 'choppier' than the Friday before (when there was a previous broadcast). He then shouts various questions to them: 'Are you ok? Are you all right?' and 'Where are you from?', before contact is lost with the television studio. At 6:50, we return to the Channel to try again. Before addressing the migrants directly (he is within vocal distance), he observes that the sea is 'pretty choppy'; the audience can see as much as the vessel bobs up and down. After asking them again 'Are you ok? Are you all right?' the journalist asks them 'Where are you from?', to which the reply is Syria. After remarking on the visibility accorded to migrants on such crossings by their life jackets, Jones assures the audience that 'we will shadow it and see how the situation develops'. At 7:08 a.m. we return to the safari, after a studio presenter reminds us of the context: 'British and French officials will meet tomorrow to discuss stronger

measures to try to put a stop to migrants crossing the Channel.' Once more Jones reminds us that 'the sea is pretty choppy'. Now he is able to observe them 'using a plastic container to bail out the boat', which might arouse concern on the part of the audience, who can see this unfolding live, though Jones assures us that 'the boat seems to be safe', after asking them once more his three questions: 'Are you ok? Are you all right?' and 'Where are you from?' There is a sense of repetition as the reporter once more observes that the sea is 'pretty choppy'. At 7:10 we return once more to the boat as Jones, on deck with the dinghy behind him, raises the context of the government's need to 'get a grip on this issue', as well as possible disagreement with the French about turning the boats back. A return to the Dover coast at 7:28 shows a Border Force vessel sailing behind the migrant boat in the distance. Jones deems the operation to be 'coming to a conclusion'. At 8:10 we are treated to a repeat of the segment from 7:08 a.m.

The Sky News piece featured reporter Ali Fortescue, with a similar format of approaching dinghies from a boat and shouting questions. In the segment clipped on YouTube (Sky News, 2020), there are two boats encountered (though the reporter makes reference to four, which must have featured in the live broadcast). For the first, Fortescue asks, 'Where are you from?', to which the migrants respond, Sudan. 'Have you come from Calais?', 'How many?' she asks, before counting the migrants. They respond that there are 13 on the boat. 'Are you ok? You don't have life jackets,' she observes. Later in the clip she points out 'the fourth boat of migrants that we have seen so far today and I have to say, you know, it is an unsettling image'. After this, she asks those on the boat, 'Hello. You ok? Ok?', followed by 'Where are you from?', which elicits the response, Iran. After speaking to the migrants briefly, she points to the 'White Cliffs of Dover' visible behind the deck of the Sky News boat. She reassures the viewers: 'We'll stay with this boat and make sure it's safe as it comes into shore', before reiterating that although this is now 'a very familiar scene', it is nonetheless 'unsettling'.

The news broadcasts highlight the voyeuristic nature of following migrants on an unsafe journey, where the reporter's concern appears not to be the migrants' immediate safety (if this is covered, it is in terms of the reporter's own unease) but rather surveilling them and reporting back to presenters and the audience. One might add that other than the context of UK politics (and relations with France), there is little in the way of contextual discussion of reasons for the migrant journey. Since the refugees in the BBC broadcast respond that they are from Syria, this might call for further comment by the reporter on reasons why they might need to flee the country; as well as background on the relations between the UK, Syria and the USA, and the relations of Syria with Russia and Iran. Likewise, for the Sky reporting, the contexts in Sudan and Iran are not provided. The result of the superficial coverage, and the combination of surveillance and expressions of mild concern at a distance, is to dehumanise those on the boats. This is emphasised by the overwhelming impression of the broadcast segments as fulfilling the requirements of rolling news, rather than motivated by humanitarian concerns. Although not sadism per se, it seems that such segments are nonetheless made thinkable through a process of dehumanising the migrants as a context-free anonymous mass. One might wonder about the journalistic ethics of treating vulnerable migrants effectively as spectacle,

while interviewing them without consent during what must be an immensely anxiety-inducing experience.

