Introduction

The Invisible Empire?

We invited a family we had known for several years, and whose children played regularly with ours, for some Bengali home cooking. After a feast of lamb and fish curries, a disagreement over the motives behind the recent US and British military actions in Afghanistan and their imminent invasion of Iraq led to a wider dispute about histories and legacies of European colonialism. Over several hours of increasingly heated discussions one of our guests repeatedly railed against 'Muslim' threats to 'western democracy' and argued for 'the west' to control the oil supply in order to preserve those democracies. Twisted into his argument was his rage about the 'dominating Bangladeshi Muslim population' in our east London neighbourhood which he linked, in some undefined way, to the events of 9/11 and identified as a threat to his family's way of life.

Angry at his abusive tone and arrogance at addressing this diatribe at his Bengali Muslim host, we attempted to describe the four hundred year economic, political and cultural relationship between Bengal and Britain and relate it to contemporary politics and poverty in Bangladesh. We also tried to explain about the heterogeneity of ideas, class and cultures that are suppressed and hidden behind those constructed categories of 'Muslim' and 'Bangladeshi'. Our guest wasn't interested. He expressed his agreement with the recently assassinated Dutch sociologist and politician, Pim Fortuyn who had written a book 'Against the Islamisation of our Culture' and had advocated a halt to Muslim immigration to the Netherlands.[1] My husband, being Bengali, used the example of the 1971 Bangladesh War of Independence, where up to three million Bengalis are estimated to have been killed by the Pakistani Army and their Bengali allies, to add complexity to the discussion and to demonstrate how Muslims, rather than 'Western democracies', have most often been the victims of the political ambitions of other Muslims (Bhattacharyya 1988, Sugata and Jalal 1997, Sisson and Rose 1991). Later, the conversation took a different turn which led to the host mentioning that all photos of his late mother had either been lost during that 1971 war or had become invisible due to the humid Bengali climate. Our guest wasn't interested in any of these contributions until much later when, in a general stream of bigoted

1 Pim Fortuyn was a Dutch sociologist and politician who held liberal views on social issues such as same-sex marriage. He classified Islam as a 'backward' religion and a threat to Dutch values of 'tolerance', advocating an end to Muslim immigration to the Netherlands. He was assassinated in May 2002 by an 'animal rights activist'.

abuse, he shouted 'You Bangladeshis are all so stupid you can't even preserve your photographs properly!'[2] As they left, his partner attempted to apologise for his swearing. She told us that although she lamented that the argument had become so heated, she praised him as 'the most honest person' that she knew. Like Fortuyn, he was 'outspoken', prepared to say the things that others were afraid to voice.

We were both angry and upset and discussed the incident for days afterwards. This was a different experience of racism from that which we usually encountered. It was direct, it was middle class and it was in our home. We tried to work out why he had picked on the example of the poignantly vanishing photographic images to highlight his view about the inferiority of Bangladeshis. Was his aim to demonstrate European superiority through picking up on something irrelevant to his argument and distorting it to make his point? That point appeared to be that a population was stupid because it could believe in religion and couldn't preserve photographs. Not only did he use a spurious example but he used it to condemn all Bangladeshi people as both one dimensional and inferior. As we talked through the argument I recollected the doublespeak, in a different context, of other white middle class parents when they discussed sending their children outside the local area for their schooling. Our guest had told us overtly what had been couched in the playground discourses of other parents and articulated by one white mother as 'we like multicultural but Bethnal Green is too multicultural' (for her 'multicultural' meant that there were too many Bengali children in the local school). Another white parent had said 'Bethnal Green isn't multicultural enough' (she also thought there were too many Bengalis and wanted her child to be in a school area with a more diluted 'multicultural mix'). Several parents used the term 'middle class' as code for 'white middle class' when discussing the high ratio of Bengali to white children in the school population. The careful class/educational attainment correlations that they applied to their categorisations of white children were not evident in their homogeneous classifications of their Bengali classmates, who were represented as blocs of shared interests and predictable behaviours. These conversations always took place with me, the white parent, never with my children's Bengali father.

This incident and remembered playground conversations brought into sharp focus the issues that I was grappling with at the time in the final stages of writing up my D.Phil, an anthropological study of British nationalism (Wemyss 2004). I was identifying and tracking dominant and competing discourses about Britishness relating to political and cultural events in east London and investigating how and why they shifted over a 10 year period. I had named the dominant discourse

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2 I refer to Bengalis as people who either themselves, or their ancestors, came to Britain from the area of present day Bangladesh, West Bengal and the Karimgonj district in Assam. Present day Bangladesh was part of British India until 1947 and was East Pakistan until the 1971 Independence war. East Bengalis have therefore been Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in living memory. I use the term 'Bangladeshi' when directly referring to discourses which use that categorisation.

as 'white' and 'liberal' and had located specific institutions and organizations with which it was associated. I had also tracked several subordinate discourses associated with groups or individuals that were continually challenging that dominant discourse. Through detailed examination of these dynamic processes of contestation I was able to demonstrate that the white liberal discourse about Britishness had specific characteristics that work effectively towards ensuring that it and related institutions retain their dominance. The four most significant of these distinguishing features were distilled within our post curry argument and school gate conversations.

The domestic events described above were not the focus of my ethnography and I did not include any reference to them in my thesis. However, I am using them here to introduce the characteristics of the dominant discourse precisely because they occurred in situations where I was not looking for them. An aim of this book is to identify and understand how, and with what effect such discourses continue to work. In this chapter, I begin by using these events to identify four significant characteristics of the dominant white liberal discourse. I then briefly detail the theoretical framework that supports my analysis and the labelling of the 'white liberal discourse' and summarise the methodological approach that I have used to identify and track the dominant discourse and challenges to it. Finally I outline how the chapters that follow combine evidence from my ethnography and the recent research of selected historians to identify, track and contest the dominant white liberal discourse.

Returning to the events described above, our guest refused to see histories of empire as relevant to the current war in Iraq or the political economy of Bangladesh, insisting that 'it was all a long time ago, and no excuse for current problems'. This is an example of the first and pivotal defining characteristic of the dominant discourse, what I name as the 'Invisible Empire'. In varying levels of sophistication, the discourse consistently asserts particular narratives of Britain's past whilst suppressing alternative histories, especially about the British Empire and related histories of white violence. When it does acknowledge the British Empire, it is a discourse of merchants and the spread of civilisation that suffocates competing memories. The other three defining features of the discourse all depend on the repetitious retelling of such partial European histories.

