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The Trojan Horse Affair and the coloniality of ‘British values’

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ABSTRACT

British values were formally defined and institutionalised in the aftermath of the Trojan Horse Affair in 2014 and as part of the UK’s counterterrorism strategy. In this article, I analyse the idea of “British values” as an element of coloniality and ask why the UK’s counterterrorism rhetoric, of which Prevent is a part, is centred on the concept of “British values”. The article shows how the discourse, and the promotion of British values, serves as a securitising and categorising agent which essentialises specific groups of people. In the contemporary context, this affects Muslims in particular, who are constructed as “other” and naturally hostile to or incompatible with British values. It argues that the rhetoric of the concept of “British values” and its application has been used as a form of distinction, not just today but also historically; this distinction has been built on colonialism and is sustained through coloniality. Through “British values”, the civilising mission lives on within the UK’s counterterrorism strategy and within Prevent more specifically.

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Introduction

In November 2013, a photocopied letter titled “Operation Trojan Horse” was sent to the Birmingham city council. This letter purported to reveal a secret “Islamist” conspiracy to take over Muslim-majority schools in Birmingham with an “Islamist agenda” (The Guardian 2017). Although it was later established that this letter was forged, the following months would see a range of responses to this scandal, one being the involvement of the then national counter-terrorism chief, Peter Clarke, to investigate this scandal at the request of Michael Gove, who was the then Secretary of State for Education for the Conservative government. This shifted the scandal from one of a “school mismanagement issue to a security issue” and more specifically a “terrorism issue/case” (Poole 2018, 377). Another outcome was the implementation of the mandatory teaching of British values in schools (Gove 2014). The fear that the absence or lack of respect for “British values” could lead to “radicalisation” informed the essence of the subsequent UK counterterrorism strategy.

The letter itself supposedly detailed a five-stage strategy to take over Birmingham schools, with the first stage being the identification of “vulnerable schools where most of the pupils are Muslims”. This was followed by the identification of parents

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who were on board with an “Islamist agenda,” which according to the letter would lead to a domino effect of agitating school leaders who aligned with conservative Islamic beliefs to replace staff who were opposed to such an agenda (The Week 2022). The letter was made known to the Department for Education (DfE) in December 2013, then leaked to the press in early 2014. In response to the leak, the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) also carried out an investigation into the alleged plot, which was then extended to 21 schools across Birmingham. David Cameron, the then Prime Minister, supported this investigation: “[...] we will not accept any school being run by extremists or promoting extremists’ views.... Ofsted is able to get in there and inspect’ (Hiles 2014). Cameron also summoned an emergency meeting with the Extremism task-force and alleged that “Islamist extremism in schools in Birmingham demanded a robust response” (Cameron 2014a). This alleged plot produced four major government investigations (Shackle 2017) and Gove’s installation of the mandatory teaching of fundamental British values in the schools.

In response to the DfE’s call for an obligatory respect of the fundamental British values and the promotion of them within schools, the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) criticised how the term “British values” in a way fostered a case of alienation and division between countries, creating the illusion that these values are unique to Britain and alluding to a supposed difference of superiority and civility that the UK possessed. They further stated that “the requirement has also sometimes been misinterpreted as an instruction to promote stereotypical ideas of what it means to be British or to celebrate Britain’s imperial past” (Hollinshead and Soyei 2016). However, I argue that while this is certainly true, the suggestion that there is just an *implication* of superiority trivialises the intent of the rhetoric of “British values”. It ignores the severity of the colonial nature of “British values”. To understand this severity, the question of its significance in Prevent and the wider context of the United Kingdom’s counterterrorism strategy needs to be addressed. In this article, I critically discuss why Prevent and the UK’s counterterrorism rhetoric at large has centred on the promotion of British values. In building this discussion, the article also shows how the discourse, and the promotion of British values serves as a securitising and categorising agent which essentialises specific groups of people. More specifically, I demonstrate how a resolution of “criminality” is thought to be addressed and countered through British values both historically and today. It analyses the eminence that has been placed on British values and argues that this “prestige” awarded to British values possesses a colonial heritage sustained through the structure of coloniality today.

The dominance and eminence awarded to British values can be observed when cases of its promotion and discussion are analysed. However, more than just the inherent dominance, it is the use of that dominance to suppress a constructed Other through the institutionalisation and securitisation of the concept of British values that is of interest here. This paper will be analysing the importance of it within the UK’s discourse of terrorism and extremism, and the Trojan Horse scandal. The Trojan Horse Affair is an important case to analyse in this context because it was responsible for cementing the institutionalisation of counterterrorism as mobilised through Prevent. This formalised the legal place of British values across the entire public sector, mandating public workers’

complicity in enforcing these British values (Kaleem 2022) and thereby sustaining coloniality.

