

Re-Presenting Protestors as Thugs: The Politics of Labelling Dissenting Voices

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Abstract

The use of the word “thugs”, has always precipitated the crisis that has existed *longue durée* in the history of America. The word carries diverse meanings in different spaces, histories, communities, and countries. When used as a stigmatizing label, it can define, classify, restrict and fix boundaries within a society. Through an assessment of political rhetoric, tweets, and media reports, this article evaluates the hegemonic power embedded in the word and its strategic use by the world leaders for nefarious purposes in the post-truth era. It also explores the racial underpinnings of the word and the covert intentions behind its usage. This paper critically interrogates the social circumstances in which the word is used to suppress dissent. The role of post-truth media as the intermediaries and purveyors of the real and the fake is analyzed. Labelling theory is applied to demonstrate how policy makers, mark out a group in order to rationalize the discourse of state violence. The methods and the outcomes of stigmatizing labelling is illustrated, paying special attention to the role it plays in triggering social unrest. The essay argues that the polemics around the word “thug” enables the administrators to shift focus from the real issues, and thereby deny racial minorities their right to challenge the government policies and actions.

Keywords: Labelling theory, Thug, Dissenting voices, Racialdiscrimination, Post-truth era, Race-coded language.

Introduction

The import of the word “thug” is diverse in different spaces, histories, communities, and countries. The word was borrowed into the English vocabulary in the early part of nineteenth century. The Europeans used it to signify India's murderous cult, committed to looting. The original meaning of the Indian word, “thug”- “a deceiver” or “a scoundrel”, underwent semantic changes during the British rule. The colonial underpinning of the word is coloured by imperial interests (Roy, 1999; Wagner, 2007; Woerkens, 2002). In America, the word entered the jargon of Hip-Hop culture and was popularized by Tupac Shakur in the latter part of twentieth century through the phrase, “thug life”. The usage has become part of the “complex narratives that reveal interdependent beliefs about love, loss, morality, and the individual will to survive and triumph” (Jeffries, 2010, pp. 95-96).

The use of the word “thugs”, has always precipitated the crisis that has existed *longue durée* in the history of America. By earmarking the protestors, as perpetrators of violence, the

heads of the state, levitate and normalize the state sanctioned brutality and exercise social control against the Afro- Americans. Moreover, they break free from the accountability and responsibility of addressing one of the endemic social problems that is latent in the American society- racial discrimination. “Such labelling is usually considered objective, efficient, routine and indispensable and, perhaps as a consequence, it continues wantonly, without contemplation of the politics involved and the potential adverse outcomes” (Moncrieff, 2007, p.1).

The label “thug” has been employed in American history by the political administrators to keep the protestors in place. By a careful analysis of the contexts in which the word has been used, this article aims to explore how the term imposes and fixes criminal traits on a dissenting group. When used as a stigmatizing label, it can define, classify, restrict and fix boundaries within a society. Through an assessment of political rhetoric, tweets, and media reports, this article evaluates the hegemonic power embedded in the strategic use of the word and how it is used for nefarious purposes by the world leaders in post-truth era. It also explores the racial underpinnings of the word and the covert intentions behind its usage. This paper critically interrogates the social circumstances in which the word is used to suppress dissent. Labelling theory is used to demonstrate how policy makers, mark out a group in order to rationalize the discourse of state violence. The methods and the outcomes of labelling is discussed in detail, paying special attention to the role it plays in triggering social unrest. The essay argues that the polemics around the word “thug” enables the administrators to shift focus from the real issues, and thereby deny racial minorities their right to challenge the government policies and actions. For this, two incidents from the recent history of America is analyzed to depict the debilitating effect of negative stereotyping: the institutional murder of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, and the homicide of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

Freddie Gray

On 12 April 2015, an African -American man named Freddie Gray aged twenty five, was arrested by Baltimore City Police Department for carrying an illegal switchblade which later was proved to be a legal pocket knife. Gray, who was in good health at the time of arrest, suffered severe spine and neck injuries while in the police vehicle and passed away on 19 April 2015. Protests flared in the streets of Baltimore. The American president Barack Obama, the Maryland governor, Larry Hogan and the Baltimore’s Mayor, Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, called the protestors as thugs. Freddie Gray, was also branded as a thug in social media as he was earlier arrested on drug charges and minor crimes (Ford, 2015; Simpson, 2015).