Both our guest's argument and the school gate conversations had rested on the assumption of their own privileged white, European identity. They used the homogeneous categories of 'Bangladeshi' and 'Muslim' entirely negatively, as threats to their own specific, liberal middle class aspirations (school achievement in a 'tolerant' and 'diverse' multicultural environment) and economically secure and culturally liberal way of life (supported by global economic and political structures). The assumption of European superiority was voiced by our guest in his dismissive and pointed assertion that photographs dissolve or go missing in Bangladesh only because of the stupidity of the natives. These are examples of the second characteristic of the dominant discourse; that it privileges and naturalises white experience, making the white subject invisible by normalising it at the

same time as subjectifying the 'non-white' others. Through crude categorisations it makes the 'ethnic other' homogeneous and passive, an object of analysis and political debate. The genealogy of this process of categorisation and subjectification reaches back to the earliest days of English conquest and colonisation (events often retold in twenty-first-century discourses using the anodyne terms of 'exploration', 'engagement' and 'settlement') and stretches forward to contemporary policies of multiculturalism and the politics of belonging.

In talking with the white parents at the school gate, if the financial or educational success of local Bengalis was referred to at all, it was, in different contexts, associated with a dilution of an assumed homogeneous and static 'Bangladeshi culture' (language, clothes, family, food, religion) and the acquisition of behaviours assumed to be more 'Cockney' or 'English'. This is an illustration of the third characteristic of the dominant discourse, which also rests on the Invisible Empire narrative. The discourse constructs white categories, such as 'Cockney' or 'English' or, in this case, 'middle class' to which it is assumed others aspire. The membership of these categories are constantly struggled over but remain essentially white in the dominant discourse.[3]

Our guest's support for the political agenda of Pim Fortuyn illustrates the values and categorisations shared in the dominant discourses in post colonial Netherlands and Britain. This exemplifies the fourth characteristic of the discourse – it is recognisably global at the same time as being internally differentiated. Historically distinct processes of colonisation by various European powers and continuous contests over meanings ensure that the discourse operates differently in multifarious contexts.

Recent writing in critical whiteness studies across the social sciences and humanities has focused on discourse and power and the everyday racisms such as I have described in the mundane contexts of the dinner-table arguments and the school gate conversations (Twine and Gallagher 2008). An aim of this book is to build on previous work in the field to make the invisible and visible mobilisations of the British Empire in dominant discourse about Britishness central to the analysis. In order to expose and understand how the Invisible Empire works, I focus on challenges to it from subordinate discourses associated with contesting individuals and groups. Through making the contests and connections explicit, I aim to show how the discourse of the Invisible Empire works to define notions of Britishness and belonging. The continuing dominance of the Invisible Empire, despite the challenges from contesting voices, ensures the consolidation of 'common sense' assumptions about 'race' and belonging that infuse media and policy debates.

Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault both saw 'the most significant political problems deriving from the denial that power is operating' (Ives 2004: 143). The incident discussed above demonstrates two ways that the white liberal discourse

3 The categories 'Cockney' and 'English' are examined in the following chapters. For the construction of 'middle class' see Reay (2008).

works: Firstly, to disguise how power operates, for example, through the obfuscation of past and present power relationships created by the discursive mobilisation of the Invisible Empire; secondly, to exercise power at the micro-level, for example through the construction of essentialised and exclusive categories such as 'Muslims' and 'middle class'. In this book I aim to further unpack and expose how the dominant white liberal discourse, and its key element, the Invisible Empire, work to support the cultural hegemony of an alliance of powerful institutions and groups. Through detailed ethnographic investigation I am able to identify and analyse the discourse and challenges to it. Through tracking some of those challenges I am able to show the flexibility of the discourse as it adapts. Ultimately this book is about the power of the Invisible Empire.

In the following section I summarise my theoretical framework, drawn from Foucault and Gramsci's theorisations of discourse and power and theorisations on whiteness. I then introduce the context of the ethnography that forms the basis of the study. Finally I provide a chapter outline of the book.

White Liberal Discourse

This book is an investigation into the central and pivotal constituent of the dominant white discourse about Britishness, what I have named as the Invisible Empire. It aims to identify and locate the discourse and demonstrate the material and discursive processes whereby it works to retain dominance. Through locating and tracking the discourse over time, I aim to show its flexibility and how it adjusts to challenges from competing discourses associated with competing groups. My theoretical approach is broadly encompassed in a research field that has recently and provisionally been labelled as 'third wave whiteness studies'. This field focuses on institutional and ideological arrangements and practices that maintain white privilege whilst challenged by competing movements. It investigates 'locally specific ways in which whiteness as a form of power is defined, deployed, performed, policed and reinvented' (Twine and Gallagher, 2008: 5).

The theoretical framework of the study draws on both Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' and Foucault's notion of 'discursive formations'. Both concepts, grown out of contrasting theoretical traditions, focus on the processes whereby a dominant ideology/discourse becomes 'common sense' and embedded in institutions – a central concern of this book. Whilst accepting that attempts to reconcile Gramscian hegemony with Foucault's discourse theory have been criticised as contradictory, I do not enter the debate about the relative strengths of the two theoreticians in furthering the understanding power.[4] Rather, I use

4 Edward Said's use of Gramsci's hegemony and Foucault's discourse in exposing Orientalism is one of the most apposite examples (1978). In opposition to such approaches, the cultural studies theorist, Tony Bennett argued that an earlier attempt within cultural studies to accommodate Foucauldian discourse theory into Gramscian hegemony was

theoretical insights derived from both approaches in order to understand how white liberal discourse works.[5]