The next example is from a BBC news item on 3 November 2022, during which the BBC Kent reporter Michael Keohan reported from Dover in advance of a scheduled visit from Suella Braverman (BBC News, 2022). His report to camera featured the controversial words: 'This will be one of the places the home secretary will come to see for herself exactly how the UK is defending itself on the frontline against migrants.' The incident followed a petrol bomb attack on a Border Force immigration centre the Sunday before. The reportage hardly needs commentary in order to establish its xenophobic import: the construal of borders as self-defence *against migrants*, with Dover as a 'frontline'. Such language reminds us of the increasing 'securitisation' of migration (Goodfellow, 2019; Yeo, 2020; Saenz Perez, 2023). Such an approach on the part of European governments construes migration as a law-and-order issue, employing agencies and military technologies to surveil national borders. We can see the dehumanisation of migrants and the normalisation of hostility and suspicion against them; as well as putting border control on a war footing. The construction of self/other, ingroup/outgroup binaries could scarcely be clearer. The journalist later defended himself along the familiar lines of merely articulating the concerns of local people (Maggs, 2022); later in the broadcast he described local residents as being 'fed up of their area being associated with the migrant *problem*' (emphasis added) in similarly uncritical terms.

The choice for including these precise clips is motivated first, through their controversial reception at the time of broadcast; second, because they are from broadcast media sources that reflect the press's xenophobic agenda on migration; and third, since they provide eminently clippable media that then circulate on other platforms such as Twitter/X. Thus, they are solid examples of the communication phenomena native to the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013, p. 215). Having looked at the media texts, we can consider some psychoanalytic concepts that might allow us to model the psychic and affective investments that might account for such media, if we posit these as facilitated by the particular sociopolitical circumstances outlined earlier as the hostile environment.

Splitting and projective identification

It is in Melanie Klein's famous article of 1946 that she outlines the infantile roots of schizoid mechanisms, including splitting and projective identification. This is part of Klein's innovations in psychoanalysis in terms of the pre-Oedipal stages in child development, with relations with the mother providing the basis for fantasy and rudimentary object relations. As is well known, she discusses the transition from an earlier paranoid position associated with feelings of persecution, to a more mature depressive position in which the splitting of the paranoid position is overcome. For the earlier phase, she argues, 'the primary anxiety of being annihilated by a destructive force within, with the ego's specific response of falling to pieces or splitting itself, may be extremely important in all schizophrenic processes' (Klein,

1946/1986, p. 180). One of Klein's purposes here is to underline that 'schizoid' mechanisms have their foundations in normal infantile functioning.

Furthermore, the splitting of the ego and its relations with the mother forms the basis for a particular form of identification 'which establishes the prototype of an aggressive object relation' (Klein, 1946/1986, p. 183). In this mechanism of projective identification, the infant identifies an object with the hated parts (or in some cases the good parts) of the self. For Wilfred Bion, this mechanism is nothing less that the origin of 'thinking' itself (1984, p. 31). In relation to the projection of bad feelings into a good breast, the modification undergone by the bad parts will allow the object to be re-introjected; this forms the basis of the idea of the container–contained relationship elaborated by Bion (1984, p. 90). However, for the xenophobe, we might conjecture that projective identification is arrested at a point prior to this, such that the bad feelings cannot be contained; instead, the aggressive feeling articulated in terms of a stark binary (self/other, ingroup/outgroup) will persist. Taken together, we can cite Diamond in order to summarise the import of these two early psychic mechanisms.

> Psychological splitting refers to the infant's response to the threat of anxiety and insecurity by dividing contrary emotional experiences (good versus bad) of the other (or primary caregiver) followed by projecting onto the other (absolute categories of) either good or bad, loving or rejecting. Psychological splitting and projection are defensive actions that enable the self, for example, to retain a positive self-image while externalising a bad image onto the other. (Diamond, 2020, p. 102)

We can find analogous mechanisms identified by Adorno and his co-researchers in their famous study of the authoritarian personality (1950). In this work, Adorno et al. utilised questionnaire responses along various scales (including antisemitism, ethnocentrism, political–economic conservatism and fascism) in order to construct personality types likely to be receptive to politics that identifies strict ingroups in antagonistic relationships to an outgroup. Interviews of 'high' scorers on the F (for fascism) scale attempted to relate their inflexible social attitudes to earlier psychosocial experiences deriving from childhood, along the lines of psychoanalytic explanations. Subjects exhibiting such attitudes were deemed to exhibit the authoritarian personality, one given to conformity, self-denial and resentment:

