

Chapter 1: Introduction

The election of a New Labour government in May 1997, after eighteen years of Conservative rule, signalled a new era of optimism for Britain promoted by their campaign promise that ‘things can only get better’. Following the party’s landslide victory, and during its first term in office, New Labour fostered their vision of Britain as a ‘young country’ (Blair, 1996) through emphasising the nation’s plurality, cultural diversity and dynamism in order to ‘rebrand’ Britain as a vibrant and progressive society; a strategy deemed necessary for Britain’s economic survival and success in an expanding globalised marketplace.¹ This attempt to re-imagine Britain as a modern and forward thinking nation exploited and was encompassed by the notion of ‘Cool Britannia’ – a phrase originally coined for a Ben and Jerry’s ice cream in April 1996, and appropriated by the media to characterise British popular culture as fresh and exciting after *Newsweek* in November declared London was the coolest capital city in the world (McGuire, 1996). For New Labour then, Cool Britannia would come to supersede the traditional ethos of ‘Rule Britannia’, through the party presenting an image of a new Britain focused on its potential as a creative culture: an image confirmed by a glamorous celebrity reception held at Downing Street in July 1997 which enabled the government to exhibit Britain as a youthful, fashionable, post-imperial country with cutting edge cultural industries and creative talent.² This initiative of rebranding British identity as Cool Britannia was further facilitated with New Labour’s establishment of Panel 2000 in April 1998 whose task, as Robin Cook (1998) stated, was ‘to replace a myth of an old Britain [a country in decline, consisting of castles and villages] with the reality of the modern Britain’ by producing a plan which would project new Britain globally as a sophisticated, multicultural³,

¹ During the late 1980s and 1990s British companies and public services were increasingly subject to privatisation and takeovers by international conglomerates, thus leading to a decline in the industrial prestige of ‘Britishness’.

² Indeed, the Cool Britannia phenomenon was characterised by the image of Noel Gallagher (of rock band Oasis) shaking hands with then Prime Minister Tony Blair.

³ It should be noted that during this period multiculturalism was commonly understood to mean that different cultural communities have the right to live their own ways of life independently, with no overarching thread binding them together. This contrasts with the more recent interpretation of multiculturalism which emphasises that all cultures should be

open and dynamic nation as well as a centre of innovation and creativity in the run-up to the millennium. In their report (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 1998) Panel 2000 outlined five main themes that were believed to define Britain's character, these being reliability and integrity; creativity and innovation; free speech and fair play; openness to the world; and a unique heritage. Significantly, and of equal importance, during this period the Runnymede Trust set up a Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain in January 1998 to analyse British society's multi-ethnic future and propose ways of countering racial discrimination and disadvantage, in order to reconfigure Britain as a strong and multicultural nation.⁴

However, after a veritable boom period the Cool Britannia project – which appeared to engender a renewed sense of British pride, most famously epitomised by Geri Halliwell's iconic Union Jack dress – collapsed as it was unable to fulfil expectations, became an object of mockery and a source of internecine political conflict. Indeed, from its outset, concerns had been raised regarding Cool Britannia's worth and suitability as a nation-branding exercise because some felt it attempted to package something as complex as British identity as a consumer product, and demonstrated that the government prioritised 'style over substance' (Bayley, 1998); that is to say, Cool Britannia was dismissed as being merely a corporate marketing campaign that lacked any engagement and association with concrete principles. Furthermore, New Labour's vision of a new Britain would also have difficulty overriding the 'myth of an old Britain' as this was firmly entrenched within the national psyche and recognised internationally. Moreover, at the dawn of the 21st century Cool Britannia was increasingly accompanied by images of an 'uncool' nation plagued with crises including failing public services, football hooliganism, foot and mouth disease, and ongoing racist violence. In addition to these problems besetting Cool Britannia, the Runnymede Trust's report on *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* published in 2000 cautioned New Labour that Britain would not develop as a multicultural society until past and current forms of racism were confronted and many of the cherished dominant narratives of the nation were radically revised through 'rethinking the national story'

open, self-critical and engage in dialogue with others, and argues a multicultural society must combine respect for diversity with shared common values such as equality and fairness (see Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, 2000).

⁴ This report was launched by then Home Secretary Jack Straw in 1997.