As Rizwaan Sabir (2017, 206) has noted, “contemporary counterterrorism policy and practice rather than being ‘new’ or ‘unique’ is in fact a continuation of historic practices and methods used to maintain social control against the racialised ‘other’ in the colonies”. Prevent, as well as the formal institutionalisation of British values, as I argue, is an example of this. I argue that the insistent position of the British government to promote British values both as a way of living and as a determinant and solution to extremism stems from the colonial era and is upheld through the contemporary system of coloniality. In other words, the conceptualisation and discussion of British values today cannot be separated from Britain’s colonial past (Gani 2017; Gani and Marshall 2022). Its promotion and its usage in whatever context – terrorism, counterterrorism or as political manifesto – continually show how relics of colonialism are maintained through a system of coloniality. Through an institutionalised system of othering, the concept, I argue is continually reproduced as a *form of distinction*; creating classifications or rather measurements of people based on their supposed acceptance of said British values. Through those classifications, inherent criminality is ascribed to those deemed to be on the outskirts of these values which in recent times have been pin-pointed to those within the Muslim communities (Breen-Smyth 2014; Croft 2012; Winter et al. 2022).

Similarly, “terrorism” today has also predominantly been constructed as originating from the “Islamic world” leading to the securitisation of Muslim communities (Kundnani 2007, 2). The positioning of British values within the framework of countering terrorism has facilitated and aided the securitisation and othering of communities carried out by the British state. However, such securitisation and othering is not new and was integral to the colonial state and part of the contemporary creation of the nation state: the structure of the modern nation-state puts race at its centre (Valluvan 2019, 20), which then necessitates a constructed “other” to establish national bounds, values, and peripheries (Younis 2021).¹

As Goldberg (2002, 7–9) posits, rather than seeing race and racism as a separate part of the state, it is essential to modernity and was important for modern state formation. Goldberg (2002, 82) further argues that the modern state works on a homogenising premise. Within this premise, those the state considers to be an “other” are either excluded or required to assimilate into it (Goldberg 2002, 96). The institutionalisation of “fundamental British values” within schools in response to the Trojan Horse Affair and through the Prevent strategy illustrates this. The promotion and the formal institutionalisation of British values operates by creating identities through the implicit criminalisation of the “other”. The weaponisation of those values against the constructed “other” is central to the exclusionary discourses of British nationalism. Central to such nationalism is the belief of superiority that has fuelled the weaponisation of British values. The new civilising mission. The civilising of values.

Against this background I highlight the faceted nature of the positioning of British values within the UK’s counterterrorism regime. I demonstrate the implicit institutionalisation of colonial structures in contemporary tactics through the British state’s reliance on its values as an assumed antidote to “terrorism”. This is premised on the eventual erasure of the targeted/othered groups’ cultures, values, and beliefs which are assumed to be prone to criminality and ultimately terrorism. To build this argument, I firstly outline what

I mean by coloniality. I then provide a historical case study of criminal allocation by the British colonial authorities to a group of people in British-occupied India, the so-called Thuggee. This case provides a historical example of how the British colonial state operated by persecuting those assigned a (racial) classification of inherent criminality through a legal framework. I then show how British values has been defined and how a certain “eminence” has been awarded to it by the British state, which I argue to be an element of coloniality. Finally, I tie this back to the response to the Trojan Horse Affair both structurally and politically.

Coloniality and its structure

“Colonialism”, Gandhi (2019, 17) writes, ‘marks the historical process whereby the “West” attempts systematically to cancel or negate the cultural difference and value of the “non-West”. It is the justification of a political act of superiority and hegemony (Hiddleston 2009). This means that colonialism is more than the control of a foreign territory through physical settlement, political rule, or economic exploitation. It was and is also a form of power; it is the domination of people’s identities, cultures, and knowledge, creating a division or rather a hierarchy of knowledge, identity and culture with the “Western” ideologies being the superior one (Quijano 2007). Edward Said further explains this relationship of identity between the Empire and its colonies, between the West and the East and other colonised territories. In the course of pitting itself against “the Orient” and more generally the “non-West”, European culture, knowledge and identity was established as the “norm of orientation” on civilisation, development, and modernity (Quijano 2007). As Said states, “the relationship between the Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony”. (Said 1978, 29)

It is in the production of systems, knowledge and culture, centred on Europe, built on racialised hierarchies and the continual denial of indigenous, pre-colonial, or non-European systems of knowing, being and creating, that coloniality lies. It is important to note that while colonialism differs from coloniality, it is part of it. Coloniality, however, is more than just the colonial control or occupation of land and relates to the production of knowledge (Gani 2017; Khan 2024; Mignolo 2007). It denotes the continuous denial and rejection of indigenous knowledge, culture, and systems by Western states, rendering the standard of “rationality/modernity” to be European. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) theorises that the mechanism of coloniality is based on an arrangement of a hierarchical classification of human beings based on racial ontologies which still order the world as we know it. The notion of modernity presents the Eurocentric West as the prototype for civilisation, development, and humanity (Fasakin 2021). Coloniality, modernity’s darker side, reveals the continuous denial and rejection of indigenous knowledge, culture, values, and systems upon which modernity is based.