> The individual who has been forced to give up basic pleasures and to live under a system of rigid constraints, and who therefore feels put upon, is likely not only to seek an object upon which he can 'take it out' but also to be particularly annoyed at the idea that another person is 'getting away with something.' Thus, it may be said that the present variable represents the sadistic component of authoritarianism just as the immediately forgoing one represents its masochistic component. (Adorno et al., 1950, p. 232)

We can see in this quotation the sadistic and masochistic drives being articulated with projection into the other of repressed desires or enjoyment in the subject, which chimes well with the mechanisms present in Klein and Bion. We might insist that the sadistic component in authoritarianism is likely to be favoured in particular

social formations over other ones in order to retain a psychosocial approach to these phenomena; such a social formation might include the UK hostile environment, for instance.

One framework that has been used to account for the resentment in such subjects has been the notion of a projection of enjoyment on the part of a particular outgroup. Here we may allude to the influential discussion of Slavoj Žižek, whereby:

> We always impute to the 'other' an excessive enjoyment: he wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our way of life) and/or he has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment. In short, what really bothers us about the 'other' is the peculiar way he organizes his enjoyment. (1993, p. 203)

We might therefore supplement the types of projection alluded to earlier with this particular form of resentment in which my own enjoyment is a sort of zero-sum game, in which the other must suffer if I am to preserve my own *jouissance*. Spectacles that reduce the other to particularisms, such as identifying a common ethnicity or race, might reasonably be taken to amplify such feelings of resentment.

Žižek was himself dismissive of the notion of the authoritarian personality (1993, p. 215), as itself betraying 'left-liberal' resentment about working-class resistance to the leadership of the intelligentsia. We can see such arguments as part of Zizek's provocations against postmodern multiculturalism in the late 1990s, perhaps: a context that has now changed considerably, given the almost ubiquitous appeal to xenophobic sentiments ('legitimate concerns') across the media and public sphere by notional left-liberals (as discussed earlier in relation to the current Labour government). One reads Žižek's analysis with a wistful nostalgia for a time in which it was possible to suppose centre/centre-left parties were indeed 'liberal' in this respect, although Goodfellow (2019) reminds us of the decades-long conjuncture of cross-party anti-migration sentiment in the UK. If this is the case then we can agree with Derek Hook's advice: 'Any viable analytical reference to the notion of *jouissance* must of necessity be tied to the symbolic domain from within which it has arisen' (2018, p. 262).

Nonetheless, half a century before the spread of the 'theft of enjoyment' thesis, Adorno et al. (1950, p. 526) were able to identify that 'desires within themselves which remain unsatisfied tend to be magnified and rejected in others whom they suspect of satisfying the same desires'. This works very well of course for the figure of the migrant, refugee or asylum seeker in this resentful libidinal economy. The cruelty implicit in the attitudes of the authoritarian personality is well captured in the creed of 'no pity for the poor' (Adorno et al., 1950, p. 698) identified by the researchers, who are also keen to locate the role of propaganda (p. 726) as well as the ways in which particular cultures may facilitate such personality profiles more than others. It is tempting to argue that the hostile environment seems tailor made for the authoritarian personality in our era—or, in other terms, an ideal situation in which to persist with binary thinking along the lines of self/other, ingroup/outgroup, associated with an unmodified aggressive or sadistic projective identification. Such an interpretation chimes well with Dover being described as a 'frontline' in the 'defence' against migrants.

Although their focus is mostly on the migrant rather than the receiving community, psychoanalysts León and Rebeca Grinberg (1989) devote a book-length study to 'psychoanalytic perspectives on migration and exile'. As exiles themselves from Argentina during the Dirty War, during which psychoanalysts were themselves often targets of the military regime (Finchelstein, 2014), the Grinbergs are able to draw on therapeutic as well as personal experience of migration, asylum and exile. In relation to possible hostility from the new country's inhabitants, they say the following:

> One must allow for the possibility that the immigrant's presence in some cases will increase the paranoid anxieties of the receptor group. The newcomer may be viewed persecutingly as an intruder who is trying to deprive the locals of their inalienable rights to enjoy the fruits of their labor, their possessions and property. In extreme cases, intense xenophobic reactions with marked hostility may result. (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989, p. 83)

That the process of projective identification associated with such personality types might be resistant to coming into the subject's consciousness is highlighted by King and Noerr, who reflect in particular on the superego aspects of this character type: 'The authoritarian personality is therefore primarily characterized by a projective mingling of its own and foreign components that have almost entirely ceased to be accessible through self-reflection' (2020, p. 748).