Central to the analysis are Foucault's organising principles of discursive formations, where meanings are temporarily stabilised into a discourse, which, 'constructs, defines and produces the objects of knowledge in an intelligible way while excluding other forms or reasoning as unintelligible (Barker 2000: 78). A discursive formation is when discourses allow ways of communicating about an issue in similar ways with common clusters of keywords, mobilising metaphors and ideas and forms of knowledge across various sites. The notion of 'keywords' stems from the work of Raymond Williams who traced the changing meanings of words that are central to the dominant discourse (Williams 1976). His conceptual histories of words finds echoes in the changes in discursive formations between epistemes theorised by Foucault. The shifting meanings of keywords make up the discursive record of political struggles between the dominant class and subordinate groups. The dominant class seeks to maintain its historic bloc and to retain hegemony through political negotiations and compromise, which may involve incorporating some interests of sections of the middle or working class. The meanings of words may thus shift in order to accommodate those interests. Shore and Wright employ the term 'mobilising metaphors' to describe those keywords that become:

> The centre of a cluster of keywords whose meanings extend and shift whilst previous associations with other words are dropped. Their mobilising effect lies in their capacity to connect with, and appropriate, the positive meanings and legitimacy derived from other key symbols of government such as 'nation', 'country', 'democracy'. (Shore and Wright 1997: 20)

The Invisible Empire is constituted through such processes. The 'British Empire' has had and continues to have multiple meanings in different contexts, which continue to be struggled over (Armitage 2000, Marshall 2005). In the following chapters, through focusing on keywords and mobilising metaphors, I argue that dominant discourses about Britishness in twenty-first-century London invest the British Empire with positive meanings associated with merchants, profits and the spread of liberty and democracy. Negative connections with exploitation, disease and racism – the Invisible Empire – are obscured.

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only possible by erasing Foucault's theories on the mechanisms of power and culture that questioned the basis of Gramsci's theory of hegemony (Bennett 1998: 64).

5 Mark Olssen provides a useful summary of arguments for and against the complementary use of Foucault and Gramsci's theorisations of power. He concludes that, taken together they 'present a more powerful perspective on social structure' than either does on his own.' My approach is close to his demonstration of how hegemony and discourse can be used as 'analytic and explanatory tools in conventional sociological work'. (Olssen 2006: 95–118)

Dominant discourses are the result of power struggles, in which their ordering of knowledge and expressions of truth are provisionally victorious over other forms of knowledge. How can the power struggles that contribute to the domination of the white liberal discourse be identified? Foucault's writing on disciplinary power and microprocesses of power are particularly useful in this study of a shifting dominant discourse. Disciplinary power refers to the relationship of power/knowledge embodied in modern institutions, practices and associated discourses. It works through the discourses of academic and professional disciplines constructing the subject as a docile object of inquiry which can then, amongst other things, be categorised and improved. Disciplinary power requires the creation of a body of knowledge about the subject group which can take different forms historically. The subject fulfils the constructed identity created for them by those in authority (Foucault 1979).

As well as conceptualising power as being embodied in modern institutions, associated practices and discourses, Foucault understood power as being grounded in day-to-day relations between individuals - the microprocesses of power. He suggested that rather than coming from a single centre of control, power relations are present in all social relationships, permeating society like capillaries. Thus the analysis of the discourses and practices of individuals as well as of politically organised groups and of official discourses, are all central to an understanding of power.

I have avoided using the term ideology so far in this discussion, because of complex debates over its definition and relationship to discourse.[6] However, Barker offers an analytically useful understanding of ideology which is interchangeable with the Foucauldian concept of power/knowledge discussed above:

> By power/knowledge is meant a mutually constituting relationship between power and knowledge so that knowledge is indissociable from regimes of power. Knowledge is formed within the context of the relationships and practices of power and subsequently contributes to the development, refinement and proliferation of new techniques of power. However, no simple uncontaminated 'truth' can be counterpoised to power/knowledge for there is no truth outside of it … ideology [can be defined as] discourses which have specific *consequences* for relations of power at all levels of social relationships (including the justification and maintenance of ascendant groups). (Barker 2000: 20)

Knowledge, communicated as discourse, cannot be isolated from the power relationships which it both shapes and is shaped by. Dominant discourses, associated with powerful groups, constitute an ideology, one of the consequences of which is the assertion of one particular 'truth'. This provides a conceptual and terminological bridge between Foucault and Gramsci, allowing the latter's theoretical understanding of hegemony to inform this study. White liberal ideology

6 The concept of ideology was rejected by Foucault (1980), and post modernists such as Rorty (1989), because of its common counter positioning opposite 'truth'.

is constituted by dominant shifting discourses and discursive formations which have consequences for power relationships in multiple social contexts.

Like Foucault, Gramsci was concerned with analysing processes whereby dominant ideology (discourses) becomes 'common sense' ('truth') and embedded in institutions. Both saw power as operating in sites not often understood as political. For Gramsci the specific relationships between ideology, power and relations of production are central.[7] He transformed the term hegemony into a concept that can be used as a tool for understanding and changing society.[8] In contrast, Foucault did not focus on how people can mobilise to change a given discourse.[9] Although Gramsci's writing was always grounded in specific places and times his analysis of power can be used to understand very different societies when combined with equally well grounded research (Simon 1982, Ahmad 1996, Crehan 2002).[10]

Recent scholarship has argued that Gramsci's notion of hegemony is no longer useful in understanding twenty-first-century politics (Lash 2007, Thorburn 2007). Johnson (2007) has argued that such criticisms are based on a limited usage of hegemony as cultural politics, reduced to domination through language, discourse and semiotics without clear constitutive relations with identifiable dominant, complicit and subordinate groups who produce and contest them. This 'cultural politics' interpretation of Gramsci has also been referred to as 'hegemony lite' (Crehan 2002: 172–181). I employ what Richard Johnson refers to as 'an expanded version of hegemony' closer to Gramsci's original usage (Johnson 2007). Ideology and common sense are explicitly connected to struggles between competing global and local groups over, for example, capital accumulation, fossil fuels or water.

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7 Gramsci's analysis of power differs from Foucault's analysis in developing a more direct link between competing discourses, social groups, classes and relations of production. He argued that in order to become the hegemonic class in civil society, to achieve and retain control over the apparatus of the state, a class must also have significant control over processes of production. Because workers contest that control, it is never absolutely held by the dominant class. To remain hegemonic, a class must combine leadership of processes of production with leadership of a 'bloc' of social forces in civil society. Gramsci referred to a 'historic bloc' as an alliance of groups and forces in society, held together around key ideas or ideology. In order to become hegemonic, a 'historic bloc' must involve alliances outside the class interests of the dominant group. For example, populist or nationalist ideologies propounded by a dominant class include ideas that are attractive to sections of the middle and working classes. In order to attain state power and control of production, a subordinate class must seek to gain hegemony in civil society through making alliances across classes that challenge the dominant bloc (Simon1982).

