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**Community, politics and extremism:  
a study of far-right and radical Islamist  
engagement with wider society**

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**Submitted for the degree of PhD**

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## Abstract

This study examines the activities of those allied to the British National Party (BNP) and al-Muhajiroun, groups deemed ‘extremist’ by mainstream society, particularly those actions done as part of the extremist group, but which engage with the wider community. The research comprised of participant-observation and biographical interviews, both with extremist and non-extremist activists and focused on public community engagement. It was conducted in two sites in Stoke-on-Trent; a ‘white site’ with a number of BNP members in leadership positions, and a more dispersed ‘Islamic site’ in which a number of young men were engaged in al-Muhajiroun’s street-based activism. In the context of *Community Cohesion* and *Preventing Violent Extremism* policies and programmes, these groups and their members are presented as an existential threat to the nation while still allowed to carry on much of their business. In this light, the research looks at the backgrounds, connections, and political attitudes of extremist activists in order to situate them as community members and not as standing apart from society. The thesis asks how the political and policy context affects their contact with others. It finds that the connections and continuities, in background and political attitudes, between extremists and others, makes clear cut divisions problematic, and so undermines the rhetoric of ‘them and us’. The thesis argues that the government and media emphasis on particular extremist groups, as opposed to racism and intolerance more generally, is counterproductive. The singling out of particular groups allows those social groups from which the stereotyped extremists are drawn to see themselves as unfairly targeted. The conflation of political extremism with terrorism and other violent extremism at the same time exaggerates any threat of violence. A sense of injustice and fear can then fuel further extremism.

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## ***SUBMISSION OF THESIS FOR A RESEARCH DEGREE***

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Degree for which thesis being submitted      **PhD**

Title of thesis                      **Community, politics and extremism: a study of far-right and radical Islamist engagement with wider society**

**This thesis contains confidential information and is subject to the protocol set down for the submission and examination of such a thesis.**

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Date of submission      **24.06.11**                      Original registration date      **01.02.07**  
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I certify that:

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- (c) The data and results presented are the genuine data and results actually obtained by me during the conduct of the research
- (d) Where I have drawn on the work, ideas and results of others this has been appropriately acknowledged in the thesis
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# 1: Introduction

In June 2011, as this thesis was being completed, the British government published the *Prevent Review*. As with previous iterations of the Preventing Violent Extremism and the related Community Cohesion policies, the Cameron government sought to define and challenge Islamist and right wing ‘extremist organisations that appear to be non-violent’ (Secretary of State for the Home Department, 2011, p. 19). These organisations and their actions are not illegal, as they do not partake in actual violence, nor do they directly incite violence or hatred. However, present and previous governments state that they and their ideology are a cause of communal conflict, terrorism and other violence. The groups are in a grey area as they are legal yet deemed to pose an existential threat to the nation. This thesis is a study of the activists of two such groups, the far-right British National Party (BNP) and the radical Islamist group al-Muhajiroun,<sup>1</sup> at the time of the research also using the name Islam4UK, and of other ‘mainstream’ activists who engage with them. It combines ethnographic and biographical research to examine first the backgrounds of these individuals; secondly, whether and how ideological difference between extremists and others is exhibited; and thirdly how government rhetoric that places these groups as ‘beyond the pale’ translates within the neighbourhoods where such activists are to be found.

Since 2001, ‘extremist groups’, ‘extremists’ and ‘extremism’ have come to the centre stage in media coverage, political debate and in policies on both race relations/ multiculturalism and counter-terrorism. Official reports argued that ‘parallel lives’, in which ethnic communities live in separate enclaves with no contact between them, and extremist

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The Emigrants’

agitation caused the riots in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in the summer of 2001 (Cantle, 2001). In the community cohesion discourse, the lack of contact between the 'white working class' and 'Asian Muslim' populations allowed extremism to grow on the seedbed of ignorance, and at the same time such extremism induced fear that stopped people from engaging with each other. These arguments were given new impetus after the terrorist attacks on London in July 2005. Thereafter, the British government argued that society needed to tackle 'the factors that contribute to the radicalisation and recruitment of terrorist groups' through 'pull[ing] up this evil ideology by its roots' (Prime Minister Tony Blair quoted in White, Travis, & Campbell, 2005). Since, the British government has increased the range of 'unacceptable behaviours' that could lead to deportation, arrest or prosecution (McGhee, 2008a, p. 40), but also made much of how groups, individuals and actions that do not cross the line into illegality should and will be treated by central and local government, civil society and the wider population. This discussion has included questioning where non-violent extremism begins, and most recently has considered whether organisations or individuals should be allowed to receive government funding, be engaged in cohesion work, run schools, work with the police on counter-radicalisation projects, or hold meetings in council owned buildings or university campuses. Although these policies are primarily aimed at radical Islamists, the far-right is also implicated as both a cause of violence and of fear that leads, amongst other things, to Islamist radicalisation. Thus, far right extremism also became subjected to the same discussion. Should members of far-right groups be allowed to speak on university campuses, hold school governor positions, be elected as police commissioners, or run residents' associations with government funding?

While these policies named the problem of extremism, and suggested restrictions on individuals and acts, government also asserted that freedom of speech remains, and that



only those breaking the law will be subject to prosecution. Radical Islamist and far-right activists were, and are, still allowed to express their views at street stalls and in meetings, and stand for election: this thesis focuses on such instances. The research was conducted in two areas where extremists were active: in *East Estate* a number of BNP members held positions as chair of a community centre and as councillors, and in *Hilltop and Beyond* a number of al-Muhajiroun activists convened regular proselytising street stalls and public meetings. Through biographical interviews I examined the backgrounds of activists, both extremist and moderate, particularly with regard to the ‘parallel lives’ thesis that is the basis of community cohesion policies. Through participant observation I examined the engagement that these activists had with those who were not members of their group, including other ‘community activists’, police and council officers, and members of the public. The interviews also provided data on how the discourse of extremism and extremists was understood and operationalised, or not, by those ‘on the ground’. Together, these methods are used to question the labelling and understandings of extremist individuals and groups, as well as the impact of the naming of a political phenomenon as extremist and the subsequent tackling of groups, individuals and ideas.

This thesis is therefore one of the first research projects to take up Eatwell and Goodwin’s (2010a) proposal for ‘a broader, more holistic perspective’ (p. 231) covering both the far-right and Islamism. I do not attempt to compare the two groups to assess which is the more extreme and where the lines should be drawn, although I could, if required, make an estimate. Indeed, given the complicated relationships between extremists’ attitudes, actions, government and other reactions, and the history of the term ‘extremist’ itself, I do not know for sure if al-Muhajiroun and the BNP, or at least all of their members, should be classed as such. Certainly some definitions of extremism would require actual attempts to foment revolution, violence or law breaking (see Havens, 1965). For this reason, where I

refer to 'extremism' or 'extremist' activists and groups I do so because that is how they are described in government policy and speeches.

Similarly problematic, and perhaps more so due to the weight of history, is my use of words such as 'white', 'Asian', 'Muslim', 'working class'. An implicit part of my argument, drawing on Sen (2007), is that although such categories may be useful for correlations or causality at the level of populations, they do not give us any facts about individuals: identities are complex, multi-faceted and potentially contradictory. 'The attribution of significance to [particular] characteristics results in the creation of social categories' (Banton, 2011, p. 189), such that it is possible for individuals to be ascribed a position that they would not agree with. While I complicate the 'groupism' of mainstream discourse, I also need to use such terms to recognise each individual's place within a racist, classist and Islamophobic society: each encounter between two people 'is mediated; it presupposes other faces, other encounters... other spaces, other times' (Ahmed, 2000, p. 7). However, I do not wish to reinforce the significance of such categories by according them a role of independent variable, in the same way that state actions against racism reinforce the concept of 'race' (Miles, 1993, pp. 2-6).

The thesis, inevitably, also uses the term 'community', perhaps the most slippery concept of all. Throughout the relevant policy and academic literature, and in government and everyday speech, there are references to the 'Muslim community', and allusions to a 'white working class community'. The concept of community comes loaded with assumptions of boundedness and homogeneity. Despite Parekh's assertion, on the publication of his *The Future of Multi-ethnic Britain* (2000a), that 'ethnic groups are often more or less loose and open communities' (Parekh, 2001, p. 693), his 'community of communities' description translates easily to 'the 'mosaic pluralist' view of multiculturalism' that allows for simple

models, problems and solutions (Wetherell, 2008, p. 303). I therefore use the term 'community' with reluctance.