Modernity is constructed as inherently European, and as having introduced “the rational ‘concept’ of emancipation that we affirm and subsume” (Mignolo 2007, 454). The concept of emancipation with its roots in the European Enlightenment (Mignolo 2007) and is a very Western-centric concept (see also Abu-Bakare 2024). The age of Enlightenment is often credited with the advancement of liberty, constitutional human reasoning and the separation of the church/religion from the state (Khan 2021). Although the European Enlightenment era of emancipation later proposed changes

to the political system, the underlying logic of coloniality which is part of this system, remains unacknowledged. The new nation-states that emerged in this era just became a part of a new imperial order (Bhambra 2022). Quijano describes how history is seen as evolving from “primitive to civilised; from the traditional to the modern; from the savage to the rational; from pre-capitalism to capitalism” (Quijano 2007, 176). And Europe is seen as the founder and pioneer of this evolution for all other cultures and societies. Essentially, the notion of rationality/modernity was created and advanced during colonialism and through coloniality which serves as the justifying ideology of contemporary state systems of liberalism, capitalism and modernism which are all modes of rationality/modernity.

Therefore, when I refer to the “colonial”, I refer to those institutions, security practices, transnational state systems and models that were developed by Western colonial powers and established during the period of European (settler-) colonialism. Dominant ideas about the world based on binaries are colonial. For example, the “developing and developed world” within state social interaction, the idea of the “core and the periphery”, within political economic theory (Dussel Enrique and Fornazzari 2002) and the idea of “liberalism and state democracy” (Georg 2011). These all correspond to and enable harmful, racial practices and policies on governance (Quijano 2007), counterinsurgency/counterterrorism (McQuade 1990), state building (Fasakin 2021), economic development (Quijano 2007), immigration (El-Enany 2020), and state identity (Ann Laura and Frederick 2017) that are born out of the idea and concept of modernity (Mignolo 2007). It is based on the idea of an “us versus them”, “backwardness versus development” and legitimacy to use violence versus illegitimacy of violence’ that was also prevalent in the era of colonialism (Woodman Connor 2020).

One way in which coloniality is present today is in contemporary counterterrorism practices in Europe (see Khan 2024; Wright 2024). Michel’s (2004, 87) notion of the “imperial boomerang” explains how ideologies and practices from the colonies are transported back to the metropole: the boomerang effect of colonialism. First articulated by Aimé Césaire in his book, *Discourse on Colonialism*, it was furthered by Michel (2004, 87) who points towards the effects of European colonialism on the “West”. Aimé (1972, 37), for example, argued that Adolf Hitler employed a colonialist strategy with his Nazi agenda; the only thing that differed in Hitler’s agenda was that it was carried out inside Europe and not outside of it (Aimé 1972, 38). Thus, as Sabir (2017) and many others (Abu-Bakare 2020; Berda 2020; Khalili 2013; Khan 2021; Sentas 2014) have alluded to, colonial strategies have travelled back to Europe, like the “boomerang” Foucault uses as a metaphor.

As I argue here, “British values” and their use in counterterrorism is an example of this. It is an element of coloniality that is present within the governance of populations within a “Western” state, the UK. In the process of state securitisation, the British government employs a colonial strategy. It has been influenced by and built upon the dichotomy of Western culture and non-western culture, the former being presented as and assumed to be the epitome of civilisation and social and moral uprightness and the latter the opposite. This dichotomy is only accepted when it does not impede on the political, economic, and power structure that guides the world (Mignolo 2007). As a result, any threat that opposes the Westernised standard of civilisation status quo requires preventative and operative actions that birth policies and strategies that work to maintain and reinforce it.

The securitisation of othered communities, counterterrorism/counterinsurgency and ultimately the Prevent strategy are all examples of these policies and strategies. As Amal Abu-Bakare (2020, 82) writes: “The pursuit of counterterrorism [in the West] has always been intertwined with the politics of European contact, colonisation, and the domination of people thought to be beyond modern civilisation”.