8 Originally, the Greek term meaning the predominance of one nation over another. For a detailed discussion of how that transformation took place see Ives (2004).

9 Ives (2004: 143).

10 A stimulating example is Aijaz Ahmad's discussion of using Gramsci to analyse Hindutva political movements in India (Ahmad 1996: 221–66).

In Gramsci's analysis of power, both coercion and persuasion are used by a dominant class and its representatives, to exercise power over subordinate classes. His concept of hegemony can be summarised as 'organised consent'. The dominant class is seen as divided and needing to secure alliances with others as it is continuously challenged by subordinate groups. The never-ending political and cultural struggles in the state over policies and strategies are understood as complex processes. Hegemony is a dynamic process of establishing 'unstable equilibria' which is shaped in significant ways by the actions and reactions of the subaltern classes (Gledhill 1994: 81 citing Forgacs 1888: 205–6). For Gramsci, the struggle between capital and labour is understood as taking place in the context of complex social and cultural relations between classes in three different spheres –those of the state, civil society and of production.[11] There is no clear boundary between the different spheres. For example, educational establishments which are part of civil society, also embody some of the state's coercive relationships. The non-coercive social relations that are manifested in and between the organisations of civil society are also power relations. Civil society is where class and other struggles take place, in short, where hegemony is exercised and contested. In analysing power in different societies at distinct historical moments, the relative significance of coercion and consent cannot be assumed. Their relationship can be understood through the detailed investigation of features of the state, civil society and production. For example in British India, although the colonial state did not rule by coercion alone, the importance of force far outweighed that of consent.[12]

Power struggles between different classes lead to shifting power relations, hegemony is therefore never stable:

> What constitutes a particular hegemonic landscape at any particular moment – remembering that this is always only a single moment in a ceaseless power struggle where power is never totally secure – is likely to include an extremely complicated intertwining of force and consent, and of the entanglement of accounts

11 The apparatus of the state (police, military, welfare agencies) have a monopoly on coercion. Civil society is made up of a range of institutions and organisations including the family, mass media, religious, voluntary, political and cultural organisations which are composed of non-coercive social relationships.

12 Guha argued that the relationship between consent and coercion is different in a colonial society from that of the metropolitan context. In British India the population of those ruled considerably outnumbered the rulers and therefore coercion outweighed consent. In metropolitan Britain consent outweighed coercion (Guha 1997: xii). In the British political context of Tower Hamlets in the 1990s, consent can be assumed as outweighing coercion. However, thirty per cent of the population was made up of people whose family histories and subordinate status resulted from the political experience of coercion outweighing that of consent. The British immigration laws and their application are the starkest and daily reminder to separated Bengali families of how the British state organises consent to forcefully exclude friends and relations from the old Empire.

> of reality with hard realities that are more than discourse. What hegemony 'is' therefore is necessarily extraordinarily protean. (Crehan 2002: 175)

Hegemonic ideology is never complete or closed. Opposing blocs can adopt aspects of the ideology to recycle and challenge the dominant bloc. The dominant class has to reassert its ideology and adapt it in negotiations and compromises with potentially defecting groups within its bloc.

Once attained, hegemony has to be continually fought for. The dominant class attempts to retain hegemony by achieving the consent of subordinate classes by incorporating them into institutions that support its authority. When the dominant class is challenged, its alliances with organisations and groups of civil society have to adapt to changing conditions, and compromises are made with other political and social forces. In the process, state institutions may be reshaped and ideologies may change. When the dominant class is able to build a new system of alliances, hegemony is re-established (Simon 1982: 37–41).

Gramsci's notion of ideology is key to unifying the different elements that make up what he termed the historic bloc. As a hegemonic class builds alliances that combine the interests of other classes and groups, the ideology works to give a 'common conception of the world' to the diverse elements. Dominant ideology is manifested as 'common sense' – that is the way individuals perceive the world uncritically and, to an extent, unconsciously. However, although dominant ideology is 'naturalised' as 'common sense' it can also be 'denaturalised' – that is shown to be a fabrication – and to represent the interests of a specific group. 'Common sense' is therefore also a site of contest and negotiation. It is where the dominant ideology is constructed, resisted, challenged and reconstructed. Ideologies (discourses) are embodied and elaborated in the social, cultural and political practices of individuals, organisations of civil society, commercial, financial and state institutions. Day-to-day negotiations and compromises between the dominant class and potentially defecting elements of its bloc are made as the former asserts and adjusts its ideology (discourse). These negotiations constitute the diversity of practical politics which can be observed in ethnographic research. Gramsci's concept of hegemony thus enables the mapping of shifting power relations in specific times and places.

I use the concept of hegemony to explore how members of different social groups and organisations accept, manipulate or contest dominant discourses of British culture in east London at specific moments over the last two decades. Through these processes the Invisible Empire and its related elements of the dominant discourse are exposed and their dynamism understood.

Early in this chapter I identified the dominant discourse about Britishness as both 'white' and 'liberal'. I now move on to introduce in more detail what I mean by these terms and how they work together.

There has been a proliferation of writing on 'whiteness' over the past twenty years. Much of that work has focused on the complex normalising processes and relations to domination of 'white' ethnicity and identity, 'whiteness' as a social

and cultural construction, representations of 'whiteness', 'white' subjectivities, deconstructing 'whiteness' and on specific white discourses in particular contexts. Cultural and communication studies have focused on 'whiteness' and popular culture, investigating how the meaning of white skin is constructed through communication. Writing on white racism and eurocentrism has included complex considerations of the intersections of whiteness, gender, religion, sexual orientation and class and the decentering of whiteness (See Frankenburg 1993 and 1997, Cohen 1996 and 1997, Dyer 1997, Ware 1997, Back and Ware 2002, Werbner 1997, Hage 1998, Johnson 1999, Byrne 2006, Twine and Gallagher 2007).