– ideas later encapsulated within Cook’s (2001) now well renowned ‘chicken tikka masala’ speech.⁵ Consequently, following New Labour’s first term in office during which the party had heralded the birth of Cool Britannia, Tessa Jowell, then Minister for Culture, Media and Sport in a speech given in November 2001 (Jury, 2001), declared its death and consigned it to history stating that the idea had simply ‘missed the point’ as ‘You can’t distil our national character to a liking for designer water or retro lamps’. According to Jowell, although Cool Britannia had been a programme with sound intentions, its failure lay in its inability to recognise the diverse and continually changing nature of Britain, characterised by and open to external influences. As she remarked:

This country is just too complex and too varied. Cool Britannia was at least a well meaning attempt to codify what makes this country special. But it was, I’m sorry to say, doomed to inadequacy because it tried to codify a culture. And if you codify, you ossify (*ibid.*).

Importantly, in Britain the year 2001 not only witnessed the ‘demise’ of Cool Britannia but also marked a critical turning point for the notion of multiculturalism (an idea that New Labour were initially eager to promote), when over a few months events occurred that would expose this concept to new forms of criticism and attack. During the spring and summer of 2001 a number of disturbances broke out in towns and cities across northern England involving white and Asian⁶ youths in conflict with each other and the police. These clashes, provoked by racist mobilisations of the neo-fascist British National Party, first took place at Easter in Bradford, spreading to Oldham (26-28 May) – which experienced what were identified as ‘the worst race riots in Britain for 15 years’ (Carter, 2001) – Leeds (5 June), Burnley (23-24 June), Bradford (7 July) and Stoke-on-Trent (14 July), leading to such areas being designated as ‘racial hotspots’ (Harris, 2001). Whilst many attributed the causes of

⁵ In this speech Cook (2001) argued that Britain should be optimistic about the strength and future of British identity, drawing upon the nation’s most popular dish – chicken tikka masala – as an allegory for Britain’s history of absorbing and adapting external influences, thus illustrating its pluralistic character.

⁶ Throughout this thesis the term ‘Asian’ is used to refer to individuals whose family heritage originates from the Indian subcontinent. The term ‘black’ is employed to refer to individuals of African Caribbean descent and also in its political sense, therefore including both those of African Caribbean and South Asian origin.

these disturbances to deprivation, poverty, high unemployment and racism, the official government enquiry into the ‘riots’, the Cantle report (Home Office, 2001), suggested that self-segregation by white and ethnic minority communities, whose lives did not appear to touch, let alone overlap, was the principal motivating factor behind this unrest.⁷ Furthermore, the report advocated *community cohesion* as a strategy for fostering respect and understanding of different communities as well as establishing a greater sense of British citizenship based on (a few) shared values, achieved through, for example, the twinning of schools, promoting dialogue amongst young people and encouraging interaction between various communities. Although these proposals were not intrinsically problematic, inferences that may be drawn from the report – which aimed to examine the *causes* of these ‘riots’ – are disturbing. As Farzana Shain (2003) pointed out, ‘The implication is that racism is *caused* by segregation rather than *causing* it. The picture that emerges is of racism as being caused by the failure of particular groups to integrate’ (p. vii, original emphasis).

Of equal significance, the Cantle report was published in the wake of the September 11 2001 attacks on New York’s World Trade Center with the following ‘war on terrorism’ being instrumental in centring world attention on Muslim culture and communities, and subsequent portrayals of Islam as an ‘uncivilised threat’ to global security providing a rationalisation for the war itself. As such, many have argued (e.g. Poole, 2002; Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, 2004; Abbas, 2005; Modood, 2005a) this situation has resulted in the demonisation of Muslims worldwide – aggravated by earlier media representations of Islamic fundamentalism during the Rushdie affair (1988-1989) and First Gulf War (1991-1993) which had produced anti-Muslim sentiments – leading to the word Muslim being equated with ‘terror’ and ‘evil’ as well as a belief that any individual who appears ‘Muslim’ may be subjected to hostile scrutiny, held under new terrorism laws and open to attack. Indeed, following the events of September 11 and the Cantle report’s publication in December 2001, David Blunkett (then Home Secretary) specifically focused on