The British construction of the thuggee in India

In the Trojan Horse Affair, we see how the quick association of terrorism and religious extremism to an *alleged* plot of Islamising the non-secular schools was enough to require state intervention and securitisation. Similarly, the case of the Thuggee provides a historical example of the British state assigning (hereditary) criminality and inclination to violence and extremism to an othered people based on their race and religious affiliations. Colonial officials in India defined the “Thuggee” as a group of people, or caste who performed “a specific, ritualistic form of highway robbery and murder by strangulation” (Bhattacharya 2020). William Henry Sleeman, a British administrator and soldier in British India, wrote a manual on the Thugs, identifying them as worshippers of the Goddess Kali whose mode of ritual sacrifices was murdering travellers through strangulation (Bhattacharya 2020). The Goddess was a depiction of the moral depravity and the inhumane violence of India and its “backward” religion (Bhattacharya 2020).

The phenomenon of the Thuggee allowed for the categorisation of Thugs as a special type of criminal that posed a threat to the authority of colonial rule (Lloyd 2008). To eradicate this threat, the Anti-Thuggee Campaign was created, and a separate police department (Thuggee and Dacoity Department) was designated specifically for the purpose of eradicating the Thuggee. Through an emphasis of their religious loyalism to the Goddess, the construction of Indians as people led by a barbaric religion was further pursued under the umbrella of the Thuggee (Abbas 2023). The phenomenon of the Thuggee allowed for the creation of a legal state of exception, which gave way for the formulation of exclusionary legal procedures. These Thugs worked beyond the scope of civilisation and therefore were beyond the scope of the law, in very similar ways to how “terrorists” today are often beyond the scope of regular law. Tom Lloyd writes, “dacoits (thugs) were criminal wretches at war with the government who had forfeited any right to the benefits of its laws” (Lloyd 2008, 205). Exceptional laws were therefore required for the eradication of the Thuggee, and it was not enough to just apprehend a Thug but to suppress the possible reappearance of one (Lloyd 2008). Hence, the design of a system that aimed to identify suspected Thugs, through a reporting scheme (with the use of people called approvers) or the character categorisation of a person. Any individual had the capacity to be a Thug and once a Thug had been identified, the family members of said Thug were also Thugs because the nature of a Thug was hereditary (Lloyd 2008, 202). The conflation of one’s criminality to a specific identity within a multifaceted individual judged them guilty.²

An important point that McQuade highlights, is the difficulty and the ambiguous nature of the word “Thug” (McQuade 1990). The open definition of the word could therefore be used against any individual to discredit or critique an action. We see a parallel with the word “terrorist” today. As the control of colonial power and territory

increased, the ability of the colonial to construct certain actions of the indigenes as barbarism increased state monopoly on legitimacy, whether that be the legitimacy on violence or regulations. One result noted by McQuade was that certain groups that previously held informal roles of power within territories were then reconstructed as enemies of the government (McQuade 1990, 39). The legitimacy of power and violence in a way was then redirected from groups like the Thugs or dacoit to the colonial state. The stereotypes created in reference to Thugs therefore served as a bedrock for the rhetoric of justification on rebellions carried out against colonial rule in India by its indigenes (McQuade 1990).

For example, the Santhal Rebellion of 1856, an uprising by the Santhal tribal community of India against the British East India Company, was seen as a war inspired by Indians based on their religious beliefs and barbaric and criminal nature rather than the aim of settling political grievances held by the indigenes (McQuade 1990, 41). In reality, it was an uprising in response to the forcible taking of land by the landlords instated by colonial rule and the establishment of tax systems by the British authorities that heightened the financial hardship of the tribe and the constant discrimination the tribe faced.

The idea of religious extremism was not only placed on the Thugs. In the same way that the Thugs were labelled religious extremist with inherently barbaric natures, Muslims too have been geographically and ideologically mapped as risky based on the belief that their culture and religion are inherently violent (Taylor 2020; see also Khan 2023). This notion is also present within the implementation of the Prevent Strategy and British values' place in it. As terrorism has been used as an identity category and epithet (Khan 2021; Lisa 2013) so has British values. While in the current climate "terrorism" remains the starting point for criminalisation of Muslim bodies, the "acceptance of British values" has become the new antidote to terrorism.

The UK's pre-crime counterterrorism strategy: prevent and channel

The United Kingdom's counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST) was first introduced in 2003 but made available to the public in 2006 and then subsequent revisions to the strategy were released in 2009, 2011, 2018 and finally 2023. According to the government, "the aim of CONTEST is to reduce the risk to the UK and its interests overseas from terrorism, so that people can go about their lives freely and with confidence (HM Government 2011a). The strategy for CONTEST is divided into 'four P's'; Pursue, Prevent, Protect and Prepare. Each P has a role in countering terrorism. The objective of Pursue is to stop terrorist attacks; Prevent is to stop people from becoming or supporting terrorism; Protect is based on strengthening the nations' protection against terrorist attacks and Prepare, is to lessen the impact of a terrorist attack (HM Government 2011a). Although "terrorism" is mentioned more generally, in identifying the threats to the UK, four primary sources all linked to Islamism were highlighted and presented as threats not just to the UK but also to the world (HM Government 2011b).