George Floyd

On 25 May 2020, George Floyd, 46, died after being arrested by police for allegedly using a counterfeit bill, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Footage of the arrest shows Floyd pinned to the floor and a white police officer, Derek Chauvin, kneeling on Floyd's neck. Transcripts of the police bodycam footage show Floyd repeating twenty times that he could not breathe. His death happened within 30 minutes. The four officers involved were fired from the job. The incident triggered widespread protests around the world. Social media campaigns “#Ican’tbreathe” gained momentum (Bayrasli, 2020; Muhammad, 2020). The president Donald Trump, in a tweet, called the protesters “thugs” and said “when the looting starts, the shooting starts”. Twitter removed the tweet for “glorifying violence” (Donald J. Trump, 2020). The British prime minister responded to the protests in London by stating, “Racist thuggery’, will be answered by “the force of law” (Sawer et al., 2020). Australian senator, Pauline Hanson, called, George Floyd “a thug” (Folley, 2020).

The systemic violence of neocolonial states finds expression in stereotyping the dissenting voices with violence. The word, “thug” is used “to dismiss Black life as less valuable and perpetuates a negative and criminal connotation in forms of micro-insults and micro-invalidations” (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016, p. 351). The physical, emotional, and psychological ramifications of such usages extend beyond historical and geographical boundaries. The impact of the process of labelling can be detected not only between the state and people in a society, but also among people “through constructions of social othering and identity creation” (Wood, 2007, p. 20). The custodial murder of the two Afro-American men brings to fore the politics of stigmatization that results from labelling. Ronald L. Akers (2012) in his book *Criminological Theories*, states that society’s perception of an individual is reflected in labelling and this societal process shapes the self-concepts and the character of a person. “When confronted with a label applied by those with power and authority, the individual has little power to resist or negotiate his or her identification with it” (Akers, 2012, pp. 101-102). Both Gray and Floyd are stamped as thugs immediately after their death, stating that they have been arrested before for minor crimes. As the fact-checking website *Snopes* points out, “The question of past arrests often surfaces among people who want to rationalize police officers’ actions when Black men are killed in custody” (Lee, 2020). Richard Reddick, the Associate Dean of Equity at the University of Texas, considers this, as a part of communication strategy to dehumanize the victim so that the public need not be sorry for the victim and the police can escape from the responsibility. He observes that “the claims about Floyd were also a product of the era’s highly polarized media environment, compounded by years of problematic storytelling by politicians and reporters that portrays Black men only as “criminal entities” instead of nuanced people” (Lee, 2020). In a case involving evident police brutality, researching the background of the victim can only lead to the standardization of state violence.

De-coding Thugs

Charles Hirschman(2004)concedes that, even though, racism is rejected as unscientific, the racial boundaries persists as significant social markers informing public opinions and the design of state policy (p. 400). There is a gamut of words to represent blackness like “thug,” “ghetto,” “brute”, “hood,” “sketchy,” and “shady” without explicitly sounding racially biased (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016, p. 354). When a Black American uses the word “thug” to address himself, it signifies authenticity, power, and being cool. The American rappers use it creatively in their songs to communicate their genuine life. When Afro-Americans are labelled as a “thugs” by the dominant whites, the meaning undergoes a paradigmatic shift. Black men with criminal inclination are often branded as “thugs”. The word is used in public sphere without reproach as it is thought to be racially neutral (Boyd, 2007) and at the same time facilitates racism that has become covert and implicit.

