Rethinking segregation

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Bilkis Malek argues that incoherent ideas about the causes of segregation, including those of people who repudiate multiculturalism, risk returning us to the days of a British monoculturalism.

Concerns about ethnic segregation have taken centre stage in domestic analyses of the implications for multicultural Britain of the events of '9/11' and '7/7'. Yet, almost half a decade into the 'war on terror', we appear to be no closer to defining a cultural and political vision of Britain in which Muslims, alongside their fellow British citizens, can feel they belong and have a valuable contribution to make.[1]

I want to suggest that this ongoing state of affairs revolves around a reductive understanding of segregation, which is based on incoherent ideas about the value of multiculturalism, and an inability to imagine the shared responsibility on both Muslims and non-Muslims for overcoming the realities of ethnic segregation. In this article I argue for the need for a more nuanced position on the meaning of multiculturalism; an articulation of what it is about the majority of Muslims that makes them 'ordinary'; an openness to what Muslims have to offer to 'national' debate; and an exploration of ways to build on the broad coalition of support united behind the anti-war alliance.

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1. Although Muslims are distinguished by their religious affiliation to Islam, negotiations of Muslim identities, on both an individual and group level, are intertwined with experiences of nationality, cultural 'origins', language and other markers of ethnicity. In Britain understanding of Muslims as ethnic, as opposed to religious, groups is entangled still further with the conflation of Muslim and 'Asian' cultures in dominant discourses, but also in current references to notions of ethnic segregation when debating the 'alienation' of Muslim youth.

Death or resurrection of multiculturalism?

During the 1970s and 1980s multiculturalism was criticised by the political right as an initiative promoted by 'loony left' councils, doomed to failure because it supported the expression of cultural differences at the expense of a unifying and harmonious national culture. But since the onset of suicide attacks by Muslim individuals on the West, it has been the centre-left that has increasingly voiced disillusionment with multiculturalism as a policy for promoting better understanding and relations across ethnic groups. The declaration by Trevor Phillips in 2004 of the 'end of multiculturalism' encapsulated a frequently expressed centre-left view that multiculturalism has led to fragmentation rather than integration. In some cases, such as the 'new assimilationism' being developed in the pages of the respectable left journal *Prospect*, the arguments being put forward have a resonance - in terms of their exclusive notions of national identity - with views held by members of the BNP.[2]

There have been some two decades worth of critiques and re-thinking of multiculturalism, and this may warrant some disillusionment with its potential for success, but the fact of the matter is multiculturalism as a coherent government policy has never existed in Britain. Inconsistencies in its meaning and practical application were being identified long before the new millennium invocation of the 'clash of civilisations' between Islam and the West.[3]

As Bhikhu Parekh has pointed out, a society like Britain clearly is multicultural, in that it is composed of different cultural communities. But it may remain *mono*culturalist if its political ethos is based on assimilating minority cultures into the mainstream. British politics has been divided on this point: liberals have tended to perceive minority cultures as integral to defining national identity, while conservatives tend towards the view that traditional, or majority, culture should enjoy a privileged status.[4] In the post '9/11' era politicians and analysts from across the political divide have contributed to a kind of 'common sense' rejection of multiculturalism, believing that it is cultural differences as opposed to commonalities that have been nurtured by policies of multiculturalism. This conclusion is not wholly at

2. Ali Rattansi, 'Who's British? *Prospect* and the New Assimilationism', in *Cohesion, Community and Citizenship*, Runnymede Trust 2002.
3. See for example, MacDonald et al, *Murder in the Playground*, Longsight Press 1989.
4. B. Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, MacMillan Press 2000, p6.

odds with critical commentators of multiculturalism. However, the latter would argue that such a situation has arisen out of an understanding of ethnic group cultures as homogenous wholes. For more effective multicultural policies it is necessary to respond to ethnic identification as fluid and influenced by a plurality of experiences and sources of identity.

In the current rush to develop new policies to overcome the latest perceived threat to a cohesive British society - the segregation of ethnic communities - it might, at the very least, be useful to engage with some of the ongoing critical debates about multiculturalism. This is particularly so as the government's current approach is profoundly shaped by precisely the same understanding of ethnic group cultures as distinct entities that was associated with earlier, reductive, notions of multiculturalism. Such thinking is precisely what makes it a struggle for the prime minister to be able to distinguish 'ordinary Muslims' from 'Islamic terrorists'.