These studies have exposed the centrality and importance of whiteness in people's everyday lives. Ruth Frankenberg described 'whiteness' as a terrain made up of linked dimensions. It is a location of structural advantage (race privilege), a standpoint from where white people look at themselves and others, and it is a set of usually unmarked cultural practices. Her work is useful in demonstrating the interconnectedness of 'the material and discursive dimensions of whiteness', and acknowledging that white people perceive their environments through a set of discourses on race, culture and society grown out of 'Western expansion and colonialism' (Frankenburg 1993: 1–2). Whiteness is a historically constructed and internally differentiated process which is seen to be contested and contestable (Frankenburg 1997: 4). The work of Frankenberg, Dyer, Ware, Hage and others is useful in mapping the meanings of whiteness, identifying it – thus making it visible – and relating discursive and material dimensions of whiteness. I draw on their work in identifying the content of the dominant discourse. However, this study differs from earlier studies of whiteness, in that rather than focusing on the meanings, constructions, privileging and subjectivities, the analytic focus is on how white discourse works in order to retain cultural hegemony when challenged and changed in struggles with alternative discourses associated with subordinate groups.

Theorising about whiteness has led to calls for more grounded research. There have been calls for the use of more empirical evidence to expose the different and shifting ways that whiteness functions and what it means to be the subjects of its discursive dominance (Frankenburg 1993 and 1997, Nakayama and Martin 1999, Ware 1997 Solomos and Back 2000, Shome 1999). This study builds on earlier theorising about whiteness through detailed ethnographic research and discourse analysis focused on east London. I investigate the processes through which white liberal discourse mobilises specific histories, normalises whiteness and constructs different subjects. This approach allows me to identify the institutions and organisations through which the discourse is embodied, to explore when, how and by whom challenges to the dominant discourse take place, to map how the discourse shifts and how it supports the coercive power of the state. I am able to analyse the dominant discourse in relation to different subject positions and in contest with subordinate discourses. In the opening of this chapter I introduced the four elements of white discourse that were condensed into the after curry argument. I expand on them in this section.

The Invisible Empire is the first and pivotal element of the dominant white discourse, asserting positive narratives about Britain's colonial past and obscuring contesting histories, including those of white violence. There is an infinite repertoire of invented and remembered 'traditions' that may be mobilised in representing 'the past' in any local, national or global space (Hobsbawm 1983, Mackey 1999). The dominant discourse includes histories that work to legitimise the dominant group, whilst marginalising subordinate groups' claims to share local or national space. It has been impossible to escape the British Empire in twenty-first-century Britain. Colonial anniversaries, scattered throughout the calendar, are remembered through corporate sponsorship and public funding of museum exhibitions. Popular Empire histories play on TV and radio and in the pages of local newspapers. References to Britain's imperial past infuse ongoing political and media debates about British identity and citizenship.[13] Since the Empire was vast and its impact on different peoples and places so varied, those ubiquitous reminders of Empire cannot tell a single imperial story. Its complexities have been revealed further through challenges to its representation in all of the above contexts.[14] Alternative discourses about the British Empire are mobilised in other museums, galleries and festivals whilst recent post-colonial historical and sociological writing has shifted the focus from studying the Empire 'over there' to exploring the role of Empire in shaping past and present British society and cultures (Hall 2000, 2002, Gilroy 2004, Hall and Rose 2006 and the Studies in Imperialism Series edited by John M. MacKenzie). The historian, Catherine Hall has referred to an 'amnesia' about Empire in white England during the main period of decolonisation in the 1960s and 70s, where guilt and embarrassment meant Empire was either forgotten or remembered nostalgically (Hall, 2002: 5). Such 'amnesia' is recognisable in different forms in discourses associated with many of the colonial-related events over the last decade. This selective loss of memory about British colonialism is one example of the Invisible Empire. The book goes beyond asking what the Invisible Empire is, or identifying where it can be located, to explore what it does and how it does it. How does the absence of some histories of the British Empire, and the mobilisation of others, work to include or exclude different categories of people from the twenty-first-century British collectivity? How does the Invisible Empire

13 Niall Ferguson's *Empire: How Britain made the modern world* Channel 4 2003. BBC Radio 4 *This Sceptred Isle*. Anniversary commemorations include: Battle of Trafalgar 2007, Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 2007, Jamestown 2006–2007, Independence of India and Pakistan 2007. On Gordon Brown's first visit to Africa (when Chancellor of the Exchequer) he was quoted in the *Daily Mail*: "I've talked to many people on my visit to Africa and the days of Britain having to apologise for its colonial history are over. We should move forward … We should celebrate much of our past rather than apologise for it … And we should talk, and rightly so, about British values that are enduring, because they stand for some of the greatest ideas in history: tolerance, liberty, civic duty, that grew in Britain and influenced the rest of the world (Benedict Brogan, *Daily Mail* 2005).

14 National Maritime Museum, Trade and Empire Gallery, British Library East India Company 2000.

combine with other keywords and discursive practices to construct a hierarchy of belonging, where some people are consistently identified as more British than others? How does the Invisible Empire work to ensure that such constructions remain despite being challenged?

The second element of dominant white discourse is the privileging and naturalising of white experience, making the white subject invisible by normalising it. The discourse assumes that white people are 'just people'. In being 'just human' the power to speak for all of humanity is asserted (Dyer 1997: 2–3). The discourse makes the voices of what it sees as the 'ethnic other' passive, as they become the subjects of measurement, categorisation, analysis, and of social and public policy. Hage defined this process as 'a discourse of internal orientalism' (Hage 1998: 17). The normative cultural processes of this discourse are most invisible to those who are most immersed in it, the people who speak as 'we'. White discourse is most visible to those it dominates and does violence to, referred to as 'them'. Lola Young has argued that the ubiquitous use of the word 'we' consolidates white dominance '[the] use of 'we' and 'they' … serves to re-inforce the Euro-American dominant cultural status in determining who is 'us' and who is 'them' (Young 2000: 284). Dyer demonstrated how whiteness is made invisible as debates about 'white' as a particular category become discussions about more specific 'subcategories' of whiteness (Dyer 1988: 44–7). In this study, the constructions of 'East Ender', 'Islander', 'Cockney', 'English', 'middle class', 'working class' and 'British', are such subcategories, all superficially racially unmarked, yet all are sites of struggle over their racial meanings. The dominant discourse constructs these groups as the dominant group in specific circumstances. Apart from the 'middle class' category, they are normalised as being the natural and historically legitimated occupiers of the East End space. In contrast, I track how in white discourse, in different historical contexts, Bengali people living in east London, if visible in the discourse, have variously been categorised as 'lascars', 'Asians', or 'Muslims'. In each case they have been the subjects of social and cultural analysis and political debate where a single identity (based on their presumed employment, ethnicity or religion) has been used to define the whole person or group of people. I investigate the struggles over meanings associated with both the constructed 'white' and 'Bengali' categories. I explore their shared embeddedness within the dominant white discourse and how they work to both maintain and are sustained by the Invisible Empire.

