Community Cohesion and the 'death of multiculturalism' in Britain: evidence from Oldham

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My role as part of this Panel is to offer some thoughts and make some arguments on the British situation in relation to multiculturalism and, in particular, to address the charge that British policy approaches in the twenty first century have involved a retreat from, or even an outright repudiation of, multiculturalism. What is beyond dispute is that there has been a very significant discursive shift in British 'race relations' policy approaches since 2001, with the language and emphasis of the previous phase of 'political multiculturalism' prior to 2001 of 'diversity', 'ethnicity' and 'equal opportunities' being replaced by policies of community cohesion and integration, which have stressed shared values, commonality and Britishness. Controversial in itself, this new policy emphasis on cohesion and integration has been accompanied by overt attacks on the concept of 'multiculturalism' itself as a policy goal from across the political spectrum, ranging from Prime Minister Cameron to EHRC leader Trevor Phillips. This has prompted accusations that the post-2001 policy shift has represented a lurch backwards to the coercive assimilationism of the 1960s and the 'death of multiculturalism.

I want to suggest that such interpretations are an overly-pessimistic and negative reading of the community cohesion policy agenda from 2001 to 2010 and to support that view with empirical case study evidence around how community cohesion has been actually understood and operationalized at ground level. In doing so, I'm

summarising the arguments made in my recent Palgrave Macmillan book '***Youth Multiculturalism and Community Cohesion'.***

In offering case study evidence in support of a more positive interpretation of community cohesion, there are obviously cautionary notes to be struck. The first is the traditional sociological caution about any case study and the dangers of over-claiming from a situated and contingent example. Secondly, Paul Bagguley and Yasmin Hussain, the authors of the only full-length monograph concerned only with the 2001 northern riots, highlight how, too often, sociological discussion of race in Britain generalises on the basis of geographically-specific research, even though the demographic, economic and political realities are very different in east London, Birmingham, or in towns like Oldham and Burnley.

However, there are several good reasons to offer case study evidence. The first is that my evidence comes from Oldham, one of the towns where rioting and racialised violence in 2001 prompted the national change of policy direction, and which remains one of the most ethnically-segregated local authorities in England. Secondly, policies of multiculturalism only ever partially developed through national direction (such as the legislative framework and Section 11 funding) and were actually developed and operationalized to a very significant degree through local debate, campaigning and practice, by local authorities and within professional bodies such as teachers, social workers and youth workers, so studying localised discourses and understandings around policy operation is vital. Lastly, despite the heated academic and political discourse around community cohesion in Britain, there has been virtually no empirical research around how such policies have actually been understood and locally mediated and operationalized – my research has attempted to address that.

The research itself involved in-depth qualitative interviews with youth workers in both the voluntary and statutory sectors in Oldham, which is an ex-industrial town on the northern edge of Manchester. These interviews were part of on-going research in the town ever since the 2001 riots and explored what youth workers at all levels of responsibility understood about 'community cohesion' and what influence, if any, they felt this new policy priority had on their individual and collective work. That research process was later followed by action research with young people there and in neighbouring Rochdale around how they experienced 'cohesion' and segregation, and what identifications were important to them. Whilst mainly focussing here on the research with youth workers, I will also refer to the research with young people and later research in other areas of the north.

Oldham will always be linked to community cohesion because of the Cantle report process following those 2001 riots, with Cantle's focus on community cohesion being adopted by the Labour government and operationalized though national pilot work and policy advice, and subsequently being made central to their overarching Race Equality policy strategy 'Increasing Opportunity, Strengthening Society.' Local Authorities were offered explicit guidance on how they should be promoting community cohesion, with work monitored through 'National Indicators' and supported by the 'Place' survey data around how different people 'got on' locally. That survey and national drivers have been scrapped since 2010 by the Coalition government.

At the recent British Sociological Conference, Professor Robert Moore presented a paper suggesting that community cohesion is a highly problematic and questionable concept for sociologists. In many ways I agree, but my focus here is on Community Cohesion as

a concrete policy initiative, and how it has been understood and practiced at ground level in Britain.