Perverse institutions and the perverse pact

As discussed earlier, a key component of Miéville's diagnosis of contemporary social sadism is that of complicity. Here, we can bring in the concept of perversion in order to find a psychoanalytic framework that can elucidate this aspect of the mediated hostile environment; and the relation it sets up between anti-migrant communications and their audience. Though we can trace analysis of perversion back at least as far as Freud's discussions of fetishism, I will here utilise some more recent definitions that stress instead the other-obliterating nature of the perverse relation. We might allude here to Stein's definition: 'perversion often manifests itself as a disguised, often sexualized, enactment of hatred and destructiveness which is actualized within a relational structure, what I call the "perverse pact"' (2005, p. 776). Consonant with the Kleinian analyses mentioned earlier, in Stein's discussion, perversion is a mechanism to protect 'a crumbling, possibly pre-psychotic self' (2005, p. 780).

A perverse relationship is unhealthy in that it involves willing seduction on the part of the other (Johanssen, 2021, p. 90); this forms the basis of Stein's 'perverse pact' and chimes with the complicity identified by Miéville in contemporary social sadism. This crucial aspect of the relation is brought out well by André, who argues:

> Whereas the fantasy is a private matter for the neurotic, for the pervert it serves to attract an Other, either to persuade this Other that this fantasy is also

> his [*sic*], or to corrupt him in such a way that he is willing to act out the fantasy with him. (2006, p. 124)

Social sadism, as a contemporary perverse pact, seeks to recruit others in order to participate in the aggressive and hostile projection of bad feelings into the object, which for the purposes of this paper includes the migrant, refugee or asylum seeker. Media organisations and journalists can claim the 'plausible deniability' of merely reflecting or reporting on sentiment from local communities or politicians, while inviting audiences to identify with such sentiments, in relation to dehumanised others presented as aggregates of anonymous bodies on dinghies, or off screen, alluded to from the 'frontline' of the cliffs of Dover.

One can pursue this argument yet further in relation to group situations, including those of institutions. To do this, one is extrapolating from a perverse pact that involves two or three (the pervert and their other; perhaps the pervert and their accomplice in relation to another) to a wider societal formation, which might include apparatuses of the media or the state. According to Susan Long, it is possible to discuss perverse organisations that are structured along such mechanisms, as the following quote makes clear: 'This demonstrates the effects of psychological denial and splitting at a societal level. Such institutional level dynamics are carried also into non-corporatised organisations and our everyday life' (Long, 2008, p. 6). More broadly speaking, Feldner and Vighi (2018, p. 109) have described capitalism in the era of globalisation as itself an '*epoch of generalised perversion*'. The inability to provide symbolic narratives to justify an era of precarity and falling wages means that only perversion can provide a means for enforcing a pact rather than winning a consensus. In relation to our concerns here, the aspect of globalised capitalism that elicits a perverse response is the flow of bodies across borders. The institutions that internalise this logic may include media organisations that present xenophobic spectacle or content on the express ground that these will 'appeal' to their audience.

Another interesting example to bring in here would be the UK Home Office itself as an obvious candidate for a perverse organisation; so much is apparent in its aggressive and hostile attitude towards migrants (Yeo, 2020). More intriguingly yet, Daniel Trilling's (2021) article on the Home Office makes clear that the internal dynamics of the organisation—and what it demands of its employees themselves—might readily be characterised along these lines. According to this and other accounts, employees of the Home Office are under great pressure not only to reject many applications but also to present a tough appearance to the public and, most importantly, the media.

> Talk to people who have worked at the Home Office over the past 20 years and you are hit by an overwhelming feeling of defensiveness. They worry about being seen as callous or racist—'like right bloody Nazis,' as one official told me—yet this is frequently outweighed by not wanting to be seen as weak on immigration. (Trilling, 2021)

Led from the top, the Home Office appears to have internalised hostility as an institutional culture, incentivising its employees to appear anti-migrant for the

benefit of an appreciative media and those sections of the audience who are taken in by the perverse pact. In this respect the Home Office working culture also contributes to the structure of feeling that is mediated through the broadcast segments analysed in earlier sections. The 'overwhelming feeling of defensiveness' may well be derived from the psychic defences of splitting and projective identification, scaled up to the institutional level. Such is the stubbornness of this culture and the pride in wilful cruelty, that it renders the Home Office largely immune to the criticism that is frequently made by those opposing the hostile environment. Yeo argues: 'You might even say that they seem to be like Millwall football fans, singing their infamous chant: "No one likes us, we don't care!"' (2020, p. 116).