Some of these issues of terminology are implicit in the next chapter, a literature review which introduces the concepts of community cohesion, extremism, and integration as used within the policy and academic debates. This chapter also includes some of the history of these terms, particularly in relation to their (re)formulation after the events of 2001 and 2005. The methods used in the study are discussed in chapter 3.

The thesis is then structured into two parts, the first addressing the 'Islamic site', and the second covering the 'white site'. In each part the first chapter (4 and 6) is dedicated to the backgrounds of the activists, both extremist and mainstream, discussing various forms of integration, including contact with ethno-religious others, political others, and the state. Here I also include some history and background of the community and neighbourhood in which these individuals reside.

The second chapter of each section (5 and 7) examines the (potential) ideological divides between extremist activists and wider society. In particular, these chapters describe how such divides are manifested, or not, in the contact made between extremists and moderates. Building upon this analysis, chapter 8 discusses how the policy focus on particular extremist groups relates to the experiences of individual 'on the ground' activists, far away from the government elite or the 'evilized' (McGhee, 2008a) leaders of extremist groups such as Nick Griffin of the BNP, and Omar Bakri Mohammed and Anjem Choudary of al-Muhajiroun. This chapter also discusses both sides of the equation as it builds on Eatwell's (2006) concept of 'cumulative extremism' by demonstrating how government action and inaction is interpreted by different individuals. The thesis concludes with a chapter that aims to bring this all together, suggest future avenues for research, but also makes

proposals for an anti-extremist politics that does not reproduce the binaries that lead to hate and conflict.

## **2: Community cohesion and the threat of political extremism**

[T]here is little or no contact with other communities at any level. This appears to allow ignorance about each community to develop into fear, particularly when fostered by extremists attempting to demonise a minority community.

(Cantle, 2001, p. 28)

I want us all to live in a Britain of strong, confident communities, where people of all different backgrounds get on together. I want us to live in a country where violent extremism of any kind, whatever its roots and motivations, is utterly rejected.

(Bleas, 2007b, p.2)

Interfaith dialogue contribute[s] to increased resilience to violent extremism through increased community cohesion.

(Communities and Local Government Committee, 2010, p. 22)

### ***Introduction***

This chapter provides an introduction to a number of concepts – extremism, community cohesion, integration, social capital and multiculturalism – and the policies that have been directed towards them over the past decade in the United Kingdom. As demonstrated by the quotes above, policy makers and their advisers posit a connection between community cohesion and (violent) extremism, with extremism being both a threat to community cohesion and a symptom of a lack of community cohesion.

I therefore begin with an examination of community cohesion, ‘now the official race relations policy of the UK’ (Worley, 2005, p. 487), and how this has changed the multicultural settlement. I argue that the rhetorical shift from multiculturalism to community cohesion has done three things. First, and most obviously, it has put a greater emphasis on the cultural aspects of Muslim populations. Whereas problems of integration were previously associated with external factors such as societal and institutional racism and material inequality, now internal factors including Islam itself are problematised. Secondly, white working class people – as a community – were included as a further problem group. Despite this being a response to white anti-Muslim racism and a need to be seen to be even-handed, this can also be traced back to the early years of the New Labour government and the social exclusion policies that had already placed white working class people as a moral underclass (Levitas, 2005). Furthermore, the concept of social capital, and in particular the finding that people have a lack of ‘bridging’ social capital, was to be found in both social exclusion and community cohesion policies. Thirdly, under the banner of tolerance a number of attitudes and practices were deemed incompatible with full citizenship and/or a blockage to people getting on: thus, problems of poverty and exclusion were blamed on the cultures of the two groups. Underpinning these policies there is a continued reliance on a simplistic ‘billiard ball’ conception of communities and cultures that obscures the myriad connections between citizens and places.

The chapter then moves on to a discussion of the concept of extremism as the antithesis of cohesion. This will demonstrate the difficulties of creating a universal definition of extremism and how the British government has attempted to create definitions simply based on ideology in order to catch a more complex form, while also creating a cohesion / extremism dichotomy. The section concludes by introducing the concept of ‘cumulative extremism’ that proposes a link between radical Islamist extremism and far-right

extremism as ‘one form of extremism can feed off and magnify other forms’ (Eatwell, 2006, p. 205). That these two extremisms and not others are seen as a threat to community cohesion, and may also motivate each other, is key to the rationale of this research project.

The chapter then concludes by discussing two components of community cohesion that can be conceived as both causes of extremism, in their absence, and so also a bulwark against extremism. First, I will further discuss the idea that ‘contact’ or bridging social capital is what is lacking, and which can guide people to be more positively disposed to people of other backgrounds. Second, I discuss ideas of civil and political engagement or empowerment, which again are said to cause extremism in deficit, and can be used to tackle extremism. This, therefore, suggests that the ‘integrationism’ (Kundnani, 2007) of community cohesion policies pertains to a multidimensional integration. Such integration includes social contact, with ‘parallel lives’ as its opposite, acceptance of ‘British values’, with extremism as its opposite, and political engagement, with alienation or disempowerment as its opposite. This, of course, reflects Parekh’s (2005) assertion that ‘a society is articulated at several levels, such as the political, the economic, the social, the moral and the cultural. Immigrants might integrate at some of these levels but not others’ (p.8).

### ***From multiculturalism to community cohesion***

I begin this chapter by examining that which is threatened by or may encourage the two extremisms, namely ‘community cohesion’. As a concept, community cohesion gained prominence through the creation of the Community Cohesion Review Team and its subsequent report on the 2001 disturbances in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley (Cantle, 2001). These events were conceptualised as ‘race riots’ that ‘reflected an apparently stark

ethnic/racial divide – Asian versus white – reinforced by geographic, social, economic and cultural segregation’ (Alexander, 2004, p. 528). The rhetoric of ‘parallel lives’ (Cantle, 2001) and ‘sleepwalking to segregation’, the latter phrase used by Trevor Philips (2005) as Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, has been used as justification of a reconfiguring of ‘race relations’ through ‘a systematic dismantling of multiculturalism as the organizing rhetoric of public policies’ (McGhee, 2005b). After the bombs in London of 7 July 2005, this argument was taken further, such that policies of multiculturalism were blamed for allowing segregation, separate services and employment, alternative value systems, including extremism, which ultimately led to riots and bombs. Community cohesion was defined as the absence of such problems:

A cohesive community is one where there is a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities; the diversity of people’s different backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued; those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities; and strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods.

(Local Government Association, 2002, p. 6)

At the time of writing this shift was most recently re-articulated by the Prime Minister as ‘muscular liberalism’ in opposition to ‘the doctrine of state multiculturalism, [under which] we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives’ (Cameron, 2011).

## **Antecedents**

That said, the language of community cohesion predates these particular problems. Before the 2001 riots the problem of cohesion was seen to be internal to particular places and



related to the problems of 'sink estates' and youth disorder. Despite a recognition that such problems could divide one neighbourhood from another, a lack of cohesion was seen as internal to particular places and cultures, between the respectable and unrespectable, and was not explicitly connected to race relations.

Prior to 2001, community cohesion, in the UK at least, referred to issues of atomisation, a lack of social ties and economic inequality as well as the relationship between ethno-religious groupings. In 1995, Peter Hain argued that 'The blind Thatcherite worship of market forces has created an ugly me-firstism which is destroying community cohesion and poisoning social relations' (Hain, 1995). Indeed, the discourse of social exclusion referred to individuals, families and communities that could not access 'normal activity', whether through poverty, unemployment or social isolation (Richardson & Le Grand, 2002).