Arguably the most central part of CONTEST, however, is the Prevent Strategy (Martin 2019). The principal goal of Prevent is ensuring individuals do not become terrorists (HM Government 2011b). Prevent consists of pre-emptive measures taken to halt certain

“vulnerable persons” from being radicalised, which may or may not lead them into committing terrorist attacks. The three main objectives of Prevent are:

- (1) Challenging the extremist ideologies
- (2) Preventing people from being drawn into terrorism and,
- (3) Working with sectors and institutions that are at risk of having individuals that can be radicalised. (HM Government 2011b)

McCulloch and Pickering (2009) refer to the anticipation of risks and threats and the prevention of “illegitimate” as “pre-crime”. This notion of pre-crime and the creation of exceptional laws to address cases of criminality not yet actualised but suspected demonstrates this idea of inherent criminality previously seen with the British-colonial persecution of the Thuggee. The labelling of a threat or “terrorist” in the sense of pre-emption is not necessarily built on the presence of a criminal act but in the ability for a government to convince an audience of the need for security and a group’s susceptibility to criminality just like the Thuggee. In the identification of a likely threat of violence against the audience, an act is required to ensure that the threat of violence never fully materialises. As McCulloch and Pickering (2009, 631) argue

‘the “preventative” counterterrorism framework is concerned less with gathering evidence, prosecution and conviction and subsequent punishment than in targeting and managing through disruption, restriction and incapacitating those individuals and groups considered to be a risk’.

This strategy relies on the referral of certain individuals who are thought to be at risk of being radicalised or are already radicalised by the police or local authorities like teachers, healthcare and social workers. However, only referrals assessed by the police progress to the Channel (HM Government 2023).

Channel according to the government remains “a cornerstone of the Prevent in providing early intervention” (HM Government 2023, 8). The document that outlines the duty of Channel acknowledges that while there is no fixed profile of a terrorist, thresholds for determining one should be applied in referring individuals. Those thresholds, it seems, are built on one’s acceptance of British values. The scope of British values is also extended to the deradicalisation of a radicalised individual. The government defines the radicalisation process as an,

activity aimed at a person who supports terrorism in some cases has engaged in terrorist related activity, which is intended to effect *cognitive* and/or *behavioural* change leading to a new outlook on terrorism and/or disengagement from it. (HM Government 2011a)

One of these deradicalisation activities is the ideological mentoring in the sectors and institutions that are at risk of radicalisation (Hammersmith and Fulham 2022) which includes the promotion of positive values (British values) and community cohesion (Kent Safeguarding Children Multi-agency forthcoming) and the education of those values to the people at risk (HM Government 2011b). However, who are those deemed to be at risk of radicalisation in the first place?

Thomas Martin, a critical scholar of the Prevent Strategy argues that one of the strands within the Prevent Strategy is an identity-focused strategy strand that engages with the identities and values of those within the Muslim community which are seen as potential breeding grounds for “radicalised” individuals (Martin 2019). Unsurprisingly, according to the government “the greatest threat to UK as a whole is from Al Qa’ida and groups and individuals who share violent Islamist ideology associated with it” (HM Government 2011b). Having identified violent Islamist ideology as the dominant threat to its national security, it is of no surprise that the Prevent Strategy has been predominantly implemented on Muslim populations by the British government.

Martin (2019) presents it as the threat of radicalisation being created and acted upon through the categorisation of identities as dangerous or needing to be securitised based on probabilities. This “ordering” of persons continually allows for the justified suspicion and criminalisation of those within the Muslim community (Awan 2012; Breen-Smyth 2014; Taylor 2020). The result of this ordering is two-fold. Through the identification of threats being a violent Islamist ideology, suspects and potential individuals of radicalisation are identified by racial and ethnic and cultural markers (Pantazis and Pemberton 2011). Not based on what they might or might not do but based on who they identify to be and the proximity of the individual to the Islamic religion and an imaginary tipping point into terrorism (Taylor 2020).

The above ordering also creates suspect communities. As Marie Breen-Smyth points out are, these are “not merely the product of legal and security apparatuses, but the product of a larger cultural apparatus or ‘imaginary’” (Breen-Smyth 2014). It is a community that is now viewed suspiciously through the pronouncement of potential threat to security of a specific feature associated with them. Those that possess elements of non-Western culture or those that are suspected to be hostile to the status quo of European rationality/modernity or its values (in this case British values) are considered suspect and potential threats. Prevent, according to Nadya Ali (2023, 22–23), “has never been an exercise in pre-emptive violence prevention but it is fundamentally concerned with the more complicated and colonially inflected task of domesticating Muslims to the whole British nation”.