The third element of whiteness is that the dominant discourse constructs 'white' as a category, (or subcategory, such as those discussed above) which people from various 'non-white' backgrounds may, it is suggested, 'aspire' to in order to become part of the 'white' elite. When challenged, the discourse shifts to include different categories of people as 'white' in different contexts. The social and cultural capital associated with that category puts 'white' people in positions of structural advantage.

Historical studies have explored processes whereby those defined as not in the dominant category 'white' in specific historical and spatial contexts have been

included in the 'white' category when circumstances have changed in some way. Contests take place over which groups of people should be included or excluded as 'white'. Becoming 'white' depends on the accumulation of specific social and cultural attributes which are relevant to their specific locations. This is illustrated in the experiences of migrants from all over Europe and the Middle East who arrived in ex-colonial countries of the United States, Canada and Australia as Macedonians, Ukrainians, Norwegians or Lebanese Christians, for example. Over time, and to different degrees, they acquired a 'white' identity which they did not have before (Roediger 1991, 1994, Hage 1998, Jacobson 1998, Frankenberg 1993 and 1997). Discourses of whiteness can be effective in uniting otherwise disparate peoples (Dyer 1997: 19). 'White' people can mobilise around certain issues in opposition to people categorised as 'other'.

Hage has argued, in an Australian context, that people aspire to being 'white'. In this study I do not use the term 'aspire' because of its connotations of desire. The word does not challenge the processes whereby 'non-whites' are made the subject of the discourse. Those who wish to contest the dominance of the 'white' discourse are forced to communicate on its terms. Processes of becoming white in London have some similarities to those in the settler ex-colonies. East London has a history of migration and settlement of peoples from all over Europe and around the world. Historians have demonstrated that there have been economic and political advantages associated with being 'white' (often in terms of being identified as belonging to the subcategories 'Cockney', 'East Ender' or 'Islander') for at least the last four hundred years (Fryer 1984, Lahiri 2002, Visram 1999, 2002, Fisher 2004). It is beyond the remit of this study to focus on historical processes whereby migrants might have acquired various degrees of whiteness (Cockneyness), or have been categorised as 'sometimes whites' at specific political moments (Dyer 1993). However, I show in Chapter 5 how the discourse of tolerance is used to both unite different people as 'white' and to exclude others from that category. The hidden histories of South Asian and African settlement and intermarriage/relationships with other migrants from the British Isles and Europe in east London and beyond, which are increasingly being researched by historians of the Asian and black presence in Britain, challenge the power of the Invisible Empire and the bounded categorisations of minorities. In the following chapters I draw on the research and writings of historians including Michael Fisher and Rozina Visram which challenge the common sense ethnic categorisations of the dominant discourse and the mobilisations of selective histories of the British Empire.

The fourth element is that white liberal discourse is global, but with internally differentiated discursive formations. This point is central to my analysis. This study is based on ethnographic research in a very specific time and place. The individuals, groups, organisations and institutions that are the focus of the study communicate through dominant and subordinate discourses which cross local, national and global contexts. Shome, writing about whiteness in postcolonial India and Nair in relation to the Caribbean, explored colonial and postcolonial 'processes of whiteness' in ex-British colonies which were no longer ruled by white

elites, and from where migrants to Britain brought with them colonial experiences of whiteness (Shome 1999, Nair 2000). Dogra (2009) has demonstrated how the discourse works through the fundraising and advocacy communication of British-run Development NGOs working in ex-colonies. The dominant elite, as exemplified in the discourse of the part-Canadian owned Canary Wharf Group and associated with transnational capital and finance, discussed in Chapter 1, draws on a white liberal discourse recognisable well beyond the local context. The white discourses of 'real East Enders' that I analyse in Chapters 3 and 4 are different in specific content and context from the discourses of 'real Canadians' or 'real Australians' in studies by Mackey (1996) and Hage (1998) respectively but are similar in their meanings and clusters of ideas. The same can be said of the keyword 'tolerance', which as I will show, has its roots in seventeenth-century English liberal philosophy and which is central to the dominant nationalist discourses of the ex-English colonies now Canada, Australia and the USA. British and North American white discourses have both similarities and differences which derive from shared and alternative historical, social, political and economic processes. The dominant white liberal discourse developed from the five-hundred year history of European colonial expansion across the world, but it is manifested differently over time and space. The different and similar manifestations of the dominant discourse in distant national contexts highlights the necessity for both analysing the discourse in a global, postcolonial framework and for understanding the internal differentiations caused by struggles of different subordinate groups.

This study builds on the literature on whiteness, in using a supranational framework of analysis where metropole and colony are analysed as a single field of study (Cooper and Stoler 1997). This approach is especially significant since, as I argue, the dominant discourse excludes or obscures specific historic, political, economic and cultural relationships that existed, and continue to exist, between Britain and her ex-colonies and protectorates. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to research the white liberal discursive formation in all its contexts, it is important that the discursive continuities and associated power relationships that cross continents are recognised, and that a normalised international 'common sense' is identified when it is mobilised.