There is a disjuncture between how Afro- Americans’ perceive the label “thug” and how the policy makers of the state view them. Vulnerability, insecurity, forced exclusion and alienation suffered by the racial minorities are coded in the word from an Afro-American perspective. Apart from the accepted meaning of exerting violence, the word carries multifarious meanings for the political administrators, coloured by racial undertones, which include: unemployed problem-makers, looters, people indulging in arson, drug-peddlers and the ones in need of dire rehabilitation. Every time the word is repeated these meanings are re-produced and reiterated. Equating blackbody with savages, criminals, and unmanageable ruffians, facilitate the white supremacy (Davis, 1998; Muhammad, 2010; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). Thus, labelling “... inscribes in and enables the very construction of social reality” (Gupte& Mehta, 2007, p. 66). According to Ian Haney-López, author of *Dog Whistle Politics*, “racial code operates by appealing to deep-

seated stereotypes of groups that are perceived as threatening. But they differ from naked racial terms in that they don't emphasize biology — so it's not references to brown skin or black skin" (Lopez, 2016). The word "thug" is used more to target a racially defined group rather than a specific behaviour, as a replacement for the n-word and has been repeatedly employed by politicians for oppressive shaming, which John Braithwaite (2006) warns, can result in "thought control and stultification of human diversity" (p. 12).

Post-truth Media

Mediated and embodied politics of media has become one of the key features of post-truth era. Representations by the media focus on the prevailing narratives and overlook a range of other potential and convincing interpretations. The CNN news segment, *Outfront* hosted by Erin Burnett cited the use of the word "thug" by the US President, Barack Obama and Baltimore's Mayor, Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, and asked the Baltimore City Council member, Carl Stokes, "isn't it the right word?" The reply he gave was, "so calling them thugs? Just call them n***" (Burnett, 2005). "Stokes was calling attention to the use of coded language that is in some ways explicitly and other ways implicitly used as a substitute for personally mediated racism" (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016, p.351). The process of labelling produces reductionist approaches that stigmatize, provoke and sustain discord in the society (Moncrieff, 2007, p. 3). Burnett associates "thugs" with a deviant behaviour and is ignorant of the history of this offending word to black Americans. Such hegemonic articulations are informed and constructed by previous representations circulated in the mass media (Hobart, 2007, p. 134). Stokes, in turn, is conscious of the structural underpinnings of the word and reflects the sentiments of a black person when the word "thug" is used to signify their existence.

Media functions as the intermediaries and purveyors of the real and the fake. The representations not only reflect the crisis but also "...actively (re)produce it, name the stakes and set the parameters of what is considered real—or not" (Overell & Nicholls, 2019, p. 7). Immediately after a fatal incident, media would resort to the collection of details that often trigger misconceptions about these individuals and would unreasonably label them as thugs. The first information that reaches the public would be difficult to alter. Such re-presentations would then focus on the protestors for hampering peace in the society. The same label that was given to the victim would be transferred to the people who raise voice against this injustice. "True understanding of the power of racialized language, both overt and covert, should be the new standard of journalistic integrity" (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016, p. 365).

Conclusion

The protest of the state against the protestors is reflected in the label "thugs". Every instance of remonstrance, gives an opportunity for naturalizing and normalizing the clusters of meaning that designate the word. Language is the key to the art of governance in a liberal democracy. The word "thug" has replaced the n-word and has played a significant role in manufacturing the fear of "the other". Apart from this, race-coded words are used by the state for authoritarian social control. It can "trigger deep seated feelings of revulsion and give permission to vent frustration on targets lacking economic, social and political power" (Kitossa, 2018). Labelling is a process that is grounded in history and extends globally and is used by the administrators in perpetuating and legitimizing, systemic violence. Branding the dissenting groups as "thugs" is a political strategy of state policing to isolate and detain the protestors. However, it would be an impediment to the struggles for social reformation against the racist totalitarianism, prevalent in the western countries and would undermine the democratic values of justice and equality. Instead of shifting

the blame from the perpetrator to the victim, the state has to be accountable for every action it initiates.

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