In this analysis, a vicious cycle of, first, a lack of community spirit and community self-policing, and second, crime, disorder and incivility, was making 'sink estates' intolerable places to live. Thus, the individual level argument about multiple disadvantage was combined with an estate or community level argument in which 'a negative neighbourhood reputation, or high crime neighbourhood' (Richardson & Le Grand, 2002, p. 14) needed communal intervention. A neighbourhood could suffer from a lack of community cohesion internally, as the stereotypical young troublemakers create an environment where people stay in to watch TV instead of socialising. The same neighbourhood could also be unmoored from wider society: there is a common belief that 'the poor in poor neighbourhoods are increasingly dislocated from mainstream society' (Forrest & Kearns, 2001, p. 2126). Prior to 2001, this estate or neighbourhood level analysis was predicated more on class than race. While the discourse of 'underclass' was of course racialised, the 'dangerous classes' were distinguished from the middle class and the respectable working

class. Particular geographic areas, ‘where the excluded exist in an area which is spatially segregated and socially and morally distinctive’ (Young, 2003a, p. 390), were to be feared.<sup>1</sup>

## **Putnam and Social Capital**

Before moving on to an account of how community cohesion policies came to focus on the white working class and Asian Muslims, and the relationship between them, I will first discuss their origins in the ‘social capital’ element of the social exclusion discourse. Even prior to the events of 2001, the British Government saw ‘associational life’ (Tocqueville, 1966) as a site for the betterment of certain categories of people, particularly through the benefits individuals could gain through social contact across boundaries. This policy prescription drew, in particular, from the work of Robert Putnam (2000), and the distinction made between ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital.

Putnam presented his work to senior government figures at a Number 10 breakfast seminar in March 2001, and was described at the time as Tony Blair’s ‘new favourite guru’ (Butler, 2001). His *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000) argued that due to time and money pressure, television, suburbanisation, and ‘generational change’ (p. 283), Americans’ civic engagement declined in the final three or four decades of the 20th century. This civic engagement, including political and religious participation as well as the informal social connections of bowling leagues had reduced, along with social trust: ‘honesty, civic engagement, and social trust are mutually reinforcing’ (Putnam, 2000, p.137). He argued that the problems caused by this decline are many: ‘where there is community, there is less crime, better school performance, more happiness’ (Toynbee, 2001). Social capital was

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<sup>1</sup> For a long-term perspective on ‘respectable fears’ of the underclass see Pearson (1983), and for the association of disorder with particular places and young men see also Campbell (1993) and Muncie (1984).

thus defined as ‘connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them’ (Putnam, 2000, p. 19) that create public and private goods of safety, health, and prosperity.

Of particular significance to policies on social exclusion and, later, community cohesion was the distinction Putnam made between ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital, described as ‘sociological superglue’ and ‘sociological WD-40’ respectively (Putnam, 2000, p. 23). The former is ‘inward looking and tend[s] to reinforce exclusive identities and homogenous groups’ while the latter is ‘outward looking and encompass[es] people across diverse social cleavages’ (Putnam, 2000, p. 22). Drawing on the work of Granovetter (1973), Putnam argues that ‘dense networks in ethnic enclaves... provide social and psychological support’ while ‘bridging networks... are better for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion’ (Putnam, 2000, p. 22).

For the Government’s Social Exclusion Unit, the concept of bridging social capital connected with the ideas of ‘unmoored’ or disconnected neighbourhoods that are discussed above. While a revival of local community, seen as bonding social capital, could reduce crime and the fear of crime as people got to know their neighbours, it was wider connections that were seen to help with economic and governance issues. Volunteering, as an example of an activity that crosses divides, was said to ‘bring people into contact with those outside their normal circle, broadening horizons and raising expectations, [linking] people into informal networks through which work is more easily found’ (Social Exclusion Unit, 2000, p. 53).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, membership of a neighbourhood group fosters both contact with the local state and community empowerment, ‘crystallis[ing] projects of social autonomy over against the dominant power(s) of that time and place’ (Edwards & Foley,

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, social capital also helps the most privileged hold on to their privilege through both close connections and weak connections, hence the phrases ‘it’s not what you know but who you know’ and ‘old school tie’. See Bourdieu’s (1986) consideration of social capital for an example of this more pessimistic analysis.

2001, p. 3), and again helping to ameliorate disadvantage. Here the concept of bridging social capital is heavily weighted towards contact between disadvantaged communities and a more advantaged mainstream.

Within the community cohesion discourse, with its emphasis on stopping one particular form of community conflict, a further social good was attributed to bridging social capital. However, such bridging social capital was weighted more towards contact between people of different ethno-religious groups, as opposed to contact across other divides. Through community projects, voluntary groups and other forms of civil society, the Government aimed to promote 'meaningful interaction' or 'intercultural bridging' between 'different communities' (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008c). Furthermore, the 'parallel lives' analysis, with its mention of 'educational arrangements, community and voluntary bodies, employment, places of worship' (Cantle, 2001, p. 9) showed that each 'community' had its own bonding social capital which may have provided support for its own members, but excluded others. Thus, the community cohesion policies 'problematiz[e] excessive bonding social capital in a context of insufficient bridging social capital' (McGhee, 2003, p. 385).

The creation of such bridging social capital aims to increase knowledge of the 'other', leading to people of different backgrounds trusting each other and being able to work together to find mutually beneficial solutions. This is Allport's (1958) 'contact theory' in practice: as people get to know each other and work together in a context of equality and common goals they begin to see each others as colleagues and not merely as members of a social group, and so prejudice declines. Furthermore, the development of norms and reciprocities that cut across the 'community of communities' means that disagreements can be settled peacefully: 'when associational life is multifaceted and cuts across identities, communities, geographies, and other potential cleavages, it provides a dense social

infrastructure enabling pluralistic societies to attain a vibrant creativity and diversity within a context of multiple but governable conflicts' (Warren, 2000, p. 3). Community cohesion, here, therefore refers to wider cohesion across 'diverse' groups of people, as opposed to the narrow cohesion threatened by atomisation.

Running parallel to this use of the contact hypothesis is an implicit acceptance of the threat hypothesis (Blalock, 1967), in which it is argued that proximity to ethnic others, without the beneficial contact, is deemed a threat, which then increases hostility. Putnam (2007) himself argued, somewhat paradoxically given the opportunities for bonding, that social capital reduces in the context of ethnic diversity as individuals find it harder to trust and get along with those who appear to be outsiders:

In the short to medium run... immigration and ethnic diversity challenge social solidarity and inhibit social capital... In the medium to long run, on the other hand, successful immigrant societies create new forms of social solidarity and dampen the negative effects of diversity by constructing new, more encompassing identities. (Putnam, 2007, p. 138-9)

Community cohesion policies therefore seek to accelerate this process, moving from community conflict between ethnic enclaves to 'future cohesive or integrated communities' (Amin, 2002, p. 17).<sup>3</sup>

## **Muslim culture becomes the problem**

After the 2001 'riots' the focus of such 'ghettoisation' analysis turned to Asian Muslims.

During the 1990s the stereotype of the 'compliant and quiescent law-abiding minority'

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<sup>3</sup> Amin (2002), drawing on the 'new ethnicities' literature, and mindful of the multiplicity of social divides inherent in technology and subcultures, argues that this idea of community is now outdated. 'Mixed neighbourhoods need to be accepted as the spatially open, culturally heterogeneous, and socially variegated spaces that they are... There are limits to how far community cohesion – rooted in common values, a shared sense of place and local networks of trust – can become the basis of living with difference in such neighbourhoods' (p. 17).

(Werbner, 2004, p.905) had been replaced with an image of angry young men. At least in part because of religiously-based political mobilisation, a heterogeneous group that had been 'known by national or regional origin – Pakistani, Mirpuri, Bengali, Punjabi, etc. – [were] now all seen as part of a single Muslim community' (Sahgal & Yuval-Davis, 1992, p. 22). Thus, a group that was and remains divided by religious sect, geography of origins and geography of settlement (see Ali, 1992; Werbner, 2004) was homogenised into a 'Muslim community' with a problematic ethno-religious culture.

The Rushdie affair in 1989, illustrated by television images of book burnings, had already raised questions about:

...the basis and limits of free speech, equality before the law, what it means to be British, how to forge common values out of a welter of conflicting moral systems, how much diversity a society can accommodate without losing its cohesion, and the meaning of such terms as secularism, fundamentalism and national identity.

(Parekh, 1990, pp. 708-709; see also Lewis, 2002)

The 'riots' then cemented the idea of geographic division: the perceived wisdom stated that not only did Muslims have a different culture and moral system but they were also concentrated, as in the underclass discourse, into 'clear-cut ghettos' (Young, 2003a). The Cantle Report found that:

Separate educational arrangements, community and voluntary bodies, employment, places of worship, language, social and cultural networks, means that many communities operate on the basis of a series of parallel lives.