In the initial days following the 7 July bombings the prime minister was keen to establish a 'shoulder to shoulder' image with Muslim leaders and Muslim communities united in a common struggle against the terrorists. But since then politicians from across the political divide have not been as careful, or able, to maintain a distinction between 'ordinary' law-abiding Muslims and terrorists acting in the name of Islam. Muslims as a whole group have been challenged - to critically examine the values and activities within their own communities, to question their political affiliations, to shape up their mosques, and to ensure that their communities are neither a safe haven nor a recruiting ground for terrorists.

In July 2006, a few days before the first anniversary of the London bombings, Tony Blair impressed still further the responsibility on ordinary Muslims for defeating Islamic terrorism. Before a House of Commons liaison committee, the prime minister asserted that Islamic terrorism had to be defeated in its entirety - in its extreme interpretation of Islam and its completely false grievances against the West. He added that government alone could not defeat Islamic terrorism: it was necessary to mobilise the wider Muslim community to defeat the ideology and grievances of Muslim extremists. The prime minister went on to challenge Muslim leaders who, he believed, were only partially disputing the position of extremists, in that, although they opposed the use of violence, they gave the impression that they sympathised with the grievances of the terrorists.

This insistence on containing both the problem and solution within the Muslim 'community' carries firm undertones of 'you are either with us or you are with them'. It allows only a very narrowly defined and unrealistically burdensome space for the involvement of Muslims in Britain's democratic process for dealing with the 'war on terror' - one within which even Downing Street's hand-picked Muslim taskforce has found it impossible to operate.[5]

The series of new initiatives announced by the government once more places the responsibility for integration on Islam and Muslims. One such initiative was the Islam Expo - a four-day event that took place in June 2006 at Alexandra Palace - inviting the public to explore the history and culture of Islam. There is also the Islamic Roadshow of 'moderate' Muslim scholars which travels to different parts of the country to promote a modern and non-violent interpretation of Islam. I have no doubt that there will be some benefit arising from these initiatives: as with the saris, samosas and steel-band brand of multiculturalism, the current crop of initiatives may eventually help the British to shed their fear of the hijab, beard or mosque. But the principle weakness of reductive multiculturalism - that of containing ethnic groups as segregated cultural entities - continues to be evident in these projects.

The present moment may be marked by calls for the end of multiculturalism, but government policy itself remains underpinned by weak, and ineffectual, versions of multiculturalism. Long-standing commentators do not call for an abandonment of multiculturalism; they propose instead that it can help to improve and enhance race and ethnic relations through more complex contextualisation of people's lived realities attuned to 'the shifting contours of black and white cultural and political identities'.[6]

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5. The Muslim Taskforce was set up after the suicide attacks on 7 July to tackle the spread of 'Islamic extremism'. Members (who include peers, MPs, businessmen, imams and community leaders) have expressed their disappointment that many of their recommendations and concerns, including that British foreign policy is a central factor in the 'radicalisation' of Muslims, have been ignored by the government. Following the failure of the British government to call for an immediate ceasefire in the recent military campaign by Israel in Lebanon, many members of the Muslim taskforce, including Labour MPs Sadique Khan and Shahid Malik, signed an open letter to Tony Blair impressing that government policy was placing civilians in the UK and abroad at increased risk.

6. Ali Rattansi, 'Racism, Culture and Education', in *Race, Culture and Difference*, James Donald and Ali Rattansi (eds), Sage 1992, p41.

Current realities of segregation

In 2006 we are two, almost three, generations into Britain's post-war race relations narrative. Earlier government policies on 'race' relations, such as assimilation and integration, were underpinned by the view that successive generations would play their part in eroding the traditional and pre-modern practices of their immigrant elders, and adopt a 'superior' British way of life. Yet it is precisely the generations born in Britain that are now the focus for national anxiety about the consequences of ongoing dynamics of ethnic segregation.

Even before '9/11' there was some government momentum behind addressing the issue of segregated communities, in response to the series of public disturbances involving mainly Asian and white youth in the north of England in the summer of 2001. David Blunkett, who was Home Secretary at the time, seized the moment to re-invigorate policies based on assimilation. Armed with findings from a series of official reports into these 'Northern riots', and fuelled by the fallout from '9/11', Blunkett drew on longstanding Asian stereotypes to focus public attention on to Asian, and more specifically Muslim, communities as 'the' main cause of the problems. The official rhetoric proposed that not speaking English at home, strong kinship ties, long holidays in Pakistan/Bangladesh, and marrying partners from the same country of origin, were maintaining ethnic segregation.