⁷ Although the Cantle report noted that segregation between different communities has always existed, it argued that the polarity between cultures within these northern towns and cities was a fundamental cause for concern. However, Riaz Ahmed – then deputy mayor of Oldham – maintained that the causes of such segregation were far more complex, stating that ‘We all want to get rid of segregation, but it is how you do it. [Asian] People find themselves in extreme poverty and deprivation. They have no mechanism to fight out of that poverty and they end up in ghettos’ (BBC Online, 2001).

arguments concerning religion and cultural practices in his statements about integration (see Brown, 2001), partially in order to support suggested new legislation on nationality, immigration and asylum. Blunkett's position rested upon his conviction that ethnic minorities must make more of an effort to integrate into British society, and called for immigrants to undertake oaths of allegiance to British social values and 'norms of acceptability' as well as the introduction of English language tests (echoing, despite Blunkett's denial, Norman Tebbit's (in)famous 'cricket test'). He further declared that cultural practices such as genital mutilation and enforced marriages with people from the Indian subcontinent were unacceptable in Britain arguing 'we don't tolerate the intolerable under the guise of cultural difference', adding multi-ethnic communities needed 'sensitivity rather than political correctness' (*ibid.*). Moreover, Blunkett claimed a healthy cohesive society required ethnic minorities not only 'to develop a sense of identity and a sense of belonging' invested in Britain, but must also ensure that future generations grew up 'feeling British' (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, what actually arises from Blunkett's pronouncement is a picture of an insular Asian, predominantly Muslim, separatist community who do not wish to learn English, hold onto conservative cultural practices and are unwilling to integrate with wider society. Furthermore, as Hassan Mahamdallie (2002) has asserted, 'Asians who have lived in this country for decades (and their British born offspring) [are recast] as foreigners who will only be tolerated if they forcibly assimilate "British norms" and become in Blunkett's words "more English"'.

Crucially these events threw the validity of multiculturalism into question with criticisms being levelled, not solely from within the government, but also by commentators working to an established anti-racist agenda who had importantly formerly supported the principle and not, as other left-wing critics, reduced this notion to 'saris and samosas' or a capitalist ploy which disguised class struggles (Modood, 2005b). For example Kenan Malik (2001), in an article written for a Commission for Racial Equality publication, claimed 'multiculturalism has helped segregate communities far more effectively than racism' and Hugo Young (2001) voiced his criticisms more explicitly, declaring multiculturalism 'can now be seen as a useful bible for any Muslim who insists that his religio-cultural priorities, including the defence of jihad against America, overrides his civic duties of loyalty, tolerance, justice and respect for democracy'. In addition Farrukh Dhondy (2001), an ex-Black

Panther political activist and pioneer of multicultural programming on British television, discussed an 'Islamic Fifth Column' which had to be exposed suggesting that the state 'need[ed] to redirect the effort and money that they have poured into race-relations and multiculturalism into a clearer, reasoned, energetic defence of the values of freedom and democracy'. These arguments, in keeping with Blunkett's position, maintain that a 'politically correct' multiculturalism has created fragmentation and separation between communities instead of fostering integration. Indeed Trevor Phillips, former chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, stated that although multiculturalism once had currency the concept was now no longer useful and out of date as it emphasises promoting ethnic uniqueness and fetishises difference rather than encouraging minorities to be British, further arguing that there is a vital 'need to assert ... a core of Britishness' throughout society (see Baldwin, 2004): a position enforced by the London bombings which were perpetrated by British born citizens in July 2005 which, as Tariq Modood (2005c) has said, 'has led many analysts, observers, intellectuals and opinion formers to conclude that multiculturalism has failed'.

More recently, and as a response to the London bombings, Gordon Brown – then Chancellor of the Exchequer – in a speech given to the Fabian society in 2006 (BBC Online, 2006) stressed the increased importance for promoting ethnic minority integration, announcing that Britain must develop 'a united shared sense of purpose ... without which no society can flourish'. In order to achieve this Brown called on British people to 'embrace the Union flag' and patriotism proposing that Britain should have a 'British Day', equivalent to the United States' Independence Day and France's Bastille Day, on which British culture, history, achievements as well as its unique values and ideas could be celebrated; whilst at the same time demonstrating New Labour's desire to re-establish itself as a party of strong national identity. Brown said that patriotism has, over time, come to be associated with right wing principles but claimed that the values on which Britishness is based are in fact grounded in 'progressive' ideas of liberty, fairness and responsibility. Therefore, Brown argued that the British flag needed to be reappropriated from the far-right British National Party, stating that 'Instead of the BNP using it as a symbol of racial division, the flag should be a symbol of unity and part of a modern expression of patriotism too ... We should assert that the Union flag by definition is a flag for

tolerance and inclusion' (*ibid.*). Brown's speech importantly placed the issue of what being British means centre stage within the public arena once more and encouraged dialogue on this matter, as Billy Bragg said:

