Alternative Narratives of Grassroots (Anti) -Racism and Multiculturalism

:The Need for Epistemic Revolutions

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1. Introduction

Both multiculturalism and community cohesion have been strong policy drivers within the context of UK race relations policy for a number of decades (for example, Parekh, 2000, Modood, 2007). Multiculturalism has in recent years been attacked within academic, media and political discourses and discredited as a failed, diminished or redundant feature in a post-racial society (see Cantle, 2005, Bourne, 2007). However, there has been very little resistance to this post-9/11, media driven populist idea that multiculturalism is counter to the dominant norms of society and a failed ideal. This paper aims to explore through narratives of experience grassroots anti-racism and multiculturalism and begin a discussion on how to create new forms of knowledge that move beyond essentialised identity construction through epistemic revolutions.

2. Grassroots (Anti) -Racism

Ethnic minority communities do not just organise around the singular issue of anti-racism. The growth of anti-racist movements and municipal anti-racist strategies and responses, throughout the late 1970s

and 1980s, has often resulted in ethnic minority communities being viewed as one dimensional, holding a constant victim status and wanting special treatment. Thus in the 1980s racist 'jokes', for example, mocked South Asian communities (Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi) as demanding local authority housing for themselves and being favoured by local authorities at the expense of deserving white communities. One 'joke' I remember very well when I was young went something like:

"Why do Asian women have a dot on their forehead?

Because they get told 'no you can't have a council house!" [Finger repeatedly hitting the forehead]

The red 'dot' represents the 'bindi' or sign of marriage on the undifferentiated 'Asian woman' and suggests that South Asian families were constantly asking for state help and being declined and told by tapping the forehead, hence the red dot. This sort of humour and what it implied ran counter to my experiences growing up in Britain. I knew very few South Asian people who were unemployed and even fewer who lived in local authority housing. But the 'joke' itself tells us something about the deep resentment and racism that many minority ethnic people experienced and continue to experience. The joke highlights a cultural stereotype, that all South Asian women have a cultural identifier on their forehead, and therefore, are the same. Yet the diversity and difference of ethnicities, religions and traditions within this large category of South Asian is evident even today after over 50 years of minority, and particularly, South Asian presence.

The undifferentiated Asian women had no class status, was viewed as dominated by her husband and male-other figures in a tightly regimented home and community where she lived out her life, often not able to speak English or enjoy the benefits of a liberal society such as the UK.

These and other stereotypes were deep and often positioned both women and men from the South Asian communities in contradictory ways. Sometimes, when it suited the political and media elite people of

South Asian origin were represented as hard working, industrious, family orientated and with low criminal activity. But this was often in relation to pitching South Asian families in diametrically opposed position to African-Caribbean families and communities, who were often viewed as criminal, without rules, dysfunctional. Yet when it suited the media and political elite, African Caribbean communities were seen as holding similar values to white British society because of commonalities revolving around language, culture, music and religion.

In this climate throughout the 1970s and 1980s minority ethnic communities were pitched against each other. The potential for, and actual unity in different communities was further undermined through structural differences, poverty, circular uses of stereotypes as familiar tropes to differentiate, divide and create a climate of fear within and between communities (see for example, Sivanandan, 1982). This led to some communities in England rioting, particularly, in predominately African Caribbean areas, demanding better conditions, opportunities and life chances. One consequence of this was throughout the 1980s, a policy of cultural competiveness for state based grants to develop local specific ethnic, religious and cultural projects that led to divisions in local areas between different ethnic minority communities over grants and resources.

3. The Attack on Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is potentially both an outcome from the challenges of grassroots anti-racism as well as a basic description of any modern society that operates in a globalised world, that has had migration and settlement. It is an outcome through the challenges of anti-racism because it enables the recognition of differences positively between and within groups, where 'race' and ethnicity are not seen as the overriding means of socially organised differences. But within which there is an acute awareness and consciousness of differences and how I as a social actor make decisions about others.

In the past 10 years (but stretching back at least 30 years) there has been a simmering attack on multiculturalism. This largely has its origins in the USA and mainland Europe. In the USA there has been throughout the 1980s and 1990s a retreat from viewing black-white inequalities through the lens of racism and towards a lens of cultural deficiency and now treating all the 'same'. Similarly, in mainland Europe, racism is often just not recognised as a social problem or seen as an issue of assimilation. For example, in France the recent ban on Muslim women wearing the burkha in public.