The idea that Muslims, and other migrant communities in Britain, have failed to integrate because of a lack of openness to other cultures and perspectives is simply not viable. Indeed *some* sections of migrant communities are now out-performing the indigenous population in education and employment, and many are well integrated into the fabric of British society. But regardless of their success in education, employment and involvement in civic and wider community structures, Muslims feel the brunt of being cast as the 'enemy within'. Their segregation is one of disconnection from the nation's cultural and political imagination.

The 'common sense' view about Asian communities not having integrated into British society dominated explanations and perceptions of the four 'home-grown' terrorists responsible for the suicide bombings in London in 2005. However, the information that has emerged since, including the two official government reports published this year, has undermined these 'common sense'

perceptions.[7] The four perpetrators themselves were by no means a homogeneous group; for example one of them (Jermaine Lindsay) was a convert to Islam. More significantly, all four - as indeed was the case with many of the Asian youth involved in the 'northern riots' - were found to be well integrated into British society. The overall picture emerging is that the perpetrators came from respected affluent families not bound to strict religious codes. The two that were married had chosen their own partners, who were both British, and for their respective ages they had all achieved relative educational success. Mohammad Siddique Khan and Shazad Tanweer, deemed to be the main organisers of the attacks, were also known for their participation in wider community activities - Khan was a popular teaching assistant at a local primary school and Tanweer a member of his local cricket team.[8] If segregation was indeed behind the 'radicalisation' of these four individuals, then their personal histories demand that we re-think our understanding of its dynamics.

The recent biography of freed Guantanamo detainee Moazzam Begg provides fresh insight into the experiences of segregation amongst seemingly well integrated Muslim individuals.[9] Begg's childhood was by all accounts one of which Blunkett et al would be proud. Born in Birmingham, of Indian/Pakistani Muslim parentage, Begg went to a local Jewish primary school because of its reputation for educational success. He recalls wearing the Star of David on his school blazer with pride and enjoying learning Jewish history. He learnt about Indian history alongside English literature and history from his father, and his teenage years were formatively shaped by his involvement in a local gang the Lynx, which included fights with other gangs, often white racists, as well as dance parties, popular music, etc - many of the 'normal' associations of British teenage life.

Throughout his childhood Begg had minimal contact with 'organised religion'

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7. *Report into the London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2005*, www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/ publications/reports/intelligence/isc_7july_report.pdf; *Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7th July 2005*, www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/7-july-report. pdf?view=Binary.
8. The emerging personal profiles of the 23 British Muslim citizens arrested in August 2006 on suspicion of planning multiple terrorist attacks on transatlantic flights appear to be very similar to the perpetrators of '7/7'.
9. Moazzam Begg was never tried for supporting or playing a role in 'Islamic terrorism', for which he was detained in US custody for three years. See his *Enemy Combatant*, Free Press 2006.

or institutions such as the mosque. His sympathies for the plight of Muslims abroad did not arise from attending mosque or listening to radical preaching, but from watching media coverage of military conflict in the Middle East, Bosnia and Afghanistan. He recounts how it was as he became more aware of the historical inconsistencies of Western interventions abroad (such as arming Saddam Hussein and the Taliban when it suited their interests) that he felt he was being asked to choose between his conscience and his country: his conscience won every time.

There are aspects of Begg's upbringing that are by no means typical of his generation of British Muslims. But it is precisely Begg's openness to these 'common sense' markers of integration that invites alternative conceptions of the dynamics of segregation. In the end his integration did not prevent the splitting of 'conscience and country' which arose from the impact of British policies on Muslims abroad. This highlights the global dimension of British Muslim contestations of government policies. And this global dimension is much more complex than is usually credited in popular debates, which often assume that Muslims in Britain are automatically going to sympathise with Muslims abroad. What we often forget is that many Muslims opposing the 'war on terror' also oppose the West's support for non-democratic regimes such as Saudi Arabia.