(Cantle, 2001, p. 9)

This analysis followed that of Forrest and Kearns (2001), in which the potential for 'negative' social capital arises from such divisions:

A city could consist of socially cohesive but increasingly divided neighbourhoods. There may be ethnic or religion-based cohesive communities living side-by-side. In such circumstances, the stronger the ties which bind such communities the greater may be the social, racial or religious conflict between them.

(p. 2134)

The discourse here was of the nightmare scenario of ‘sleepwalking into segregation’ (Phillips, 2005) in which the UK would develop ethnic ghettos in the style of the United States. Despite debate over such ghettoisation theories by demographers (Finney & Simpson, 2008; Poulsen & Johnston, 2006), and the fact that only five electoral wards (units of around 8,000 people) nationally have a Pakistani Muslim majority and even in these wards around a quarter of the population are ‘White British’,<sup>4</sup> such fears were portrayed with references to ‘no-go areas’. Thus in Oldham some estates were seen as ‘no-go areas’ for black and minority ethnic (BME) people and another area was ‘characterised in the local press as a ‘no-go’ area for white people’ (Institute of Community Cohesion, 2006, p. 46).

Worley (2005) demonstrates that within a year of the 2001 disturbances the community cohesion agenda emerged as the *de facto* race relations policy, with the word ‘community’ ‘enabl[ing] practitioners and policy actors to avoid ‘naming’ which communities they are referring to’ (p. 487). This usage, however, also relates back to the earlier debate over multiculturalism in which the communitarianism of Amitai Etzioni (1997) was to be found in the Parekh report, which argued for a Britain of a ‘community of communities’, as well as a community of individuals, in which national cohesion requires ‘find[ing] ways of nurturing diversity while fostering a common sense of belonging and a shared identity among its constituent members’ (Runnymede Trust, 2000). Although the recent caricatures

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<sup>4</sup> Data here is based on my own analysis of the 2001 census.

of this ‘orthodox multiculturalism’ as encouraging an absolute moral relativism (see West, 2005) were aimed at a straw man, it is evident that the 2001 ‘northern riots’ resulted in what Joppke (2004) describes as a retreat from multiculturalism. After this time, the emphasis of policy and practice shifted to shared values, the speaking of English, and ‘a greater sense of citizenship, based on (a few) common principles which are shared and observed by all sections of the community’ (Cantle, 2001, p. 10). Amongst those principles was to be the rejection of extremism as ‘extremist organisations – whether political or religious – can undermine inclusion and generate fear’ (Home Office, 2005, p. 50).<sup>5</sup>

After the London bombs of July 2005 the community cohesion agenda was given renewed urgency. ‘Apparent increasing rates of radicalisation amongst young Muslims... [led to a] focus on both cohesion and the need to ‘integrate’ migrants.’ (Ratcliffe, Newman, & Fuller, 2008, p. 11). Githens-Mazer and Lambert (2010) argue that policy makers analyse ‘radicalization as a function of Muslim communities not demonstrating a commitment to ‘shared values and beliefs’ and the radicalisation debate has ‘become bound up with concerns over ‘community cohesion’, that is, what constitutes ‘reasonable behaviour’ among British Muslims’ (p. 891). Thus the orthodox multiculturalism had allowed the development of divided communities, and in these communities alternative (Islamic) value systems had flourished leading to women wearing the veil, to arranged marriage, and to riots and terrorism.

Since 2003, the British government’s counterterrorism strategy, CONTEST, has included a ‘hearts and minds’ strand, aimed at reducing support for violent extremism and terrorism, and stopping people becoming terrorists (Communities and Local Government Committee, 2010, p.5). Known as Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) or Prevent, this is a community-based strategy, aiming to increase the resilience of communities by supporting

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<sup>5</sup> See McGhee (2008a, chapter 4) for further discussion of Home Office reports responding to Cantle but before the July 2005 bombs.



mainstream voices and marginalising extremists (Communities and Local Government Committee, 2010, p.6).<sup>6</sup> This ‘cross-cutting policy led across Government by the Office of Security and Counter Terrorism... [was] aimed at the group of people who are vulnerable to persuasion to provide tacit or silent support to terrorists in certain circumstances and possibly “reject and undermine our shared values and jeopardise community cohesion” ’ (Communities and Local Government Committee, 2010, p.5). Unlike community cohesion policies, PVE focused solely on Muslims, but its aims of promoting shared values, empowering communities, and tackling attitudes held by people or groups that were not breaking the law put it firmly on the same terrain as community cohesion work: ‘Local Authorities in key areas like West Yorkshire have been clear that they struggle to see the distinction between the two policy areas’ (Thomas, 2009, p. 286).

Indeed, in policies, official national guidance, and local implementation, there was a great deal of cross-over between community cohesion and PVE policies. ‘Preventing violent extremism’ was not only to be done through detection of plots or countering al-Qaida propaganda, but also by ‘winning hearts and minds’ through ‘defend[ing] and promot[ing] our shared and non-negotiable values: respect for the rule of law, freedom of speech, equality of opportunity, respect for others and responsibility towards others’ (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2007b, p. 5), all part of the community cohesion agenda. The two policies were treated as one in education (Briggs, 2007; Phillips, Tse, & Johnson, 2011) and at local authority level the two streams of funding paid for similar work. However, PVE’s focus on only Muslims undermined the community cohesion agenda (Thomas, 2009). One of the key recommendations of the 2006 community cohesion review was that ‘single group’ funding in the shape of projects for particular

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<sup>6</sup> McGhee (2008a) argues, drawing on Blick, Choudhury and Weir, (2006), that the Government failed to focus enough on ‘positive engagement and building trust between Government and targeted communities’ (p.51).

ethno-religious groups was undesirable (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007; see also McGhee, 2008b), and despite arguments that other people could be violent extremists the funding was limited to Muslim populations.

The logic behind this conflation of the two funds, and the undesirability of ‘single group’ funding was the same, that of Cattle’s ‘parallel lives’. The supposed lack of contact with wider society allowed a bounded ethno-religious culture, with ways different to that of wider society, to stay separate. This ‘undesirable form of sociation... reinforced exclusive identities’ (McGhee, 2003, p. 390). Thus, Cattle argued that Muslims in closed communities have a surfeit of bonding and a lack of bridging social capital (see Putnam, 2000) through ‘separate educational arrangements, community and voluntary bodies, employment, places of worship, language, social and cultural networks’ (Cattle, 2001, p. 9). Where these lead to the negatives of poor educational, employment and political opportunities this could be a feature of any isolated or marginalised group. However, many of the negatives associated with such separateness were seen as uniquely associated with Islam and Muslims; the status of women and forms of dress, a loyalty to other Muslims over the British nation, *and* terrorism. Thus, *Islam as a culture* was posited as a threat to Britishness or British values, despite these problems also being a feature of other sections of society (Kundnani, 2007).<sup>7</sup>

### **White working class culture as the other problem**

As I discuss in the next section, in the context of ‘extremism’, questions of equity of definition (and of course funding) are extremely important. The community cohesion agenda has, due to its roots in the 2001 disturbances and its later re-articulation associated

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<sup>7</sup> Kundnani points out that ‘the epidemic of domestic violence which infects all sectors of British society, and includes two women every week being killed by their partners, receives less media attention than the problem of ‘honour killings’ carried out by Muslims’ (2007, p.40)

with preventing Islamist terrorism, focused on a Muslims versus the rest relationship. Whereas earlier accommodations of migrants were supposed to be a two-way street, both between citizens of different backgrounds, and between new citizens and the state – Werbner's (2005b) 'rather messy local political and bureaucratic negotiated order' (p. 462) – critics of the post-2001 policies see a return to requirements to assimilate in which 'it is Muslims who are routinely singled out' (Kundnani, 2007, p. 26). Far more of the community cohesion agenda has been addressed to South Asian Muslims than any other ethno-religious group, meaning that other unintegrated groups are implicitly being given the green light to carry on staying apart from wider British society. For example, many of the ultra-orthodox Jews of Stamford Hill, London and Broughton Park, Manchester, live lives that 'revolve almost entirely around Jewish people and ways of life' (Valins, 2003, p. 169). 'Nowhere in the debate has it been mooted that established Jewish clusters, for example, in cities like London, Leeds, and Manchester, should be broken down in the name of promoting community cohesion' (Phillips, 2006, p. 8). Unlike multiculturalism, that targeted the relationship between all black and minority ethnic groups and an assumed homogenous white 'host' society, the new policy is mainly targeted at Muslims, with a part of the host society that is also problematic.