The connection between the 2001 riots, though, and cohesion is controversial as the reports seemed to focus very little on the actual events and their causes. I would suggest that in reality those riots were an opportunity for government to implement policy changes that it was already considering – the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain the previous year, despite being portrayed as a highpoint of 'old style', group-based multiculturalism, was already using the term cohesion and clearly arguing for a better balance between commonality and ethnic specific identities.

What Community Cohesion did clearly focus on was a number of interrelated themes. One was very significant physical and cultural ethnic segregation, 'parallel lives' and the need to break it down. Allied to that was over-developed 'bonding' social capital within largely moncultural communities, in the absence of meaningful forms of Bridging social capital, with the very significant segregation in schooling particularly relevant here. Underpinning this was a significant, communitarianist focus on the agency of communities, both in terms of re-enforcing existing parallel lives through everyday decisions and behaviour, and changes in such individual and community behaviour needed to make progress. All these themes were consistent with wider New Labour approaches to social policy. Allied to this was the belief that previous policy approaches of multiculturalism, although bringing significant progress, had proved increasingly problematic, with their focus on equality outcomes and specific funding and facilities for each separate, and necessarily essentialised, ethnic group at the expense of meaningful focus on shared needs and identities.

Such themes have been significantly controversial, with the academic debate on segregation continuing to rage, and colleagues such as Claire Alexander rightly highlighting that much of the media and political discourse, including Cameron's Munich speech, have focussed in a very partial way on the values, attitudes and 'cultural practices' of British Muslims. Accompanied by Trevor Phillip's badly-misjudged attack on multiculturalism, fears about a retreat from, multiculturalism are understandable, but what does community cohesion actually looks and feels like in practice?

The focus on parallel lives and segregation with community cohesion was accepted by all the youth workers interviewed with them consistently blaming the attitudes and practices of their 'own' ethnic community, rather than 'others'. Young peoples' evidence supported the picture of significant and racialised geographical barriers in people's head, with traditional forms of territoriality and 'race' coming together in a toxic mix. The consistent interpretation from youth workers of what community cohesion means was that it is about 'meaningful direct contact' across community lines. Whilst cohesion as a policy term means nothing to young people or their communities, there was support for cross-community work amongst **some** young people.

This shared professional understanding of what community cohesion means reflected the very significant changes in the organisation and content of youth work professional practice in Oldham in response to this new policy agenda. Both the local authority youth service and voluntary sector organisations had made bringing together young people of different backgrounds the highest priority in their work. This was done in a number of ways. Central was creating 3-way link-ups of youth centres and projects from different communities so that they regularly throughout the year visited each other or met in

neutral spaces for activities – meaningful direct contact had to be central to all activities they planned. Also regular Oldham-wide events and parties were arranged, and residential trips outside Oldham were used to give young people the experience of living together, with the Fusion residential being the highest profile example. Central to all these approaches was they were built around experiential, fun activities that necessitated working together, but which did NOT involve making young people talk about race or identity. Instead, they were built on the approach of creating 'space' for conversation and contact to develop naturally and apparently spontaneously, within carefully planned conditions.

Such an interpretation of community cohesion can be seen as an approach of 'contact theory', a social psychology-based approach to prejudice reduction which argues that for contact between communities or identities in conflict to be successful, contact has to be over time, regular and in groups to avoid the 'he's alright but..' scenario. As academic colleagues like Amir have highlighted, and as youth workers were fully aware, contact can make things worse, if the key conditions previously highlighted were not addressed. Contact may not work if there are asymmetric power relations, and structuralist colleagues would argue that white-Asian relation in Oldham or Britain generally are asymmetrical, but both white and Asian young people in Oldham **feel** that they are the victims and the most neglected group.

This new emphasis on contact was supported by a deliberate policy of re-organising into multi-racial staff teams so that young people had youth workers of different ethnic backgrounds, living models of cohesion. This, and the general approach of bringing young people together was seen as explicitly different to pre-2001 approaches to youth provision, where there had been no contact between different

youth centres whatsoever, and it had been seen as inappropriate for ethnic minority young people to be worked with by workers who were not from 'their' community. Similarly, any 'anti-racist' work with white young people had been of a formal and didactic approach, focused on telling them to say or think certain things – an approach that Roger Hewitt identified as leading to the 'white backlash' amongst some young people. Whereas research has shown teachers and youth workers to feel unskilled and unsupported in trying to police behaviours and language in such ways, the youth workers carrying out this community-cohesion-based work felt empowered, with the relationship building approach of cohesion being congruent with their professional training and values.