Discussion

Having adumbrated the mechanisms of splitting, projective identification and perversion, we might now consider their import for the types of media text discussed earlier in the article. Although sadism might seem like a strong word for clips of the migrant safari—perhaps tastelessness or trivialising might seem like better descriptions—nonetheless we can argue that processes of dehumanisation and a clear construal of ingroups versus outgroups are implicit in their rhetoric. The lack of individuality accorded to those on the dinghies—or those invoked as calling for a defence on the frontline—recalls the stereotypy repeatedly identified by Adorno et al. (1950) of those displaying an authoritarian personality. Furthermore, the construal of the migrants as a 'problem', an 'unsettling' sight, reflects this rigid binary thinking. The BBC Kent journalist referred unambiguously to a 'defence against migrants', construing them as a threat requiring action; his own later justification was a familiar 'legitimate concerns' defence. Such an account clearly reflects a process of splitting between good and bad objects, as well as projection of anxieties into the faceless, anonymised figure of the migrant. The latter is kept perpetually in extreme long shot—or in off-screen space. They are permitted merely to indicate whether or not they are 'ok', as well as their country of origin (the migrant safari reporters are content to assign them to but one nation per boat). Although the broadcast segments do not involve open insult, they occur in a climate in which a politician such as Anderson is permitted to tell them to 'fuck off back to France'. It is this poisonous climate that is the only context provided by journalists in the media clips reviewed above, when they report the politicians' xenophobic agendas, rather than the context of war, internal conflict and persecution that will have prompted traumatic migrant journeys. This contrasts with media coverage of these topics that explores the issues in more depth (such as Trilling, 2021).

Here we might allude to Judith Butler's assertion that:

> The public sphere is constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality and what will not. It is also a way of establishing whose lives can be marked as lives, and whose deaths will count as deaths. (2006, p. xx).

Furthermore, she notes a paradox in contemporary representations of those who are marginalised, in that under certain circumstances this representation fails in fact to humanise the object of the gaze. It is 'through the very framing by which the image is contained' (Butler, 2006, p. 148) that a certain derealisation and dehumanisation may occur, even if we can see the face of the other in its mute appeal. Such dehumanisation, I would argue, is at work in the spectacle of the migrant safari, where the apparent inclusion of migrants as a subject for concern or debate becomes construed as a menacing and anonymous mass, in the context of an environment that construes migrants as ungrievable in Butler's terms.

Moreover, such spectacle often appears to preclude further analysis of the wider contexts in which vulnerable migration occurs, through the mute banality of its apparent self-evidence. Here, we can draw on certain analyses of the spectacle of migration informed by the work of Guy Debord, as elaborated by Nicholas De Genova (2002, 2013) and Antigoni Memou (2019). As Memou explains, Debord's intention is not to note the prevalence of images in late capitalist societies per se, so much as to assert the ubiquitous mediation of social relationships via the image, concurrent with their passive acceptance as self-evident; as such, they constitute 'the opposite to dialogue' (cited in Memou, 2019, p. 90). Such reception might find reinforcement in the lack of self-reflection alleged to be a feature of the authoritarian personality (King & Noerr, 2020, p. 748). What this means for the spectacles of migrant 'visibility' discussed by De Genova implies not only this mute appeal to universal acceptance on the part of the spectator, but thereby 'the thing-like fetish of migrant "illegality" as a self-evident "fact", generated by its own supposed act of violation' (De Genova, 2013, p. 1182). The cultural work effected by the migrant safari, then, can not only dehumanise the bodies on boats along the lines theorised by Butler; but it can also constitute state performances that rehearse, repeat and validate the status of the migrants as 'illegal', bogus, or a problem that elicits the need for self-defence.