Throughout community cohesion policy and practice, a second group is mentioned. As far-right mobilisation was implicated in the 2001 disturbances, the attitudes and actions of particular sections of the white population were also to be acted upon:

The overwhelming majority of people in this country live successfully side by side but we cannot take this for granted. Challenges to cohesion do exist - this might be between different ethnic or faith groups or new migrants and longer term residents.  
(Hazel Blears, quoted in BBC, 2008b)

Here, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government was referring to Asian Muslims ('ethnic or faith groups') *and* whites ('longer term residents').

Interestingly, this 'longer term residents' focus harks back to an earlier time when ethno-religious difference was not the only focus for analysis of community conflict. Norbert Elias' classic *The Established and the Outsiders* examined conflict between those on a long-standing estate and others living on a newly built estate nearby. This study, conducted in the 1950s examined the way that the 'notorious' troublemaking families in the new estate were deemed to be typical of the residents by those in the older estate (Elias & Scotson, 1965): conflict over perceived moral norms is not new.

While the inclusion of white racism as a problem to be addressed was a response to complaints that reporting of Muslim rioters left out the provocation by National Front marches (see Bagguley & Hussain, 2008), it had continuities with earlier policies addressing the white working class. In the first few weeks of the New Labour government, Prime Minister Tony Blair announced a commitment to tackle 'social exclusion': 'This was not about 'race', discrimination, and the inner city – the discourse of poverty to which the British public had become accustomed in the 1980s and 1990s...[it was about the] abject and white' (Haylett, 2001, p. 352). Like Bradford's Asian Muslims ten years later, white working class youth had rioted in Oxford's Blackbird Leys estate, Newcastle's Meadow Well and elsewhere in 1991 (Campbell, 1993; Nayak, 2009). Like the later analysis of Muslim culture being responsible, here a white working class (but not respectable working class) culture was to be blamed for worklessness, crime, and riots:

Institutions such as family, school and community which once gave children, regardless of background, a sense of discipline and moral compass, have declined in their ability to impart those values. Where all three have deteriorated, the result is the social anarchy and squalor of today's 'sink estates', inhabited by a largely white

underclass which has come to resemble in crime, violence, illegitimacy, welfare dependency and general hopelessness, the black ghettos of urban America.

(The Sunday Times, 21 February 1993, quoted in Haylett, 2001, p. 358)

Levitas' (2005) account of these policies demonstrates how social integrationist and moral underclass discourses underpinned the work of the Social Exclusion Unit. While Levitas argues this with reference to 'the traditional demons of the 'dangerous classes': idle criminal young men and sexually/ reproductively delinquent young women' (Levitas, 1999), Haylett (2001) points to the way these classes are racialised as 'white working class' and also charged with endemic racism that is a block to modernity and multiculturalism. Thus, the inclusion of white working class communities, alongside Asian Muslims, as a cohesion problem was a continuation from pre-2001 policies to improve the moral standards of this group. Later analysis such as the Runnymede report *Who Cares about the White Working Class?* (Sveinsson, 2009), along with television shows such as *White Tribe* (Littleboy & Wilmshurst, 2000), further emphasised this group's difference from wider society as a race apart.

Furthermore, and like the Asian Muslims, this characterisation of a homogenous underclass white working class, as opposed to the respectable working class (Skeggs, 1997), was spatialised in terms of 'white estates'. The 2001 Cattle report referred to '(predominantly) white estates' (Cattle, 2001, p. 23) and elsewhere reference is made to Bradford's 'traditionally white estates' (Pearce & Milne, 2010). Shahid Malik, MP, said 'What we want to do is to liberate and to empower Muslims, and people who live in white neighbourhoods as well, to stand up to extremist voices.' (Sky News, 2009).

The two formulations of spatialised and racialised 'communities' share many parallels, despite differences in language. Academic critics of the community cohesion agenda have

argued that it places the problems of Asian Muslim integration with culture and not with racism, policing and poverty (Bagguley & Hussain, 2008; Kundnani, 2007; Lea, 2003). Similarly, the social exclusion and community cohesion policies place the problems of white working class estates, including their own riots, as caused by the residents' lack of morals (Levitas, 2005) and not poverty, poor policing, and class discrimination. Just as 'white flight' and racism was at least partially responsible for Asian Muslim concentrations (Modood, 2006, p. 52), so the flight of the respectable from council estates and local authority housing allocation policies created 'sink estates'. The use of the slippery term community 'enabled practitioners and policy actors to avoid 'naming' which communities they are referring to, even though the reference points are clear' (Worley, 2005, p. 487). This de-racialisation meant that community cohesion policy, while possibly referring to a wide range of communities of which individuals could belong to many (see Sen, 2007), actually referred to Asian Muslims as one community and the white working class as another. In addition, the meaning of community as a relatively small bounded area such as a neighbourhood or estate, meant that community cohesion policy referred to the two ethno-religious groups in terms of these neighbourhoods. The stage was set to see cities divided into inner city Asian Muslim areas, and peripheral white working class estates, ignoring other divisions. Indeed, replacing the term 'community' with 'social' would require a more holistic outlook:

Social cohesion would not be confined to global comparisons between groups defined in terms of ethnicity and/or faith. It would involve looking at social divisions covering class, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability and other elements of identity... Why is 'integration' purely concerned with newly arriving groups? Is this not in truth a much broader issue, affecting sections of all population

groups, irrespective of ethnicity? And even if one accepted the CIC [Commission for Integration and Cohesion] definition, how would one define ‘new residents’? (Ratcliffe, Newman, & Fuller, 2008, p. 4)

Thus, the term ‘community’ in community cohesion marks the divide between ethno-religious groups, and ethno-religious identity, as important, while other divides are not.

Furthermore, the parallels in the descriptions of the two cultures, ‘white working class’ and ‘Asian Muslim’, suggest that the moralising project of the Social Exclusion Unit and the later focus on white working class racism is similarly an issue of integration into the mainstream. However, to use the language of integration would require the government to admit that the white working class has become a racialised other once again, perhaps with the name ‘chav’ (Nayak, 2009; Bonnett, 1998).

### ***The nation and its others***

Before moving on, then, I would like briefly to rearticulate the model of society the community cohesion and preventing violent extremism policies seem to be working with, and raise the question of what exactly these two groups are supposed to be integrating into.

Werbner (2005b) states that ‘what was thus racialised, pathologised and indeed criminalized, was the internal social cohesiveness and cultural distinctiveness of the ethnic community, and secondarily, of the white working class communities living in the inner city adjacent to it’ (p. 748). The communitarian logic means that ‘self-segregation, rather than [merely] representing choice of residence, evolves into a choice in values’ (Kalra & Kapoor, 2009, p. 1411): being a geographical member of one of the two communities is seen to be indicative of cultural preferences, attitudes, and ways of life. However, it seems

unlikely that the integrative work of community cohesion is only to bring Asian Muslim and white working class people together in harmony. Kalra and Kapoor note that:

The nature and shape of this cohesive and well integrated society often remains unnamed in the literature... [but it is] the nation itself that provides the aspiration for what is being segregated from and needs to be integrated to...a relatively empty and flexible framework, the nation allows for a range of values to be asserted, from democracy to tolerance.

(Kalra & Kapoor, 2009, p. 1408)

The articulation of this nation, this Britishness, is therefore what the unintegrated and problematic community is to be measured against, and for Kalra and Kapoor (2009) it is the 'transparent, normative mode of White middle-class values which are ever-present' (p. 1404). One important part of this self-image of Britishness is the idea of tolerance, and it is intolerance and the related extremism that are the nub of the problem.

### **Intolerance of intolerance and enforced 'mixophilia'?**

[Prime Minister Cameron] articulates a widely held anxiety: that the passage from separate to separatist, separatist to extremist, extremist to terrorist, is an established one; and that the "hands-off tolerance" of bien-pensants eases that passage.