British Muslims, like other migrant communities, have maintained and developed global family and community networks, which have been further strengthened by access to global and 'new' media networks that provide alternative sources of news information. They are far more attuned than many non-migrants to the demands of global citizenship, and in a position to assess domestic policy not just in terms of its impact at home but how it impacts on 'ordinary' people abroad. (Doreen Massey also poses this global question for a domestic politics in her analysis of the 'politics of place' for London and the 'need to globalise in some way the local claims to multiculturalism'.[10])

What Muslims are demanding is not that the West or Britain does not intervene in foreign matters, but that its interventions are consistent with its much-touted principles of justice and democracy. In this context, integration into British society can be quite fundamental to feeling at odds with being British in a global context. We should not perhaps be so surprised that the domestic terror

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10. See 'London Inside-Out', *Soundings* 32.

threat comes not from the '*un*integrated', but from those settled and familiar with the official values of being British.

'Ordinary' sensibilities of Muslims

Another dynamic of segregation that can be gleaned from the unfolding experiences of second and third generation Muslims is that their lifestyles and cultural outlooks, increasingly negotiated through the foregrounding of Islam, fall outside of the official national outlook. Segregation here arises from living in a multicultural society which remains doggedly mono-cultural in its outlook. Here too it is worth quoting Begg for a deeper insight. During one of many interrogations whilst in US custody an FBI agent asks Begg, 'if he wasn't part of the Taliban or alQaeda why did he leave the UK for Afghanistan of all places?' Begg replied:

> I was born and brought up in England - but I never saw myself as English. And neither do the English. I know English history, English language, and English literature better than a lot of English people. But I'm not white and I'm not Christian. And my ancestry is from another world. Don't misunderstand me. Britain has the best multicultural society in Europe, but still in most parts of the country I feel out of place. I'd like to go to an English country village, with my dark skin, my beard, and my wife in her hijab and not be stared at or singled out. In fact I'd like to do that in the areas that neighbour the one where I live. I'd like people to see we generally want the same things in life, that they should not feel threatened by me. I want the English to like me, because they are accepting - not just to tolerate me, *if* I'm trying to assimilate. I don't know how much of this you understand as an American, but in many ways you are more acceptable to British society than I ever could be. After all, you're white, and I take it Christian (*Enemy Combatant*, p 213).

Ever since '9/11' the official political line has been to emphasise the need to differentiate 'ordinary Muslims' from terrorists acting in the name of Islam. Yet, as Begg's experience suggests, as a nation Britain has lacked the inclination to even begin to understand what it is about Muslim lifestyles that is 'ordinary' or worth defending.

The situation goes much deeper than simply overcoming long-standing fears

of the hijab or beard in the English village. It is about being able to conceive assertive Muslim identities as a specific negotiation of the opportunities and tensions peculiar to the present moment. When Begg says 'we essentially want the same things' he means exactly that, and his beard or his wife's hijab in quintessentially English settings should not be regarded as evidence in contradiction of that. What the Muslim hijab and beard do signify is that in multicultural Britain we may have different cultural resources at our disposal for negotiating the opportunities and tensions of the moment.

One consequence of the successive neo-liberal projects of the Thatcher, Major and Blair administrations has been the onset of a social recession: the creation of a materialistic consumer-orientated society has been to the detriment of personal relations and social well-being. One response to this by sections of Britain's migrant populations has been to re-appropriate established community networks as a valuable cultural resource to offset some of the consequences of this social recession. In this respect, for many second and third generation Muslims the turn to religion has little to do with sympathising with 'Islamic fundamentalism', and everything to do with negotiating an alternative lifestyle to that driven by modern capitalism, the growth of consumerism and the accumulation of material wealth. This is not an uncritical embracement of religion, and can frequently involve contestations of the established cultural structures and meanings of Islam - including heated debates and arguments with family and fellow Muslims. You only have to glance at some of the column inches filled by young Muslims in the flourishing Muslim media to appreciate that their renegotiations of 'faith' and 'community' are closely intertwined with negotiating living in a neo-liberal consumer society. Begg puts it straightforwardly: 'there must be more to life than routine existence'. There has been a failure of political imagination from within the left, in not recognising the recourse to this cultural resource as an alternative and valid response to neo-liberalism.

The cultural dynamics and trends within migrant communities neither form nor inform the national outlook. And this is another sense in which ordinary Muslim lives and ideas are excluded from the nation's idea of itself.

For sure, there is wide recognition that migrant communities are characterised by distinct cultural formations, experiences and practices. Yet there is no attempt to understand the cultural resources of migrant communities beyond their in/compatibility with official discourses of the nation. We do not imagine how

migrant identities might actually contribute something valuable for overcoming the difficulties of the present. This, I believe, is the foremost challenge for addressing the realities of segregation experienced by Muslims in Britain. It reflects the more complex questions of culture posed by 'critical multiculturalism', of understanding 'the shifting contours of cultural and political identities'. Rather than seeking to explain one cultural formation or another, we need to open spaces where different cultural formations are both contested and valued for the way in which they have responded to the cultural and political direction being defined by the government.