Defining fundamental British values

British values, as alluded above, are central to the UK’s counterterrorism strategy. As a conceptual term, British values has always changed; however, the fundamentals of it have remained the same. Before this current iteration of British values and its importance for the fight against terrorism came its usage in describing the national identity of Britain. For John Major, the Prime Minister from 1990 to 1997, his interpretation of these values was those of the traditional values. He stated that it was time that Britain returned to the old core values that it possessed (Wintour and Bates 1993). In 1997, Tony Blair’s iteration of such values was based on principles that do not dishonour the past but honour it, picking the best values and improving it (Blair 1997). By 2000, Blair had centralised the core values to fair play, creativity, tolerance, and an outward looking approach to the world that all flow from our unique island geography and history (Blair 2000). This sentiment was shared by the next Prime Minister, Gordon Brown (2007) during his tenure and by David Cameron (2014b) in response to the

Trojan Horse Affair. Cameron (2014b) stated, “that what sets British values apart (from other nations) are the traditions and the history that anchors them and allows them to continue to flourish and develop”. While there has not been a recurring standard definition between political figures or parties, it has been said to be made up depending on the generation and the condition of society at the time (Warsi 2017, 38). What is being established is the continual entrenchment of British values in the Britain’s past.

This continual reference to the values of the contemporary being built on the history of Britain fails to point out the threads of colonialism within it, and the trail of suppression used to sustain it, namely a type of nationalism which sustains the ideal perception of Britishness (Paul and Ghosh 2007). The speeches from these former Prime Ministers acknowledge an apotheosised notion of creativity of the empire and its purported unity but exclude its despotic nature. This promotion of core British values that are based on the traditional values of the nation, ignores the historical origins of these traditional values that consisted of a disregard for local languages of colonised territories and the undemocratic rule of the indigenes of these territories (Germaine Buckley 2020; Patel 2017). Thus, although, it has been acknowledged that “British values” is a contested concept (Haferjee and Hassan 2016; A. E. Struthers 2016), it has not been acknowledged that the underlying premise of the concept of British values also significantly overlaps with that of Britain’s colonial values. These values are built on a structure of difference between the colonial masters and their subjects, values which functioned to civilise the uncivilised and modernise the traditional, irrational subjects (Elkins 2022).

Its current iteration is applied as a yardstick for the diagnosis of extremism and radicalisation having been developed within the context of counterterrorism. It plays an important role in the British government’s counterterrorism strategy. The British government equates one’s susceptibility to extremism, terrorism, or radicalisation to one’s receptiveness to British values (HM Government, 2011a, 13). Within the context of the Prevent Strategy, extremism, for example, is defined as, a vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. We also include in our definition of extremism calls for the death of our armed forces, whether in this country or overseas (HM Government 2011a, 13.). For the British government, there is a strong correlation between extremist ideologies and terrorism; they posit that “in assessing drivers and pathways to radicalisation, the line between extremism and terrorism is often blurred” (HM Government 2011b). This treatment of extremism like terrorism points back to McCulloch’s concept of “pre-crime” and the treatment of extremism like terrorism, discussed above.

Additionally, the British government argues that a “stronger sense of belonging and citizenship makes communities resilient to terrorist ideology and propagandists and it depends on integration, democratic participation and a strong interfaith dialogue” (HM Government (2011a, 27). That sense of belonging, citizenship and integration is based on the sharing of common values which have been the prescribed British values. The assumption here that British values can supposedly produce an anti-crime, anti-terrorist and anti-extremist individual gives precedence to British values producing that result. This rhetoric puts forward the notion that Muslims are at odds with “modern values” and it was they who had to subsume their cultural heritage within “Britishness” (Kundnani 2007, 7).,

The threat of “terrorism” has therefore allowed for the introduction of exceptional, pre-crime legal measures that have continued the process of repression for racialised others just like the legal repression of the Indian Thuggee. Although the Trojan Horse Affair was not a terrorist act or even a criminal act, and later established as a hoax, the government response to it was conducted within the framework of countering of “terrorism”. The actions of the DfE and the rationale of the overall response was carried out through what I term the rhetoric of justification which leads to “legalised lawlessness” (Elkins 2022). British values, I argue, is categorised under this notion of legalised lawlessness. The rhetoric of justification refers to the use of legitimising logic to promote a stance by an actor. “Legalised lawlessness”, according to Elkins (2022), was the process of law creation by colonial governments to legalise and legitimise state violence against colonial subjects when ordinary laws proved inadequate in the maintenance of order and suppression like the creation of the Thuggee and Dacoity department to deal with the constructed problem of “inherent criminality”. The system of legalities that upheld the empire and the values attained from it through a rhetoric of justification, lends a hand towards how contemporary British values are perceived. The move to legally institutionalise British values through counterterrorism policies and the education system exemplifies the concept of legalised lawlessness in a contemporary neo-colonial setting.