(Leith, 2011)

Here, then, I will draw out some of the links made between the community analysis described above, and extremist politics, made under the rubric of tolerance and intolerance. I argue that the community cohesion discourse not only makes connections between ethno-religious cultures and rioting and (violent) extremism, but also redraws the line at which 'the nation' is supposed to be tolerant, such that the multicultural settlement has been



adjusted in favour of a greater intolerance of intolerance, difference *and* separation. In order to promote greater tolerance of some differences – being Muslim, being gay, and so on – requires the nation to be intolerant of other differences because of the connections that are purported to exist in some communities between everyday difference and extremism:

It is not the effect of prejudice, discrimination and intolerance that is the target of cosmopolitan citizenship alone, rather it is the recourse to defensive monolithic cultures, traditions, identities and community formations that are the target of this model of citizenship, which is dedicated to the promotion of dialogue between groups and across boundaries within the general principles of participatory democracy.

(McGhee, 2005a, p. 164)

As I show below, it is the particular ‘monolithic cultures’ of the white working class and Asian Muslims that are the target, and these *cultures* are not to be tolerated but reformed because of their supposed intolerance.

For Wemyss the concept of tolerance cannot be understood without reference to power relations: ‘ ‘Intolerance’ occurs when the dominant class and its representatives exercise coercive power through violent suppression and legitimised discrimination against subordinate groups’ (Wemyss, 2009, p. 132). Thus, tolerance is exhibited when the powerful choose not to act, when in acting they could stop something they disapprove of. ‘Discourses in which ‘tolerance’ is used always include the idea of ‘our’ superiority, ‘our’ rightness, as opposed to the wrongness of others whom ‘we’ nevertheless are sometimes prepared to put up with’ (Wemyss, 2009, p. 131). Wemyss questions the commonsense notion that tolerance is the opposite of racism, pointing out that this power to choose to be tolerant, makes tolerance another mode of racism as it implicitly accepts existing power relations. At the same time, though, the contingent and multifaceted nature of any power

relations means that we *can* speak of the intolerance of members of subordinate groups towards others in and out of the group.

Precisely what the nation should be tolerant of, and the question of whether society should tolerate intolerance, is an old question revitalised by the differences supposedly made more obvious in multicultural societies. I will not examine here the political philosophical and theoretical arguments (see Parekh, 2000b; Young, 2000; Raz, 1998; Kymlicka, 1995), suffice it to say that many of these debates are concerned with where the limits of toleration should lie in a liberal multicultural polity, with reference to a broad range of attitudes and actions. Drawing on Raz (1998) these attitudes and actions can be divided into:

- Difference: attitudes and actions that are widely viewed as exhibiting difference but as not doing harm.
- Separation: a preference for spatial division that *in itself* does no harm.
- Internal intolerance: with regard to ‘repress[ing] their own members... appl[ying] as much to homophobia among native Germans, as to female circumcision among Somali immigrants’ (Raz, 1998, p. 199) and also the right of exit.
- External intolerance: the expression of racism, Islamophobia, homophobia and so on.

Here again, though, we find the common-sense ‘billiard ball’ conception of cultures: bounded and relatively homogenous. Unlike the messy multiculturalism described by Gilroy (2004) and Werbner (2005b), this view is of a communitarian multicultural society where one set of attitudes and actions can be neatly read off another set, with ethno-religious identity as the ultimate causal attribute: ‘social background, firmly based on “community and culture” [is said to determine] the feasible patterns of reasoning and

ethics' (Sen, 2007, p. 33). This ordered multiculturalism neatly fits the 'communities' analysis and supports the idea of a causal connection between a vast range of attitudes and actions. For Asian Muslims these elements include: the veil, speaking Urdu at home, supporting Pakistan in cricket, arranged marriages, forced marriages, segregation and self-segregation, illiberal attitudes to homosexuality and gender relations, religious superiority, sharia compliance, allegiance to the ummah<sup>8</sup> over the nation, Islamist politics, and terrorism. For the white working class these elements include: all white council estates, overt nationalism (particularly supporting England in football), illiberal attitudes to homosexuality and gender relations, high alcohol consumption, worklessness and early motherhood, racism, voting for the BNP, racist violence and terrorism. Due to the causal connections – 'the passage from separate to separatist, separatist to extremist, extremist to terrorist' – the nation's toleration of one element can then translate into toleration of other elements.

This, then, qualifies or adds texture to Jock Young's (1999) observations about the changing balance of tolerance and intolerance:

Late-modern societies consume diversity, they do not recoil at difference but recast it as a commodity and sell it in the local supermarket or magazine. What they are less willing to endure is... difficult people and dangerous classes.

(1999, 389-90)

Drawing on this analysis, McGhee further notes that in the community cohesion literature 'difference is to be celebrated, consumed and valued; forms of sociation, especially inter-community relationships that do not reflect this 'culture' are to be subjected to programmes of reorientation' (McGhee, 2003, p. 379). Diversity is to be celebrated, but those who fail to join in this celebration – the white working class in their peripheral

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<sup>8</sup> The global community of Muslims.

estates and the Asian Muslims in their inner-city neighbourhoods – are to be condemned. Not only should the nation find prejudice and discrimination intolerable, but separation is also intolerable as it leads to intolerance.

Both media and politicians have propagated a ‘common-sense’ view that connects *particular* forms of difference to separation and intolerance. The ‘threatening set of symbols of difference and otherness’ (Williamson & Khiabany, 2010, p. 87) mark people out as Young’s ‘difficult’ or ‘dangerous classes’, and intolerance is deemed integral to such symbols and should, not, therefore be tolerated by the nation. However, as I will show below, the messiness of the existing British society suggests that these straightforward connections are often mistaken.

Government policy and media coverage has contained an implicit ‘assumption that working class white people are racist’ (Hill, 2009) while conflating overt national pride, everyday racism, violence, and extremism into a stereotype of the dangerous underclass male, mirroring the ‘racist/hooligan couplet’ of Back, Crabbe and Solomos (1999). When John Denham, the Communities Secretary, announced the Connecting Communities fund in 2009, it was described in the Independent as targeting ‘white working class extremism’ (Verkaik, 2009). The previous year the BBC broadcast a ‘white season’ – tagline ‘Is white working class Britain becoming invisible?’ – in which all of the six high profile programmes were about race and racism, including a documentary on the impact of Enoch Powell’s ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech.<sup>9</sup> Despite survey data showing that ‘overt and direct expression of negative attitudes to immigrant and ethnic minority populations’ is more likely amongst the *Daily Mail* reading lower middle and skilled working-class populations

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<sup>9</sup> Enoch Powell was not himself a member of the working class so the programme being part of this season implies that the working class are more susceptible to the ‘Rivers of Blood’ message.

(Wetherell, 2008, p. 309), the pathology of racism is posited as associated with the urban working class (see also Collins, 2004; Hewitt, 2005, p. 52).

Similarly, ‘Muslims in Britain are regarded as an illusory mass... complete with attributes that are attached to this ‘singular’ community: a people obsessed with praying, veiling, intolerance towards others, demands for special treatment, regularly testing the tolerance and goodwill of ‘host’ countries and, increasingly, supporting the most medieval forms of law and punishment’ (Williamson & Khiabany, 2010, p. 86) p.86. Despite surveys showing that British Muslims are much more likely to strongly identify with the UK than the general population, and are also more likely to want to live in a mixed neighbourhood with ‘those who share [their] ethnic and religious background and others who do not’ (Coexist Foundation, 2009, pp. 19, 23), they are deemed separatist and unpatriotic.

Using this racist or culturalist analysis, even potentially benign or neutral attributes become part of what is wrong with the problematic community, and these attributes are given special significance when exhibited by a particular group, while being less problematic or even unproblematic when present elsewhere. The reading of these signs in terms of ‘communities’ allows them to be interpreted differently in different contexts.

The Islamic veil, and this includes the hijab and jilbab styles as well as the face-covering niqab, is, according to Williamson & Khiabany (2010), ‘erroneously [linked to] Islamic fundamentalism and Nazism, to the practice of clitorrectomy, of ‘child marriage’ or ‘murder’’. Although it may be more or less freely chosen and even worn as a rebellion against parental culture, it is characterised as a ‘mark of separation’, evidence of a refusal to integrate, and a radical Islamist political statement: it is a sign of the oppression of women by the men in their community. However, a similar veil worn by a non-Muslim is unproblematic: while the example of the Catholic nun’s veil may be too trite, we should

also remember that a headscarf very similar to the hijab was de rigueur in post-war England until the 1970s.