I have chosen the title white liberal discourse, as opposed to white discourse, as the term liberal carries with it a history of meanings that is not contained in 'white'. 'Liberal' is itself a keyword which has accumulated meanings since the fourteenth century and remains a highly contested term. Williams traced liberal to the early meaning of 'free man', concluding that it has become a political doctrine of certain, necessary kinds of freedom and, essentially, of possessive individualism. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, 'liberal opinion' came to mean open-minded, the opposite of orthodox. In the nineteenth century, political liberalism developed its own political orthodoxy. It still has associations with the leisurely pursuits of people of independent means together with meanings of generosity. Conservatives criticise it as lacking in restraint and discipline, being

of weak beliefs and lacking in rigour. Radicals have claimed it as a term for their 'progressive' opinions (Williams 1976: 179–181).

My use of the word implies all of the above meanings, but most particularly those associated with the philosophy of John Locke (1632–1704). His was a political doctrine of individualist theories of man and society. The dominance of the discourse of the 'Enlightenment' for most of the eighteenth century made common sense the notions of progress. Classical liberalism was rationalist, empirical, secular and based on individualism. John Locke remained the favourite thinker of vulgar liberalism because he put private property as the most basic 'natural right'. He embodies the relationship between 'liberal' as a philosophy of individualism and progress, and 'white' as a privileged, normalising, ahistoricising, shifting category. He is also a significant formulator of the notion of 'tolerance' which is an important keyword in the dominant discourse and which I investigate in depth in Chapter 5.

Several European philosophers writing in the context of the religious strife of the seventeenth century developed the notion of the state as secular rather than a religious institution. In this discourse, the role of the state was seen as maintaining internal peace and material well being. Whilst Hobbes saw the primary duty of the state as the preservation of the individual life, Locke extended it to the preservation of the individual's property. Hobbes and Locke also differed in their views on the relationship between different Christian sects and the secular state. Whilst Hobbes believed that the church should not be in a position to control the day-to-day activities of the state, he advocated a single religion laid down by the sovereign. A reason for this was that he believed that religious competition could lead to political conflict. In contrast, Locke argued for the establishment of the Anglican Church and toleration of other Protestant sects. Catholics, however, Locke argued, should not be tolerated, as he saw them as politically subversive due to their allegiance to the Pope (Brockliss 2001: 176). Locke's rather than Hobbes' ideas on religious toleration were codified in the 1689 Toleration Act to which I refer in more detail in Chapter 5.

Locke and his contemporaries were not just writing in response to religious conflict, but also to their widening knowledge of the non-European world. Pagden argues that from the increased awareness of different customs and beliefs, natural-law philosophers were seeking to find different definitions of 'natural' which would support the assumed truth of Christianity and superiority of European civilisation. At the same time they wanted to recognise the range of beliefs and customs in the world (Pagden 2001). By the time that Locke was writing, Europeans had charted most of the globe. Seventeenth-century Europe was extending its hold over the Americas and coastal Africa. Knowledge of Chinese, Japanese and Indian civilisations was increasing. The emerging Enlightenment discourse united the history of the world in a single story of evolution from pre-Christian, to Christian and secular societies. This narrative of the origin of society schematically represented Europeans as having progressed whilst the rest of the world had remained in the pre-Christian era. Locke contributed to this narrative, informed by

contemporary travel writing based on ethnographic information and speculative fictions. In his *Second Treatise on Government,* Locke intended to sanction the English expropriation of American Indian lands by describing seventeenth-century America as ‘still a Pattern of the first Ages in *Asia* and *Europe*’ (Locke 1690 cited in Pagden 2001: 192).

Locke also used non-Christian beliefs as justification for slavery. Both the Bible and the Qur’an accepted enslavement of populations in ‘just wars’ but Christianity restricted the degree to which Christians could enslave other Christians. Christian slave traders justified the purchase of African slaves by claiming that they had been seized in a ‘just’ internal African conflict. However the idea that slaves were captured as a result of ‘just wars’ was questioned by Lourenco da Silva, a mixed race African Portuguese in 1684–86. He complained to the Holy Office that most slaves had been seized to satisfy the European market. This led to Catholic condemnation of, but not action against the slave trade. John Locke denounced the principle of slavery as ‘So vile and miserable an estate of Man and so directly opposed to the generous Temper and Spirit of our Nation; that ‘tis hardly conceived that an *Englishman* much less a *Gentleman* would plead for it’ (Locke quoted in Pagden 2001: 208). Paganism, however, remained a justification for enslavement. Locke defended slavery for Africans (and thus his shares in the Royal Africa Company) on the grounds that it rescued them from eternal damnation. It was preferable for an African to be a converted Christian slave that a free pagan (Pagden 2001: 208).[15] David Wootton argues that Locke’s ‘Second Treatise’ made slavery as it existed in the American colonies illegitimate, but that Locke, who played a role in shaping England’s policy towards the colonies chose to do nothing about it. Locke’s priority at the time was to work towards achieving a ‘secure and wealthy’ government that could defeat Catholicism and the Absolutism of Louis XIV of France (Wootton 1993: 117). Democracy and the freedom of slaves were never important considerations.

This brief discussion of the philosopher John Locke indicates how his liberal ideas were rooted in the processes of colonial expansion and expropriation of the seventeenth century. Cooper and Stoler argued that as the discourses of the European Enlightenment and liberalism spread from seventeenth-century European metropoles and impacted upon the new and older colonies ‘the dialectics of inclusion and exclusion’ emerged. They stated that:

> The colonies of France, England, and the Netherlands … did more than reflect the bounded universality of metropolitan political culture; they constituted an

15 Historian of the slave trade, Hugh Thomas, argues that ‘Historians should not look for villains’, and follows this statement with a list of famous European cultural figures who had links with slavery, finishing with Locke ‘No-one surely, would refuse to take seriously John Locke, even as a philosopher of liberty, because he was a shareholder in the Royal Africa Company, whose initials, RAC, would be branded on so many black breasts in Africa during the last quarter of the seventeenth century’ (Thomas 1997: 14).