British values as a form of eminence

Every colonised people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself with the language of the civilising nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. (Frantz 2008, 9)

When British values are discussed, there is an understanding of difference in its meaning. I argue that this difference relies on a foundation of eminence. A superiority of values awarded to British values and an inferiority ascribed to those considered outside the range of those values. In a study conducted by Struthers and Mansuy (2020) in primary schools, when asked what the difference between universal values and British values was, some learners highlighted a qualifier; the “British” within the British values. It was noted that some said, “this is what British is about; something that is important for us here in the UK, and this is what makes us different” (Struthers and Mansuy 2020, 705). This “British” qualifier of values creates an othering nature within the discourse, establishing a value point scale with British values being at the highest point of that scale (Poole 2018). This point-value system arguably in a deliberate manner but certainly inadvertently, disqualifies values held by specific groups of people, whether they might be acceptable or unacceptable, as bad. According to Rabea Khan (2024), “these values are – sometimes more implicitly and other times very explicitly – defined in opposition to (what is considered to be) ‘Muslim’ values”. This eminence placed on British values is built on structures of coloniality. The belief and the acting on that belief of contrast supported by structures that sustained the empire.

These structures, however, as coloniality unveils have made their way to the contemporary period through the formation of the contemporary state. Nadine El-Enany shows how Britain is a contemporary colonial space through the medium of British immigration

law. She argues and shows that the population which the restrictive British immigration laws target are the racialised people who have had a “personal, ancestral or geographical history of colonialism” (El-Enany 2020, 219). She further posits that racialised people, whether they are classified as citizens or migrants or refugees, are considered to come from somewhere else (El-Enany 2020). They might be British citizens, but they are not British in their core. Something separates them from really being British or being allowed to be British. This was present as well during the reign of the empire, the success of the rationalising and civilising of colonial subjects nevertheless did not qualify them for Britishness (Elkins 2022). The notion of Britishness being exempt from the core of the constructed “other” has allowed for the promotion of British values.

It is in the promotion of those core British values as the path to belonging and a turn away from extremism and terrorism that the coloniality of power lies. The power is in the ability to present one’s value as both a determinant for criminal behaviour based on an opposition to it and at the same time a qualifier for belonging to the British society. The belief that British values are superior to the individual or community values held by members of the suspect community and the implication that these non-British values has put them on the fringes of society perpetuates the coloniality of power in the discourse of British values. A sense of belonging, the government opines, can be solved through a support of their core values and a rejection of those values constitutes one as a threat (HM Government, 2015). This belief in the superiority on British values and its identity stems from one of the most important parts of the Empire and British nationalism (Benedict 1991, 150). Therefore, the contemporary discourse on British values needs to be seen as inseparable from its colonial past.

Understanding the response to the Trojan Horse Affair through coloniality

The response to the Trojan Horse Affair was an overt manifestation of coloniality, putting the Muslim community right at the centre of it. While the letter was later seen to be forged, the initial response to it was not an investigation into the validity of the letter, but launched four government investigations, a change to national policy, lingering effects for those claimed to be part of the affair and a solidification of the eminence of the British values.³ Indeed, it was not the validity of the letter that really mattered here. Britain’s imperial and colonial history which lives on through coloniality today, produced the reaction of the state. The discourse of the constructed “other” came into play. The threat of a supposed teaching of Islamic values in a supposed tolerant society was labelled as a move to radicalise children into terrorism (Sultana 2022). It was not that there was an “extremist” issue going on; rather it was the belief that the teaching of Islamic values could lead to eventual terrorism. The result was the Ofsted investigation into twenty-one schools in Birmingham, five schools being said to be inadequate in teaching students’ belief systems outside Islam (The Guardian 2017).

It was said that the Trojan Horse Affair was known to have been a hoax long before the letter was made public (Adams 2014; Garner 2014). This raises the question of why Michael Gove and others within the government acted upon its purported legitimacy. Without situating the knowledge of how racialised others and their values have been continually criminalised and disqualified, it would be difficult to understand how the Trojan Horse Affair developed the way it did. This

has occurred due to systems of coloniality and the weaponised use of structural policies like those of the implementation of fundamental British values, which I argue to be a form of (colonial) violence. The securitisation of Muslim bodies as risky or vulnerable to “violence” did not begin in the last 15–20 years (Hussain and Bagguley 2012, 2). Such a presumption obscures periods in history where the British have securitised groups of people – take for instance the phenomenon of the “Thuggee” and the belief of their inherent criminality (Lloyd 2008). The criminalisation of a constructed threat to the British based on identities or distant affiliations held by individuals has been weaved through its establishment of its world political order.

