

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Charles T. Adeyanju, *Deadly Fever: Racism, Disease and a Media Panic*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2010, 136 pp. \$15.95 paper (978-1-55266-341-7)

In this empirically detailed and theoretically informed case study, Charles T. Adeyanju demonstrates how a moral panic initiated by a potential infectious disease outbreak reveals the mechanisms, nature, and extent to which racism operates in Canada. In the winter of 2001 an ill “African woman” who had recently arrived from the Democratic Republic of Congo was admitted to a Hamilton, Ontario hospital to receive treatment for an unidentified illness. According to the newspaper coverage, during the preliminary stages of the diagnostic examination, the *possibility* of Ebola infection — a contagious virus that causes severe hemorrhages throughout the body — was hypothesized but quickly ruled out. Adeyanju thus refers to the incident as the “non-Ebola event.” Sensationalist media coverage nevertheless continued for some time after the official pronouncement, and a white supremacist group (the Heritage Front) picketed the hospital where the patient was receiving treatment. In the words of the author:

The non-Ebola event was a proxy for expressing the anxiety and concern of Canadians over the growing presence of non-Europeans in the country. The media used the case as an analogy of all that is considered threatening to Canadian society, especially criminality, racial impurity, immigration and scarce social resources. (p. 13)

The book builds the case for this using content analysis of four newspapers, and interviews with journalists, physicians and hospital staff, and members of Hamilton’s Black community.

The first two chapters set the conceptual stage for subsequent empirical analyses. The first chapter reveals the extent to which racism has historically persisted in Canada and how sociological analyses account for this, particularly in relation to the representation of ethnic and racial minorities in the mass media. The second deals with the relationship between the media and society in more conceptual detail, with a focus on contemporary theoretical perspectives on, among other things: the encoding/decoding of ideology in media discourses, framing, “agenda

setting”, moral panics, and Beck’s and Giddens’s arguments concerning reflexive modernization and the risk society

The third chapter reports the findings of the content analyses. while the fourth gives a detailed account how the Ebola non-event was constituted. Through “critical discourse analysis” of the competing claims involved in the Ebola non-event, the qualities and characteristics of the professional cultures of medicine and journalism, rhetorical devices, and issues related to the (non)representation / silencing of alternative voices and their relation to power, Adeyanju moves forward the analysis of the complex relationship between society, the mass media and racism.

The fifth chapter takes up the under-representation (or misrepresentation) of Congolese / Black voices in the media coverage. The chapter also discusses the implications and consequences of the non-event for Congolese and non-Congolese Blacks. The Congolese were less apt than other members of the Black community to feel that the public attention to Ebola was racially-based. An unintended positive consequence of the non-event was reconstruction of the Congolese community in Hamilton to confront other problems facing it.

The book concludes with a discussion of “institutional inclusiveness” as a strategy to deal with media misrepresentation of racial minorities. Adeyanju calls for the media to incorporate diversity and cultural sensitivity into journalistic policy and practice.

The association of infectious disease and race has a long legacy in processes of colonialism, and later “developmentalism.” Whether it is Tuberculosis as an “immigrant disease”, SARS as a “Chinese disease”, HIV/AIDS as a “Haitian disease” or H1N1 as a “Mexican disease”, a process of “Othering” is involved in which people from the Global South are conceived as infectious disease threats due solely to their race/ethnicity. Such an “othering” process is based on “essentialism” — the supposition that essential biological, physiological, genetic or cultural differences make certain people be more or less susceptible to infectious disease. Adeyanju’s intriguing discussion of “racism without race” implies that essentialism may take a less explicit form in the contemporary era, and that “race” can be expressed and sustained in implicit and non-racial terms:

There is no single reference to “race” or “Black” in the media coverage. The terms of reference are “Congo” and “Africa” and are in connection to the etiology of Ebola and other deadly diseases. It is not unusual for the media to couch views that are anti-racial diversity in non-racial terms. (p. 58)

Racist implications persist by way of implicit associations linking crime and disease with immigrant status. For instance, during the media coverage of the Ebola non-event, one of the media storylines was that the patient was in Canada under “suspicious circumstances,” and may have been involved in diamond smuggling, although there was no evidence to support such a claim.

The analysis presented in the book is sound and I have only some minor quibbles. First, although Adeyanju does engage to some extent with the notion of risk, the analysis may have benefited from the literature on the social amplification of risk and the social construction of health scares. Second, it is clear from my reading of Adeyanju’s work the framing processes utilized by the journalists and other actors involved in the Ebola non-event were influenced by the Emerging Infectious Diseases Worldview that conflates national security and infectious disease spread. Such a consideration would help situate the study more broadly.

Deadly Fever is a fine example of sound sociological scholarship that integrates multiple structural and personal aspects of contemporary social existence and problematizes much of the “taken-for-granted” conflation of race and disease. Studies such as this will become more important in the future of post-911 intensified securitization and racial profiling. I recommend this theoretically sophisticated book for higher level undergraduate and graduate courses on race/ethnicity and the mass media.

York University

S. Harris Ali

Harris Ali is an environmental sociologist in the Faculty of Environmental Studies who researches the environmental and health risks associated with natural and technological disasters, as well as the spread of infectious diseases. He has recently completed an edited volume (with Roger Keil) entitled, *Networked Disease: Emerging Infections in the Global City* published by Wiley-Blackwell (2008).

hali@yorku.ca