Similarly, the display of the UK's union flag and England's St. George flag are both associated with racism and far-right activity. A flag flown outside a home is symbolic of racism, but when the 'overwhelmingly white' audience of the Last Night of the Proms wave their union flags this is deemed patriotic (see Manzoor, 2008). Sometimes a particular symbol or act is deemed necessary, yet at others it is deemed problematic, an inconsistency that is important in discussions of parity in what the nation should tolerate. Indeed, this also leads to the paradox that for community cohesion we need more flag-waving by Muslims, and none by the white working class.

Further community-based connections are made between particular political and social attitudes and the public expression of said attitudes. Again, common attitudes that in some circumstances are permissible are seen as one step away from intolerance and violence in others. Stereotypes of both the Asian Muslim and the white working class male as being unable to control their emotions, as opposed to the 'cool' cosmopolitan mentality (see McGhee, 2005b) exemplified by the middle classes. So although the belief that 'gay sex is a sin' is common to adherents of all three Abrahamic religions, it is expected to lead to homophobia and violence among Asian Muslims and not others (Halstead, 2005). Whereas the 'white peripheral estates' are characterised as places of danger for ethnic minority people – places where racism is associated with hate crime – rural and middle-class racism is largely unexamined (Garland & Chakraborti, 2007; Reay et al., 2007).

Quantitative studies taking these communities as the unit of analysis, including those that examine the class and regional bases of BNP support (Ford & Goodwin, 2010) and the

level of illiberal attitudes among Muslims (Mirza, Senthilkumaran, & Ja'far, 2007) encourage an actuarial understanding of disorder (Young, 1999). Although we do not have certainty of causal connections between white working class-ness, voting BNP and racist violence, or between Muslims, illiberal religious attitudes and terrorism, correlations are fitted into the community narrative to suggest higher levels of risk, such that other communities are often ignored. In this way it was deemed newsworthy that all of the UK Muslims surveyed by Gallup in 2009 said that homosexual acts were morally unacceptable, but the fact that 42% of the UK population agreed was entirely unreported (Butt, 2009; Coexist Foundation, 2009). Similarly, the survey used to support the BBC's White Season described above was used to provide details of white people's negative attitudes to immigration, alongside films about the white working class. That the survey found little difference between the white middle class and working class interviewees, and for some questions no difference at all, was not part of the story, nor the fact that both groups were more concerned about drink and drugs and 'a culture of disrespect' than immigration (Gillborn, 2009, p. 16).

Most pertinently, this logic of risk and community can be found in the narrative of a natural progression through identity politics, 'tacit support' for terrorism and 'radicalisation'. This 'conventional wisdom' sees:

...radicalization as a function of Muslim communities not demonstrating a commitment to 'shared values and beliefs' that both underpin British society and provide 'resilience' against messages that support and encourage Islamically inspired violence against Britain and British interests... Taken as whole, popular media and political discourses now routinely juxtapose issues more usually associated with integration and immigration than with terrorism, such as the

wearing of the hijab, arranged marriage, and the fundamental (lack of) compatibility of Islamic religious ideology and practice with liberal democracy.

(Githens-Mazer & Lambert, 2010, p. 891).

The steps from ‘being Muslim’ to ‘Islamic identity politics’ to Islamism to radical Islamism and terrorism are portrayed as sequential and natural, especially in analysis that unquestionably accepts the assertion that in Islam, politics and religion are inseparable to a degree not seen in other religions:

In the case of Islam, or countries where Islam is the dominant religion, the view propagated in western scholarly writings, as well as by many Muslims, is that religion is the defining element of Muslim identity. Other dimensions of identity-formation such as class, gender or national belonging are treated as secondary to religion... While the various contemporary constructions of ‘being Muslim’ cannot be equated to ‘being Islamist’, Muslim identities have, nonetheless, been articulated in recent years in relation to the claims of Islamist political movements.

(Ismail, 2004, p. 615)

Dominant discourses therefore conflate any Islamic politics with Islamism, and Islamism with radical Islamism, meaning that articulation of any aims inspired by Islam can be presented as the ‘thin end of the wedge’. Muslims’ ‘political claims-making’ (Choudhury, 2007, p. 12) for state accommodation of some Islamic norms is merely Muslims acting politically as Muslims, paralleling other ethno-religious groups: Islamism is ‘a complex, multifaceted phenomenon’ taking in those who would foment revolution, and those who may have a goal of an Islamic state but who do little to work towards it beyond normal politics (Denoeux, 2002, p. 72). However, this Islamism is deemed to be the sea in which extremists and violent extremists swim (Saggar, 2006). Although ‘religion is increasingly seen as an important aspect of identity by Muslims, it is deployed in many different and



diverse ways' (Choudhury, 2007, p. 6): but for critics of Islam, Muslim identity politics is the beginning of the road to terrorism, and an absolute red-line around liberal secular democratic politics is necessary.

Therefore one reason why community cohesion and PVE policies are connected is the presumption that violent Islamist extremists were non-violent extremists and before that had developed an Islamic identity politics – as evidenced in the 2001 riots and the Rushdie affair – in opposition to a secular and liberal multicultural nation. In parallel, a 'white backlash' (Hewitt, 2005) to liberal multiculturalism fomented a white identity politics that is deemed a precursor to BNP success and hate crime. Community cohesion policies hope to nip this in the bud by promoting a 'a shared future over divided legacies' (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007, p. 7), addressing the problem of 'communities [that] were not encouraged to be outward-facing, and therefore only mixed with others in their group' (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007, p. 161). Actively taking part in this shared future, through meeting and working with those from another ethno-religious background, makes people part of the solution and not part of the 'parallel lives' problem.

This line of argument increases the extent of social facts that the nation should not tolerate. It is not enough for the targets of these policies to refrain from outwardly expressing their intolerance: there 'seems to be an attempt to move British society, or perhaps more accurately those particularly culturally disharmonious areas... beyond half-hearted multiculturalism towards what seems to be a form of compulsory mixophilic social capital' (McGhee, 2003, p. 395). The 'right to enjoy, express and practice one's cultural traditions and identity in the future will be increasingly subject to the following provisos:... competent English speaker... respect and embrace 'British culture'... sufficiently integrated with communities other than your own... participate actively in your civic

culture and in the wider political community... tolerant of difference' (McGhee, 2005a, pp. 180-181).

At the same time, though, community cohesion documents also argue that previous race relations policies had failed by being too intolerant of particular political arguments. The 2001 Cattle Report followed the argument that political correctness was stopping people from talking about immigration or ethnic difference for fear of being accused of racism:

In our anxiety to eliminate the forms of insulting behaviour and language, we have created a situation in which most people are now unwilling to open any subject which might possibly lead to uncomfortable differences of opinion.

(Cattle, 2001, p. 20)

The 2007 *Our Shared Future* report reiterated this point as:

... the importance of all communities being able to air their grievances and concerns, but for those discussions to have clear ground rules. We have heard of instances where White groups in particular felt unable to discuss concerns for fear of being labelled as racist.

(Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007, p. 95)

This internal contradiction demonstrates that the problem of community cohesion is not merely disagreement in the realm of values. Nor, given the focus on particular communities and particular forms of intolerance, is the policy aimed at eradicating racism, homophobia, Islamophobia and other hatreds everywhere.

These dichotomies find their resolution in the construction of these groups as the ultimate source of the problem of extremism (British National Party for the White working class and Jihadism for the Muslims), an issue high on the policy agenda of the newly formed Department of Communities and Local Government. It is at the

point of equating the British National Party with Jihadism that the project of integration into a Shared Future becomes most clear. The transparent, normative mode of White middle-class values which are ever-present but not articulated become firmly established as that which is being segregated from and needs to be integrated into.

(Kalra & Kapoor, 2009, p. 1404)

Thus the nation, or perhaps the middle-class or the elite has decided to use its power to be intolerant towards those groups, that through their ‘natural’ predilection to non-middle-class ways of expressing their dissatisfaction with their lot, create problems for the rest of us.

### ***Extremism and Cohesion***

As noted previously, this thesis concerns the backgrounds of, and engagement between, community and political activists associated with two particular extremist groups and ‘moderate’ activists. This section, therefore, addresses the question of why these particular groups – a question put to me by a research participant in the form ‘what makes you think that I’m an extremist?’ – and not others. The simplest answer, and the one which I gave to the participant, is that these are the groups named in the community cohesion policies. Here, however I will examine the workings of these definitions.