The Trojan Horse Affair was not the starting point for the introduction to British values. It was the belief that the teaching of a Muslim curriculum or rather its values were a plot to Islamise classrooms which could lead to radicalisation and extremism and maybe eventually terrorism. This could be depicted by Ofsted critique of the five schools and its opinion that there was a limited teaching of predominantly the Muslim religion in those schools (The Guardian 2017). In simpler terms, “Islamic” teaching and as an extension its values equated to radicalisation. This comes down to the belief that “Islamic values” and Muslims are seen to consist of extremely strict religious rhetoric, conservatism, and traditionalism while British values and Britishness is seen to consist of modernity, progressiveness, and secularism (Marsden, Jarvis, and Atakav 2023).

The (colonial) distinction drawn between Christianity and Islam and each religion’s level of “acceptance” is important. David Cameron (2014c) in an online article for a religious newspaper, called *Church Times*, stated that “I believe that we should be more confident about our status as a Christian country”. He then goes on to imply that other religions are less tolerant than Christianity. Christianity, however, was one mode of the civilising mission during colonialism (Iskarna 2018). It was part of Europe’s expression of “superiority and civilisation and considered to be the good religion because it was seen as being able to co-exist hand in hand with the liberal secular order” (Tarusarira 2020, 90). This contrasts with how not only Islam but also the religions of other colonial subjects, was and is seen and considered as irrational (see Khan 2023). As Khan (2023, 6) notes, Christianity was constructed as the most modern, rational religion, while all other religions outside Europe were considered “archaic or primitive forms of religion” (see also Dubuisson 2003, 114). This is also exemplified by the case of the Thuggee whose religion was considered backwards and responsible for their inherent criminality and violence. The image of a Christian Western state is constituted as what is hu(man) and by extension implies those outside of it as subhuman (Mignolo and Bussmann 2023, 5). Consequently, it is this idea of “tolerance” for secularism that has made its way into British values and has disqualified the “values” of other religions.

Within this dichotomisation of good and bad religion, tolerant and intolerant religion, lies the institutionalisation of British values within the state and as an extension the Prevent strategy. It is the innate irrationality assigned to the religions outside that of the colonial master which justified the response to the Trojan Horse Affair, using it to promote the fundamental British values, and subsequently conceptualising and developing it within Prevent. At the heart of this affair, is the inherent criminality ascribed to those with an identity affiliated with the Muslim community and the preservation of coloniality through the centralisation and institutionalisation of British values in the state structure.

Conclusion

Pettinger (2020, 508) posits, “contestations over time, memory and history are central to how we understand our world, how we know each other and how we interact with others and ourselves”. Such contestations over time and history should continue to be central to the project of Critical Terrorism Studies. Especially with respect to the colonality of time. The interaction of the British state with those considered outside of “Britishness” should be understood as part of its colonial history which has been carried over into today’s modern state system. To continue the project of Critical Terrorism Studies in a relevant way, acknowledging the state’s structure of institutionalised racial hierarchies, needs to be central to any critical analysis of contemporary counterterrorism strategies.

When we think of state policies of criminalisation through the scope of terrorism, counterterrorism and even everyday security practices and the conceptualisation and implementation of these terms, it is important that we understand what has informed these conceptualisations. Who is being securitised? Why are they being securitised and how are they being securitised? It is just not enough to criticise British values and the obscurity of its definition and implication. It is also important that we question its colonality and consequently the eminence it has been awarded which orders behaviours. As Kundnani (2007, 9) has stated, “of course it is true that society needs a set core of values to unite around. But those values are not specific to Britishness”. There needs to be a shift in the advocacy of British values as a “solution-based”, litmus test and treatment for apparent criminality or loyalty to the British state, to a redefinition of what we might understand to be values of a state.

As I have shown in this article, British values are an element of colonality. Prevent and the UK’s counterterrorism rhetoric at large is centred on the promotion of British values, values which centre on colonial principles. British values have been used as an othering and securitising concept and practice for those considered to be outside the scope of Britishness. I have argued that through the institutionalisation and implementation of British values there is a securitisation of Muslim communities that takes place. It serves as both an antithetical concept and practice to ideologically securitised populations. It needs to be understood that British values cannot be separated from the colonial history of the civilising mission. There is a history of criminalising racialised people on the basis of religious affiliations and the institutionalisation of eradicating the supposed innate criminality which has been shown through the phenomenon of the Thuggee and which can be seen again with the Trojan Horse Affair today.

Notes

1. For more discussion on the “racial state” see Meier’s and Wright’s articles in this issue.
2. Parallels can be drawn between this and how Palestinians are all collectively deemed “terrorist” or “terrorist sympathisers” by the IDF based on the same logic. An entire population judged guilty by association, justifying the brutal violence and genocide against them.
3. Hamza Syed, The Trojan Horse Affair podcast.

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