I do think we need to talk about the issue of identity, about who we are. We live in a very multi-cultural society, perhaps the most multi-cultural in Europe. What actually binds us together? Well, interestingly the thing that binds us together is our civic identity which is Britishness (Bragg, quoted in BBC Online, 2006).

This study began during 2004 following the northern 'race riots', publication of the Cattle report, the events of September 11, calls for the end of multiculturalism as well as integration under the umbrella of 'Britishness' as outlined above, a period in which perceptions and understandings of identities, particularly ethnic identities, have become a more fraught issue. Thus, the present study arose from an interest in and amidst concerns regarding identity within the current political climate, and consequently the question of whether ethnicity is or is not in fact crucially important to identities today came to be an underlying theme informing this research. However, whilst much academic thinking continues to assert ethnicity (or other categories such as gender and class) as a key structural influence on identity (e.g. Andersen and Hill Collins, 1995; Holtzman, 2000; Dines and Humez, 2003; Lind, 2003), this study set out to explore the possibility that individuals' identities are more multi-faceted than previous research has suggested. Moreover, in order to help overcome some of the limitations of existing work which has relied upon research techniques that expect individuals to provide immediate verbal responses to things which are difficult to explain instantaneously and/or prioritise the researchers' preconceived agenda, the study engaged with 'new creative methods' (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 3). Therefore this study aimed to develop understandings of identities – specifically those of young people in contemporary British society – through examining how the media are used in the shaping of self-identity, by utilising an approach which affords participants *time* to *create* a metaphorical or symbolic artefact and *reflect* on it, in the hope that findings produced might both offer more nuanced and sophisticated insights into how individuals conceptualise and construct their identity as well as providing a useful and innovative method for future research projects. As such this study's original contribution to the field is apparent in the issues explored through inviting participants

to invest creatively in the research process, and in the various conclusions of this thesis.

Before proceeding with a detailed outline of this thesis it would perhaps be useful to establish how the concept of identity has been defined from a number of differing perspectives within sociological thought, by drawing upon Stuart Hall's (1992a) influential essay *The Question of Cultural Identity*. Within this work he asserts that identity has been imagined in three distinct ways which have come to dominate our thinking on this matter, these being: the Enlightenment subject; the sociological subject; and the post-modern subject. Hall states that in contrast to pre-modern societies in which identities were structured around traditional frameworks – principally religion – and people were not considered as unique individuals possessing their own identities, but rather a component of the 'great chain of being' (p. 281), he notes that the advent of modernity 'gave rise to a new and decisive form of *individualism*, at the centre of which stood a new conception of the individual subject and its identity' (*ibid.*, original emphasis). As such, Hall claims during the Enlightenment period this new conception of identity, which was grounded in the philosophy of René Descartes (1596-1650), no longer perceived individuals as part of the 'great chain of being' but as unique selves. Hence, in this formulation of identity the individual was regarded as an autonomous, rational, unified whole that was separate from others, with the capacity for independent thought and not bound by social positioning or tradition. As Hall explains:

The Enlightenment subject was based on a conception of the human person as a fully centred, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness and action, whose 'centre' consisted of an inner core which first emerged when the subject was born, and unfolded with it, while remaining essentially the same – continuous or 'identical' with itself – throughout the individual's existence. The essential centre of the self was a person's identity (p. 275).