In relation to the migrant safari broadcast stories, the bewilderment that they prompt in the spectator more sympathetic towards migrants queasily evinces a sense of perversion—what could have been the motivations for running such a voyeuristic piece on the part of the commissioning editor? In the absence of direct comment from those producing the news coverage, we have to rely on the mode of address of the news items themselves. We might speculate that the pressures of rolling news perpetually to fill the airwaves with content, no matter how abject, is to blame for running such uninformative (but cheap) pieces. However, the reporting from BBC Kent invites us to entertain the stronger thesis that the UK hostile environment has been internalised as editorial commonsense. If this is the case, then the producers might envisage that dehumanising voyeurism might play well to an audience primed to project hostile attitudes towards faceless and homogenised bodies on a dinghy, even if these migrants are having to bail water out of their vessel with plastic boxes live on screen.

We might at least take solace that according to the *Radio Times*, the BBC received over 8000 complaints from viewers after their coverage from the Channel (Cremona, 2020). It is nice to see that the BBC audience does indeed include many viewers low on the F scale (Adorno et al., 1950). Findings from Duffy et al. (2023)

show that the majority of UK respondents are clearly not anti-migrant (even if they might often wish for less inward migration). As highlighted earlier, various academic and polling sources suggest that attitudes to migration in the UK are becoming more favourable (de Haas, 2023, p. 282). A non-negligible minority are unambiguously favourable towards all migrants. There is reason to argue therefore that editorial agendas are out of step with the diversity of public opinion. Clearly this is consonant with arguments from media scholars about the need for media plurality and diversity in the context of excessive concentration of ownership, as well as the agenda-setting effects of political and business interests of media owners on the public sphere (Freedman, 2014; Hardy, 2014). In the era of the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013) we can see the influence of the right-wing press on public service broadcasters, who seem in these cases impelled to reproduce the former's xenophobic agendas.

Conclusions

Invoking psychoanalytic frameworks begins to account for the pervasive sense of hostility (if not cruelty) that emerges from these media extracts and clips. One can of course relate such mediated sentiment to trends in political communication or misinformation invoked earlier; yet this does not capture the affective climate that is distinctive in these recent media texts. Attention to splitting, projective identification and perversion allows us to model the binary thinking that produces a nativist sense of self as opposed to an alien, threatening other; the projection of negative traits and behaviours in stereotypes of the 'illegal immigrant'; and the sometimes apparently cheerful collusion between media producers and a notionally xenophobic audience, in rolling news refugee safari or 'frontline' anti-migrant reporting.

Attempts to advocate for vulnerable migrants and to push back against the hostile environment for migrants would do well to bear in mind the disturbing perverse pact that is enacted between media, politicians and audiences in the perpetuation of anti-migrant discourses. There is interesting debate among scholars as to the effectiveness of debunking misinformation through fact-checking initiatives alone, in the face of motivated thinking on the part of audiences (as discussed by several contributors to Tumber & Waisbord, 2021). In relation to media specifically (as opposed to other factors that might shape opinion), we can however cite Deane's assertion that 'no purely rational response to misinformation can be expected to succeed' (2021, p. 544). Rather than just pushing back on the information content (or lack of context) provided by such representations, reflection on the affective investments involved in anti-migrant sentiment seems to be in order. The psychoanalytic concepts adumbrated earlier are an attempt to account for these affective investments in a way that arguments invoking misinformation, populism, etc. might overlook.

In relation to media specifically (as opposed to other factors that might shape opinion), a productive strategy is provided by Freedom from Torture's messaging guide on asylum (O'Hagan & Freedom from Torture, 2021). The advice provided in this document in order to support asylum seekers emphasises the need to embrace

messages that acknowledge the affective components in audiences' reactions to migrants, asylum seekers and refugees—and consequently, the limitations of 'fact-checking' approaches that aim to counter misinformation alone. The advice to emphasise positive solutions focused on 'care and compassion' over pity, to avoid references to legality but *not* to be wary of apportioning blame or alienating xenophobic opposition, implicitly acknowledge the more subjective, irrational bases of public sentiment on this issue. Such an approach is likely to be a more effective response to the perverse pact of social sadism, than fact-checking interventions that cite statistics, legal frameworks or technicalities alone. Although established media agendas might limit the exposure of audiences to such pro-migrant messages, such communications provide a necessary supplement to debunking, for those whose projective identifications are resistant to the appeals of reason alone.

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