

It is sadly ironic that the preparation of this review coincided with the announcement by Jack Straw, the Home Secretary, of a public inquiry into the racial murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1994.

Book review

Ann Clark reviews 'Racist Violence and the State' by Rob Witte (London: Longman 1996).

Witte compares the post second world war responses to racist violence in Britain, France and the Netherlands. As European nation states they are also selected on the basis of similar post war immigration histories and comparable socio-economic experiences. He identifies four phases on the path to a formal political agenda. They encompass the occasional recognition of racist violence as an individual problem, a social problem, an item on the public agenda and finally racist violence as an issue for 'active and serious state action' on the formal agenda. The model also distinguishes the 'two faced' nature of state response in terms of 'including' and 'excluding' recognitions that identify the position of potential victims relative to society.

The metaphorical use of 'them' and 'us' in the context of racist violence is elemental to the process of recognition and definition. Witte argues that it is necessary to reconstruct the history of state responses from the time when victim(s) come to be perceived as a collective 'other' set apart as 'different'. This difference

characteristically calls minority presence into question as a threat to the welfare, culture and identity of the host community. It is in turn translated into forms of racialised exclusion that extend from immigration control and welfare policy through to harassment and in its extreme form racist violence. Racially motivated violence may or may not be organised but it is recognised that perpetrators target individuals or their property because they symbolise racial or ethnic difference. Witte's reading of this history of state recognition defines racist violence as:

The (threat of) violence in which victims are 'selected' not in their capacities as individuals, but as representatives of imagined minority communities.

The ambivalence of Witte's title - Racist Violence and the State - confirms a duality in the role of the state as defender of lost nations and champion of civilised values. His conclusion is that the state as defender of the 'imagined' national community plays an integral part in the generation of racist victimisation whenever race issues are on the formal agenda. On the other hand when racist violence compromises the civilised values of the nation the formal state response is, according to Witte, 'two faced'.

The difficulty with Witte's analysis is that while all states have responded to ethnic minority presence as a 'problem' requiring a formal response, none of the governments in question have formally responded to racist violence within the terms set out. The UK data provides the clearest recognition of the link between racism and violence. Data from France and the Netherlands relies largely on unofficial and media sources. The limited statistical information provided by the Commission des Droits de L'Homme in France identifies attacks, threats and anti-Semitic behaviour, while the Institute voor Sociaal Wetenschappelijk documents incidents confined to right wing and racist action which ostensibly confirm the official view that racist violence did not happen in the Netherlands before the 1990s.

This evidence would appear to confirm an 'excluding' recognition that racism when combined with violence requires a state response, for example the monitoring of

known incidents.

However, when it is suggested that the UK has achieved the final phase because racial attacks are recognised as a 'matter of fact and not opinion' definitional confusions become apparent. This is because the UK government has resisted the term racist and justified its denial with a failure to establish direct links between racist activity and racial attacks.

Witte's methodology is thus flawed because he uses a model that defines racist violence by one set of criteria and attempts to classify state responses within the model that are defined alternatively. Indeed the construct sidesteps the definitional and conceptual confusions that are catalogued in a decade of research on the UK state response to racial/racist attack, racial harassment and racially motivated crime. In Witte's own terms the notion that the UK has achieved the final phase is suspect and the analysis is compromised by the absence of comparable cross national data.

Nevertheless, this limited cross-national analysis provides a valuable resource that documents the separate histories of engagement with respect to race, racism and racist violence.

On the basis of the evidence presented, if not a wider reading of the available literature, the dual nature of recognition in the state response is unarguable. So too are the pressures upon the state to respond both to the appeals of anti-racist organisations and public fears especially when expressed in the racist appeal of the extreme right. However to conclude as Witte does that formal responses have 'functioned especially to define a self-perception of the nation state' trivialises and ignores the reality of the daily experience of being different. State responses can and have fostered the racist imagination and failure to respond effectively to racially motivated acts encourages perpetrators to believe they can act with impunity. Taking racially motivated violence seriously requires clarity of conception and definition which can only be achieved by examination of the context of victim experience and not just the context of state response.

Ann Clark is a Phd student at the University of Northumbria.

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