In the UK, the development of community cohesion as an active policy was introduced in 2001. This was as a response to riots in the Northern parts of England, primarily in areas where there were large minorities of Muslim people (Cantle, 2001). This was a major movement away from multiculturalism to a perceived enforced assimilation. Community cohesion advocated a policy of social glue, a cohesiveness that bonded people within a society together through shared values and forced methods of making different types of people share social space. Community cohesion was premised on certain communities, particularly British Muslim communities, having a cultural deficiency, namely, they did not integrate and they lived separated from other, essentially, white communities.

Attacks on multiculturalism grew in the post 9/11 terrorist attacks in America and the 7/7 bombings in London. The actions of a few men were transposed onto whole communities, not just Muslim but any brown faced, or South Asian person. Familiar tropes were used to stereotype 'Muslim women' in a similar way that the generic 'Asian' woman was stereotyped in the 1970s and 1980s. Muslim men and communities were seen as deeply sexist, controlling, disempowering Muslim women. Muslim women were positioned as victims of a culture within which they had no agency.

At a more cultural level, the expression of religious identity has become more predominant, a new code for race thinking. Respecting other religions and diversity has become the mantra of choice within

which the respecting of all ethnic groups has been relegated to. Indeed it is now much more common to be asked what one's religion is, or just perceive a religious belief if they are or look South Asian, than to ask which country they are from as a form of positioning the 'other'. Whilst in every sense these are all essentialised identities, structured and often formulated by political elites to changing socio-economic and global political dynamics, they are identities that communities organise around. In this sense the multiculturalism of 'races'/ethnicities of the 1970s to the 1990s have been challenged as not relevant and religion has been added to the mix. Thus racism as one organising category of experience has been diluted.

In the UK various commentators have advanced a thesis which suggests that because there is evidence that some people from some ethnic groups are over achieving in education and certain professions then 'race' and racism is less of an issue. This implies, again, a cultural deficiency in those from ethnic groups who are not able to achieve. Whilst over-achievement in certain ethnic groups is often seen as evidence that racism is not relevant, it is actually used as evidence that white children are being disadvantaged.

Why do ethnic groups have to be able to show under or over achievement? As right wing commentators, both black and white argue that race and racism are less relevant, a new racialised group, the 'white working classes' -a group invented by the media and political elites - has emerged. A socially constructed indigenous group, alongside other socially constructed ethnic groups, that now occupy the status of victim. This is a group that is constructed as being ignored by political elites, whilst others (non-white groups) have benefitted from the multicultural experiment of targeted resources. Yet the riots in the northern towns of England in 2001 by groups of both Muslim and white men was about material conditions, employment and the mass demise of a traditional manufacturing base directly attributable to liberalised, global, market forces. However, the policy response was off blaming these people as not fitting in, leading separate lives, living adjacent to

white working class communities. South Asian communities are represented in terms of 'races', white communities in terms of 'classes and the two are positioned against each other, mutually exclusive, in competition and conflict.

4. Grassroots consequences

It is now impossible to talk about multiculturalism without talking about two other groups, British-Muslims and the white working classes as highlighted above. Muslims and other South Asian identities are now essentially conflated. As a consequence of the rise of white working class narratives organised around being economically left behind, being socially marginalised, and being politically silenced, the far right in the UK, fuelled by anti-Muslim media coverage, has emerged and positioned the white working classes as a homogenous united force, instinctively anti-multiculturalists. Yet in recent fieldwork I undertook in North West of England, in a primarily 'white working class' community local white people rallied to defeat the racist British National Party (BNP) and elect an Iranian by birth as a local authority councillor.

A Local Case Study

The English Defence League (EDL) emerged in 2009 and is an issue focused right wing group. Its sole purpose is to campaign against the rise of Islam, building of Mosques and challenge militant jihadists. The EDL argues it is not a racist party because anyone can join as long as they agree to '*live an English way of life*'. The EDL has organised marches across England and are met with opposition from anti racist groups and local people.

Below are presented extracts from an anti racist witness who saw the EDL march through Dudley, a town in the West Midlands of England, with a settled minority communities. The witness, a born and bred local man from Dudley describes firsthand the events on 17 July

2010 (the author's emerging initial themes are in bold)

Target building of Mosque, second march, fewer demonstrators
"Around 500 English Defence League (EDL) members descended on Dudley on Saturday 17th July to demonstrate against plans to build a new mosque. The protest follows from a previous demonstration in April 2010, where around 2000 EDL members came to Dudley."

Inflammatory speeches, racist abuse, violent attacks, other ethnic minority centres attacked, EDL close to Asian residential areas
"During the protest the EDL supporters listened to anti-Islam speeches, chanted EDL, hurled anti-Muslim and racist abuse. The protest turned violent as EDL members hurled bricks and fences at the police. Bricks were thrown at the Muslim counter demonstrators, three Asian women were attacked in their cars, a Hindu temple was attacked, windows smashed in Asian areas, highlighting the local Council's folly in allowing the EDL to assemble near areas populated by ethnic minorities."

