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Social cohesion and counter-terrorism: a policy contradiction?

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This book examines the intersection between the Prevent strand of the UK's counter-terrorism strategy and the Community Cohesion policies that had emerged after civil disturbances in several northern towns including Burnley and Oldham in 2001. The discourses surrounding these two policies are contextualised with reference to British race relations and immigration policies in the postwar period. Based on interviews with senior management, operational staff and local councillors responsible for the management and implementation of community cohesion and counter-terrorism policies in West Yorkshire, the authors address and add to understanding of many issues of interest to urban studies and related disciplines.

The first chapter provides an excellent introduction to the development of the Community Cohesion agenda in the context of postwar British ethnic relations. Community Cohesion is identified as a New Labour policy response to the social unrest in the north of England in 2001 that has an antecedent in the neo-liberalism associated with Thatcherism a decade earlier. Since the early 1980s Muslim communities have been categorised as 'outsiders' courtesy of their perceived cultural values and economic circumstances. The authors also argue

that Blair and Thatcher failed to address the issues of social class, inequality and discrimination that have shaped ethnic relations in areas such as North Yorkshire. This is illustrated by a series of reports published by their respective governments that have promoted the 'self-segregation/parallel lives' discourse as an explanation for the lack of bridging social capital between minority Muslim communities and the majority White population. The social psychological literature that underpins this policy agenda is critiqued with reference to studies that suggest that efforts to foster positive inter-community relations are unlikely to succeed unless there is sufficient focus on the socio-economic deprivation in these inner-city areas (Letki, 2005). The chapter concludes by discussing how the Community Cohesion agenda has become infused with the post 7/7 counter-terrorist priorities to encourage 'responsible' local leadership in Muslim communities.

The second chapter discusses how this agenda intersects with specific government initiatives to prevent violent extremism in British Muslim communities. Prevent, the strand of the UK counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST) that addresses the perceived causes of radicalisation in Muslim communities, is characterised here as a response to the increased threat of international terrorism that had been so graphically illustrated during the 7/7 terrorist attacks in London. This link between Islam and jihadist terrorism and the new perception of threat posed by 'home-grown' terrorists are found to be the most significant reasons for the use of Prevent by the state to target Muslim communities. This leads the reader to the contradiction referred to in the title of this book, the contribution of Prevent towards the further alienation of British

Muslims from British society. The chapter reflects on the anger and resentment amongst Muslim communities towards Prevent and cites the *Preventing Violent Extremism* Commons report (2010) as evidence that the UK Parliament has questioned the proportionality and reasonableness of this approach. What is particularly interesting to note is that the Prevent strategy emphasises the importance of making Muslim communities more socially cohesive in order to reduce the support for extremists. Yet, as we have seen earlier in the previous chapter, the inequalities and discriminations faced by these communities remain unaddressed and cultural differences between minority Muslim and majority White populations continue to permeate the discourses of government in this policy area. However, the government is not held solely responsible by the authors for creating fear amongst the majority White population about the perceived scale of the terrorist threat emanating from these communities. Media framing of an antagonistic relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim during this period is also found to have contributed to this 'social construction' of Islam as a potential threat to British society.

The perception of Islam as a threat to British society is discussed further in the next chapter of the book. The authors characterise this as a form of 'anti-Muslimism' and reject the media's use of the term Islamophobia, which implies that opposition to Islam could be considered a 'psychological phobia.' The authors draw heavily on the work of Halliday (1996) to differentiate between the populist and strategic strands of anti-Muslimism that have emerged in response to the presence of Muslim communities within the United Kingdom. A convincing case is made for holding political elites responsible for the salience of the

symbolic threat posed by the cultural practices of British Muslims. Both Thatcherite and New Labour policy discourses on citizenship are said to have informed a 'neurotic politics' surrounding immigration that has continued to emphasise cultural differences and the inherent threat posed to British values by Muslim communities. In this context, Islamophobia can be considered yet another ideological construction that has emerged from the neo-liberalist agenda of successive UK governments.

It is the interview data in chapter five that may be of most interest to scholars of urban studies. By their own admission, the authors present an unusually positive account of the competency of local authorities in this policy area. They have also managed to glean some remarkably candid observations from the interviewees about the implementation of Community Cohesion and Prevent in North Yorkshire. Three major themes emerge from the data. First, local authorities resent the interference of central government in the management of community relations and take pride in their local expertise. While by the nature of their work community activists might be expected to highlight their own competency, the study portrays a highly motivated and professional workforce that feel that their role in the surveillance of Muslim communities has undermined their independence as community workers. Second, the interviewees suggest that Prevent is a significantly flawed policy that contributes towards the perception that Muslim communities constitute a threat to British society. Many of the Muslim interviewees felt compromised by their role in the implementation of a policy informed by an Islamophobic ideology. Local councilors also criticised the targeting of one particular faith group via Prevent that often left local residents

resentful towards central government. The other major theme in the data is that both Prevent and Community Cohesion initiatives do not appear to reach beyond a narrow range of 'usual suspects' within Muslim communities. The interviewees suggest that the dependency on the small number of individuals and groups who tend to participate in these initiatives should provide sufficient basis for the government to at least review the effectiveness of its Prevent and Community Cohesion policies.

The empirical data is effectively organised around key themes and the authors have helpfully provided an index by both author and subject. The comprehensive discussion of Islamophobia is a must-read for those who are new to this area, including general readers. This book is highly recommended for students and scholars of urban studies and related disciplines.

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