We can begin to identify some of the more specific challenges for opening up such spaces by reflecting on both the optimism and frustrations of the anti-war alliance.

Strengthening anti-war alliances beyond the war

The many disparate groups that have united behind the anti-war movement provide glimpses of the possibilities and challenges for building stronger inter-ethnic alliances that could give hope to more peaceful relations across national and cultural borders. There is in the wider public responses to the events of '9/11' and the 'war on terror' the possibility of the *beginning* of a blurring - perhaps only temporarily - of the earlier lines of segregation between British Muslims and their indigenous counterparts. A fundamental reason behind this is that there have been many individual and group actions that have enabled Muslims to feel that their pain and suffering is no longer confined within their ethnic group. Examples of such acts have included the resignation speech of the late Robin Cook and the unprecedented demonstration in London opposing the invasion of Iraq involving an estimated 2 million people.

If the broad coalition of support united behind the anti-war alliance can be translated into real political alliances, it could provide the most progressive basis for long-term international peace. But here is where the optimism perhaps begins and ends. This is because the kind of inter-ethnic sensitivity that is a feature of the anti-war alliance does not go beyond the injustices of military invasion in the Middle East. It does not confront the underlying dynamics of ethnic segregation discussed earlier. This was aptly demonstrated in the actions of British Bangladeshi Muslims who marched alongside the millions protesting against the invasion of Iraq holding 'No War' placards with Socialist Workers'

Party slogans torn off, in order to distance themselves from the atheist leanings of the SWP.

In particular there needs to more acknowledgement of the role of religion in the public sphere, both within the anti-war movement and more widely. Of course the public sphere must guard against ideas of a religious state, and no religion should be allowed to dictate state policies. But this is not the same thing as enabling religious groups to have a voice within democratic processes. My own sense is that bringing religion into the political sphere, putting it under the same scrutiny as any other ideology or doctrine that shapes people's lifestyles, will improve the ability to monitor and challenge ongoing forms of oppression that get passed off as religious beliefs.

Another critical challenge thrown up by the 'war on terror' - and one that has more widespread implications for ethnic segregation - is the need for a much deeper acknowledgment and recognition of the pervasiveness of a 'culture of thinking' in the West that is inconsistent with the values of justice and protecting the innocent. There are many instances from the 'war on terror' that expose the West's 'mission to spread democracy' as questionable in its respect for innocent lives and the desire for justice. They include such instances as Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, the 'David Kelly affair', and the death of Jean Charles de Menezes. Each of these events has been explained away by officials as the actions of a few bad individuals, an 'anomaly', or unfortunate circumstances. Collectively, I believe they reveal something more rooted about Western attitudes towards the 'other' which is historically linked to its sense of cultural superiority. It is captured in Begg's experience with US soldiers, many of whom he felt found the war at odds with their own faith/beliefs, only able to carry out their duties by seeing the detainees as subhuman. Whilst in detention at Bagram, a born-again Southern Baptist explained to Begg, 'I convince myself each day that you guys are all sub-human, agents of the Devil so that I can do my job. Otherwise I'd have to treat you like humans, and we don't do this to people where I come from' (*Enemy Combatant*, p165).

Those opposing the 'war on terror' in the West have been consistently critical of its many illegal, undemocratic and inhumane outcomes, but so far they have failed to take collective ownership for the 'mindsets' behind those failures. In the end, the leaders and administrations that gave us the 'war on terror' must be seen as a product of the West. And there needs to be a collective taking of

responsibility for the cultures and systems that produce the thinking and actions of these respective individuals, the offices they hold and the institutions they represent - just as Muslims are being challenged to take wider critical ownership for defeating Islamic extremism.

The international crisis around the 'war on terror' has thrown up deep questions of identity and democracy, for Muslims and non-Muslims, the West and non-West. Yet the weight of emphasis has continually been on the need for one side to change - Muslims and non-Western nations. This reflects the segregated world that we live in. To overcome it we need to move beyond exposing the lies and deceit of Blair, Bush and co. We need to start with a renewed understanding of the dynamics of ethnic segregation, which continue to characterise our increasingly multicultural worlds.