However, with the increase of industrialisation and urbanisation during the nineteenth century he observes the development of a more sociological conception of identity. As Hall notes, in this era society had become more directed by structures and organisations which shaped people's lives, and consequently 'The individual citizen

became enmeshed in the bureaucratic administrative machineries of the modern state' (p. 284). Therefore, he proposes that individuals were no longer perceived as unique and distinct from others; instead an individual's relationship with society was negotiated through 'group processes and ... collective norms' (*ibid.*) and as such identity was seen as being inextricably linked to, for example, social class, nationality and occupation. For Hall this conception of identity is advanced by the theory of symbolic interactionism, which claims that identity can only be constructed through interaction with others and an individual's self-concept is in part produced by how other people see them (see Mead, [1934] 1967; Jenkins, 1996). From this perspective, as Hall says:

[I]dentity is formed in the 'interaction' between self and society. The subject still has an inner core or essence that is the 'real me', but this is formed and modified in a continuous dialogue with the cultural worlds 'outside' and the identities they offer. Identity, in the sociological conception, bridges the gap between the 'inside' and 'outside' – between the personal and the public worlds. The fact that we project 'ourselves' into these cultural identities, at the same time internalizing their meanings and values, making them 'part of us', helps to align our subjective feelings with the objective places we occupy in the social and cultural world (1992a, p. 276).

Thus, within this framework, he claims that 'Identity thus stitches (or, to use a current medical metaphor, "sutures") the subject into the structure. It stabilizes both subjects and the cultural worlds they inhabit, making both reciprocally more unified and predictable' (*ibid.*). Although he identifies the value of this approach, Hall suggests that such sociological conceptions of identity have come to lack credibility in a postmodern world. In the postmodern world he notes that societies are distinguished by the presence of fragmented identities in which individuals no longer have a unified, singular sense of self, but rather consist of 'several, sometimes contradictory or unresolved, identities' (pp. 276-277). This fragmentation of identity is attributed to a number of factors including: the rapid pace of change in late modern societies; the growth of new social movements; the rise of identity politics; the impact of feminism; and the effects of globalisation. As such, he explains that individuals' identities are now regarded to be decentred as they do not have an essential or fixed core on which to locate themselves (see Bauman, 1996), and for 'the post-modern subject ... Identity

becomes a “moveable feast”: formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us’ (1992a, p. 277; see also Hall, 1987, 1990). Furthermore he comments that the processes of globalisation have specifically come to exert ‘a pluralizing impact on identities, producing a variety of possibilities and new positions of identification, and making identities more positional, more political, more plural and diverse; less fixed, unified or trans-historical’ (p. 309). Consequently Hall concludes that this uncertainty and diversity which is symptomatic of the postmodern condition has resulted in certain groups attempting to create stable and unified identities by re-establishing and asserting their ethnicity (pp. 310-314). Therefore, in consideration of the understandings of identity provided by Hall, this study would perhaps align itself most closely with a symbolic interactionist approach as it aims to explore participants’ identities in relation to, not only how they see themselves, but also how they believe other people’s perceptions impact upon their self-concept. However it should be stressed that this study actually seeks to determine ideas about identity, and how this is understood by young people themselves, through the participants’ *own* interpretations of their work.

Since some theoretical foundations are clearly necessary for a serious consideration of the media’s role in shaping self-identities, Chapter 2 explores the issue of media representation specifically examining previous research on media representations of ethnic minority groups, and how existing representations impact on audience members. An emphasis on ethnicity as central to identity had been highlighted by previous literature, as well as the political discourses outlined above, although this dimension was found to be less crucial to self-identities as the study progressed. Chapter 3 moves on to provide a critical review of developments within audience research through an examination of the various theoretical paradigms that have been employed within this area in order to establish the numerous strategies which have been utilised for understanding audiences and their relationship with the media. The concern raised by a number of studies discussed in this chapter is the need for research to consider people’s media consumption within the context of lived experience and the necessity for advancing new methodological approaches in audience analysis. Continuing the theme of new methodological approaches, Chapter 4 evaluates a wider body of research which has employed creative and visual research

methods and establishes the potential benefits and advantages of such techniques. The chapter outlines the use of metaphors in social research, and foregrounds their value as a means of exploring individuals' identities and experiences. Chapter 5 introduces the collage-making exercise used within this study that invited young people aged 13 to 14 from seven secondary schools in Dorset, Hampshire and London to create and reflect upon a metaphorical representation of their own identity using media images and describes an analytical framework based upon principles provided by art therapy through which the results may be approached; whilst Chapters 6 and 7 analyse the data produced by participants focusing on how they conceptualise and construct their identities in terms of 'gender and individualism' and use the media as a resource to formulate their sense of self demonstrated through a discussion of 'role models'. Finally, Chapter 8 draws together the themes of this particular study and sets out a number of findings and conclusions about 'identities and audiences' and 'creative and visual research methods'.