The direct contact work central to this community cohesion practice was NOT just about white/Asian contact, although that was acknowledged as the most pressing challenge. Contact was also being promoted between different geographical areas of the same ethnic backgrounds where territorial-based violence was occurring, and residential work prioritised the inclusion of young people with physical and learning disabilities. This, and a focus on the attitudes towards young women held by young men of all ethnic backgrounds, can be seen as representing a professional concern with 'young people' as a shared identity that transcends ethnic and class background, but also as representative of the Labour government's approach to citizenship underpinning cohesion. Here, Derek McGhee has highlighted a move towards more intersectional and de-centred forms of identity, anchored on the human rights framework, where 'cooler' forms of identity, of necessity, need to be encouraged if an increasingly diverse society is going to work productively.

More importantly, this local community cohesion practice in Oldham was not seeking to deny or ignore these specific identities, but to

augment them with stronger forms of commonality. Here, preparation for processes of contact took place in local and so ethnically-specific youth clubs and projects, with young people fully-aware of what the direct contact process would involve and their right to withdraw from it. Town wide events, such as Eid or Christmas parties were used to explain and celebrate specific faith and community beliefs and identities, whilst also explicitly facilitating a shared sense of Oldham youth identity and the rights and responsibilities that go with it. Alongside the continued existence of geographical/ethnic specific provision was the clear belief of the youth workers involved that anti-racist and equal opportunities beliefs and practices continued to guide their work within the new context – there was no denial of racism and inequality or the need to confront it here, but a clear belief that the community cohesion approach now guiding their practice was a more effective way of making progress with young people on such issues. Here, there were no illusions amongst youth workers that promoting meaningful direct contact would solve Oldham's problems. Instead, they saw it being about de-racialising the way the town's problems were seen, helping get 'race' somewhat out of the way so that the very serious problems facing young people of all backgrounds in Oldham and ex-industrial towns like it can be addressed.

Once again highlighting the previous health warnings around case study evidence, I hope that this evidence on how community cohesion has been understood, supported and implemented in one local authority has highlighted that community cohesion in this situation was not a denial of multiculturalism, but rather a re-balancing of multiculturalism to have more focus on commonality and the need to strengthen it without undermining specific ethnic identities. Rather than being a break with pre-2001 policy

approaches, I would suggest that this is significant continuity, with the change being a discursive one as 'multiculturalism' as a term is viewed as increasingly problematic, not just in Britain but across western Europe.

Two further indicators to support that belief can also be identified. The first is the continuing policy and legislative framework around equal opportunities, as embodied by the 2010 Equality Act, and by the Census-based ethnic monitoring. The focus on the disadvantage, position and needs of specific ethnic minority communities has not lessened, and later research by me and colleagues at the University of Huddersfield into how two West Yorkshire local authorities were progressing community cohesion showed them to be grappling with how to reconcile equalities work with cohesion, not to replace the former with the latter. The second example is a more negative one, which is the Prevent anti-terrorism programme. In my forthcoming Bloomsbury Academic book *'Responding to the Threat of Violent Extremism- Failing to Prevent'*, I argue that Prevent has been ineffective because it failed to take on board the lessons of community cohesion – it has been an old-fashioned multiculturalist policy approach of trying to tackle a specific problem by throwing resources at an entire and undifferentiated, essentialised ethnic community through a cadre of so-called 'community leaders' – multiculturalism is alive and well!

My evidence about community cohesion in practice has addressed 2001-2010 only. This is because nationally the new Coalition government Integration policy is so flimsy and so lacking in any national implementation strategy or framework that it is hard to know where we now are. Also, the savage spending cuts are greatly damaging local authority and community infrastructure and capacity

to deliver any sort of cohesion activity – will it take more riots to re-energise this agenda?

Thank you.

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