> imaginary and physical space in which the inclusions and exclusions built into the notions of citizenship, sovereignty and participation were worked out … Efforts to define what a dominant class or a government could and could not do, helped to create *Homo Europeaus* and the social projects for which that entity stood, and therefore clarify who was the most fit to rule, at home and abroad … the rationalizing, accumulating and civilizing tendencies of European expansion both built on and could not escape the violence of militarism as that expansion blended coercive and persuasive strategies of racial rule. (Cooper and Stoler 1993: 3)

This is not to argue that Enlightenment discourses are essentially European or necessarily associated with militarism and coercion. Dominant discourses about the Enlightenment may assert that their essential Europeanness, when 'Europe' has never been a closed system culturally, politically or economically. So-called Enlightenment Principles and urges to classify and differentiate were not and are not confined to European thought (Subrahmanyam, 1997: 761). However, it is the dynamic, shifting and enduring relationships between the coercive power of militarised European colonialism combined with the persuasive hegemonic power of the discourses of the Enlightenment and liberalism that is flagged in the labelling of the dominant discourse as white and liberal.

In this chapter I have described and justified a theoretical framework that combines Gramsci's notion of hegemony, Foucault's notion of discursive formations, theories of whiteness and theorisations on liberalism and which treats the metropole and colony as an analytic whole. The following chapters are based on ethnographic research and discourse analysis that took place intensively over a period of one year in 1993–94 and less intensively over two decades, in east London. Through participation in a series of events, interviews of participants and observers, participant observation, and analyses of local and national media and political discourse, I investigate complex processes involved in the acquisition and transmission of power. I identify and map the dominant white liberal discourse, and challenges to it, focusing on contests over keywords and ideas in different and related contexts. I investigate how groups become categorised subjects and how they challenge those categorisations. I demonstrate the flexibility of the Invisible Empire through showing how, when challenged, the dominant discourse shifts to accommodate different histories and in the process the dominant group consolidates alliances and maintains hegemony.

The arguments in this book were developed through the ethnography and discourse analysis that were part of my D.Phil research in social anthropology. I was living and working in Tower Hamlets throughout the period in which this book is based (1990–2009). The intense period of ethnographic fieldwork and collection of media and political discourses was during a specific period of racial violence and related political struggles in 1993–94. In September 1993, seventeen year old Bengali British student, Quddus Ali, was permanently brain damaged in a racial attack in Stepney. A week later a British National Party councillor was elected

in a by election to represent the Millwall ward on the Isle of Dogs which is part of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. During the eight months between his election in September and defeat in local government elections the following May I attended political meetings, demonstrations and supposedly unrelated cultural events. As well as participant observation, I carried out interviews and collected related visual and aural material. I accumulated material and analysed discourses of powerful organisations, including the Canary Wharf Group, the police and the BBC, I analysed the discourses of two local newspapers, the paid-for *East London Advertiser* and the free paper, *East End Life*, published by the local authority (Tower Hamlets) and supposedly delivered to every address in the borough.[16]

In the multidisciplinary field of discourse studies, many analyses focus on a single point of time, imposing a misleading notion of fixity onto the discourses analysed. The focus of my study is on examining the processes through which keywords and symbols are transformed and how meanings of associated terms are changed; in short, how discourses shift.[17] Through focusing on discourse shifts in their social and historical context, specifically on how people from the ex-colonies were constructed in 1990, 2000 and 2005–2007 on the Isle of Dogs and surrounding areas in east London, I am able to demonstrate the historical specificity and flexibility of discourse and discourse change. This necessitates identifying how dominant and subordinate discourses are associated with specific groups, categories of people or institutions at specific times. It follows that the discourse analysis techniques that I employ involve investigating the changing 'context' as well as 'text' (Blommaert 2001).[18]

Chapter Outlines

Each chapter seeks to uncover different ways that the Invisible Empire and related elements work in the dominant white liberal discourse about Britishness. The chapters are arranged thematically. Chapters 1 and 2 both examine the Invisible Empire as a constituent of the dominant white liberal discourse in the context of British Empire related anniversaries that took place in the East End of London between 2000 and 2007. They are a preceded by an introduction which sets out the theoretical and ethnographic context. Chapters 3 and 4 also are preceded by an introduction which

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16 The *East London Advertiser* had a circulation of 24,973, targeting Tower Hamlets but also read further afield. It claimed to contain 'hard news' and to be 'caring and campaigning about the community it serves', (*ELA* Special Supplement July 1992). In 1993–94 terrestial TV channels dominated, consequently data collection was a less complex process than a decade later.

17 Early examples of this type of discourse analysis include van Dijk 1993, Wetherall and Potter 1992 and Williams' approach to keywords. 1983: 15.

18 In examining the content of the discourses of interviewees, I do not use the more intricate speech analysis of sociolinguistics as exemplified by Rampton (2001).

sets the scene for their examination of processes of the construction of 'white' and 'Bengali' categories and their relationship with the Invisible Empire during a period of political conflict during 1993–94. These chapters explore how people experienced and challenged the constraints imposed on them by these discursive constructions and the extent to which police, local authority and media discourses shifted in response to those challenges. They identify historical absences in the dominant representations of the East End local media and government discourses, demonstrating that what is edited out of discourse is as significant as the images and memories that are mobilised. They show that the processes of exclusion have histories and are related to the specific political economy of the East End and its relationship with the nation and empire. Chapter 5 addresses how the Invisible Empire combines with other elements of that discourse to maintain a flexible 'hierarchy of belonging' where different categories of people are constructed as having greater or lesser rights to belong. 'Tolerance' is examined as a keyword that is central to white liberal discourse and the maintenance of cultural hegemony in Britain. Chapter 6 makes the Invisible Empire visible through drawing on recent historical research to investigate nineteenth- and twentieth-century categorisations and connections of people from South Asia and to demonstrate how the dominant discourse and the British state have worked historically through to the present to subjectify, classify and exclude people from the Indian subcontinent from fully belonging. The final chapter considers how the Invisible Empire and simplistic 'communitarian-culturalist' categorisations of Bengali people as 'Muslims' in recent discourses about 'multicultural Britain' combine to work against 'genuine metropolitan belonging' (Bhatt 2006) through the privileging of differences at the expense of commonalities.

Each chapter assumes Britain and its colonies or ex colonies as an analytic whole and necessarily involves searches for the stories of the British Empire that are hidden, absent and omitted from that ubiquitous narrative. This investigation has been hugely helped by the recent research of scholars including Gopalan Balachandran, Rozina Visram and Michael Fisher who have expanded knowledge about the pre-twentieth century experiences of people from South Asia in Britain.