Carnage, Police presence, spatial reassurance, spiritual insecurity
"Our first stop was to check out Stafford St, where the EDL protested. It was a mess. All the fencing was broken. Beer bottles, dirty looking flags hanging on the walls, bricks all over the place. It didn't look like the site of a peaceful protest. The police reassured me it was a safe place now. It was eerie. Hundreds of people stood here hours before united in their hatred of Muslims...I was anxious."

5. Towards a Conclusion: Anti-Racist Localism, Multiple Identities and Epistemic Revolutions

In those few words captured by a witness to the EDL marching close to and through South Asian origin residential areas a number of key issues emerge for anti-racist localism. How can such events be captured

and alternative epistemologies be developed that present South Asian communities, particularly in the current climate Muslim communities, not as an essentialised other, not as exotic and in need of research, not as communities to be feared or communities by their mere existence seen as challenging the dominant norm of society.

It is imperative that they are seen as citizens able to live free of intimidation from organisations like the EDL and the media that has in many circles been overtly anti-Islamic. How can different epistemologies be influenced that offer a view of the 'other' as a citizen living with multiple, deessentialised, identities. What sorts of methodologies do we need to develop to connect narratives of experience with policy change and generic community empowerment and change?

The current debates on 'race', ethnicity and multiculturalism in the UK stretching back at least 30-50 years have positioned minority ethnic communities as permanently racialised, always already 'raced', and in this sense not quite part of the mainstream. As a result whether the target is Muslim or South Asian, the familiar racist tropes emerge over time and space and what becomes clear, through the everyday conversations in the streets, with neighbours, at parties, in the media is that racialised talk is ever present, that 'raced'citizens are treated as a threat and outsiders.

The attack on multiculturalism in the UK is a concerted effort to move away from integration models to assimilative processes and thus reducing further the ability to capture epistemic and ontological differences. Given the current challenges to the western order by different organisational and economic forms, the war on terror and the global movement of populations, social researchers and activists have a duty to enable and promote the diversity of views and ways of living that are inherent in any society as a social good. This includes the challenging of dominant discourses that feed into prejudices about the other as an uncomplicated unified, singular figure without the complexity of different identities and positioning.

Research on 'race', ethnicity and multiculturalism has been domi-

nated by academic, policy and political discourses that have often through thin analysis, political agendas, over-emphasis on race and ethnicity as key organisational categories and an inability to bracket their own views and knowledge of the world has led to a reified view of race/racism/multicultural forms.

Back (2007) describes the outcome of such sociology or sociological research as 'flat sociology'. Back, arguing from the perspective of a globalised world argues that in the:

"clamour to be heard...is having severe and damaging consequences in a world that is increasingly globalized and where time and space are compressed...the relationships between centre and margin are becoming more complex, patterns of suffering and uncertainty even more terrifying" (Back, 2007: 163).

The Sociologist needs to develop a means of listening that brings to the fore that which is overlooked or remains invisible and lost in the living of everyday life. When writing about people's lives, the researcher should be neither intrusive nor so distant from lived reality that the voices of the subjects are lost in the telling. Rather, researchers should engage in dialogue with those who are studied.

Back suggests that in writing these dialogues it has to be recognised that individual stories are bound to global movements, that they are complex and momentary but there is truth to be found in those moments nonetheless. Listening means reflecting this complexity in published research "without reducing the enigmatic and shifting nature of social existence to caricature and stereotype" (ibid: 153).

The challenge of social research is to recognise diversity and to explore the lived experiences of peoples' lives within the historical realities they inhabit. Back suggests that some of the reasons why sociology is needed include that sociology highlights the things that cannot be said, 'it is in silence that inequitable relations and gross political complicities are hidden' (Back: 166).

He further suggests that sociology is needed to offer an 'alternative story...pointing to the implications of what happens close-by with

events elsewhere'. In other words he suggests that it is needed to create an ethical and critical imagination and that sociology is needed to counterbalance 'blinding certainty'. He also suggest that sociology can be transformative if it hears:

"The art of listening to the world, where we take the people we listen to as seriously as we take ourselves, is perhaps the most important quality that sociology can offer today. The desire to listen opens up the sociologists preconceptions and offers a new kind of understanding..." (ibid: 166)

 In the post 9/11 world (and indeed in relation to the end of multiculturalism debates) Back outs Sociology as having the potential of and being a resource for offering hope and 'reaching out to others'. The need for epistemic revolutions is key to the move away from a continued use of essentialised identities to transformative methodologies and research that can influence and shape the lives of those whom research involves.

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