I argue here that definitions based solely on ideology do not capture what is usually meant by extremism: defining extremists as those who do not share our values of democracy and tolerance (BBC, 2009d) needs clarification as to what these terms mean. Those that rely purely on actions, requiring violence, miss out the electoral activities of the BNP. British government’s attempts to create simple definitions seem to be post hoc justification for

responses based in temporary political and strategic concerns; in particular the popular understanding of connections between intolerance and disorder or violence. Taking this line, a reading of the community cohesion and preventing violent extremism literature does provide some basis for a singling out of these two extremisms, based on the potential for ‘cumulative extremism’ and the damage to cohesion, itself held out as the bulwark against extremism.

Defining ‘extremism’ is notoriously difficult. In the final analysis, most definitions rely on a comparison to the majority – ‘actions and value systems that lie beyond the moral and political centre of society’ (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2010b, p. 8) – that differs according to what is considered normal in a particular time and place (see Sargent, 1995, p. 2; Lipset & Raab, 1971, p. 5). Even though there are ‘continuities between democratic and counter-democratic political codes [such as fascism and communism]’ (Smith, 1998, p. 117) such that there is no *clear* dividing line between them, there is also a tacit consensus as to what we mean by ‘extremism’ even if the rationale to justify such a labelling is missing.

Academics writing on the far right and radical Islamism have made parallel struggles to define their particular extremism. ‘Almost every scholar in the field points to the lack of a generally accepted definition... in twenty-six definitions of right-wing extremism... no less than fifty-eight different features are mentioned’ (Mudde, 2000, pp. 10-11). Mudde (2000) goes on to outline the most common of these – ‘nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and the strong state’ (p. 11) – and then discusses how the features may be deemed sufficient or necessary, and how some forms of the ideology relate to Nazism, fascism and populism. Furthermore, there are disagreements on whether this extremism should be named as the far right, extreme right or radical right (see E. L. Carter, 2005; Eatwell, 2004; Mudde, 2000).

This terminological argument is mirrored in the debate over the use of the terms Islamism, radical Islamism, Islamic fundamentalism, political Islam and others (see Haddad, 2003, p. 144). That these are often used interchangeably is also due to the conflation of ‘normal’ Islamist politics and radical and revolutionary forms, as seen from the perspective of the secular state. Nationalism has a long and mainstream history in the West - and elsewhere – but the UK acting in the national interest is an unnamed ‘banal nationalism’ that is deemed unproblematic ‘because it appears to lack the violent passions of the extreme right’ (Billig, 1995). The lack of an unrecognised ‘banal’ Islamism means that all ‘activities of organisations and movements that mobilise and agitate in the political sphere while deploying signs and symbols from Islamic traditions’ (Ismail, 2003, p. 2) appear alien and threatening even if they are merely common secular concerns with an Islamic spin. Requests for sharia compliant finance, trying to get Islamic ideals mainstreamed through political means, and violent revolution are not the same, a distinction not made in definitions such as Sheri Berman’s (2003):

Islamism [is] the belief that Islam should guide social and political as well as personal life... revolutionary transformation of their societies... the establishment of an Islamic state.

(p. 257)

In the context of the war on terror distinctions between different Islamisms are obscured. Jackson adequately demonstrates that a media and academic ‘Islamic terrorism’ discourse ties together all forms of Islamism with violence, to create the image of a homogenous enemy that is the other to moderate Muslims despite some Islamism being compatible with democracy (Jackson, 2007). Definitions of Islamist extremism can rest on violent actions, and this is then extended to all Islamists. Precisely because Western Europe has an established electoral far right, that is not intimately connected to violence and terrorism but

instead argues for a politics of race in the public sphere, definitions of extremism here have focused on the ideological component.

Indeed, following the American convention, Pippa Norris (2005) rejects the term 'extreme right' as it 'can imply groups well beyond the legal boundaries of democratic politics that are willing to use violent direct actions, or even terrorist tactics' (p. 45), citing those who kill abortion doctors or blow up government buildings. Using this definition, the two groups that are the subject of this study might not be extremist, both proclaiming their opposition to violence, and only having connections to violence through ex-members. For the National Extremism Tactical Co-ordination Unit, an arm of the British police 'the term only applies to individuals or groups whose activities go outside the normal democratic process and engage in crime and disorder' (NETCU, 2010). Indeed, it is for this reason that at the time of the research neither of the groups had been banned by the UK government. However, others follow the argument that not accepting the 'values, procedures and institutions of the democratic order' (E. L. Carter, 2005, p. 19) makes an ideology 'extremist' and are comfortable with the term 'extreme right' (see E. L. Carter, 2005; Eatwell, 2004; Mudde, 2000).

This discussion suggests that neither ideology nor actions can be used as a single dimension to judge where normal activism ends and extremism begins.

Extremism is, therefore, best seen as having two dimensions – an action-based one and a values-based one. As Goldwater has noted, it is possible to conceive of using extreme actions in defence of liberal democratic values.

(Eatwell & Goodwin, 2010b, p. 11)

A further component may be monomania, 'a drastic narrowing of these persons' vision or concerns' (Salmon, 2002, p. 72) such that creating the Islamic state or stopping

immigration becomes more important than, or subsumed into concerns about the economy, crime, and war. However, this multi-dimensional definition raises further questions, including where the lines are drawn with regard to political action, and why some political aims are deemed reasonable (for example, stopping abortion) and others (for example, stopping immigration) are not.

Here I would point to the relationship between the extremism and the context in which it is deemed extreme. Norris' rejection of the 'extreme right' tag (see above) is based in the experience of the United States where freedom of speech prevails over other norms. Thus, free speech law defends the acts of the Westboro Baptist Church, whose pickets of American military funerals (McAllister, 2007) bear comparison to the al-Muhajiroun demonstrations in the UK that have resulted in long prison sentences. Illiberal attitudes such as homophobia that were acceptable and common in the UK of the very recent past are now unacceptable to the extent that sections of the far right distances itself from them.<sup>10</sup> The societal and political context places particular acts and ideas as beyond the pale: the 'act of creating a taxonomy tells us much more about the creator's own social and political values—their social psychological reality—than it does about the psychology of others... deviance itself is a social and political *judgment*' (Haslam & Turner, 1998, p. 446).

Extremism, then, is perhaps more easily defined in the negative, with reference to a set of core beliefs about who 'we', the cohesive community, are. Indeed, in the UK state's recent references to extremism there appears to be an emerging consensus in which definitions of Britishness are used as the other to extremism. McGhee (2009) demonstrates how, post 7/7, what is to be integrated into – for Muslims – has changed from an acceptance of

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<sup>10</sup> In March 1996 *The Sun* responded to plans to allow gay people in the armed forces with an article headed 'Our Boys Don't Like It Up 'Em!' and highlighting the quote 'There's no way I would want a homosexual in my slit trench' (Gardiner, 1996, p. 201)

institutions and process to an acceptance of particular values: one list of such values includes ‘human rights, the rule of law, legitimate and accountable government, justice, freedom, tolerance, and opportunity for all’ (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008b, p. 10). The policy is designed to make liberal citizens, not only in terms of them believing in liberal democracy but also holding liberal attitudes:

The recent pursuit of citizenship training, loyalty oaths and new ‘managed migration’ measures by the Home Office marks a clear departure from the ‘piecemeal’, ‘haphazard’ and ‘uncertain’ ‘drift’ towards multiculturalism in Britain in favour of a more regulated and pedagogic pursuit of universalist liberal goals and acculturation.

(Alexander, 2004, p. 540)

Therefore, the ‘tension between diversity and solidarity’ (Pilkington, 2008) is to be reduced by an assimilation in the realm of values: effectively this consensus states that although the newcomers may have different coloured skin, they can adapt to our British liberal norms. The emphasis on the concept of tolerance shows that the requirement of citizens to commit to a procedural liberalism has been supplemented by a requirement to commit to some substantive liberal values, hence the end of multiculturalism.

As stated previously with regard to the concept of tolerance, I will not attempt to provide a normative philosophical analysis on the rights and wrongs of this ‘intolerance of intolerance’ in the abstract. It is both argued that ‘the idea that there has to be a schedule of ‘non-negotiable’ value statements to which every citizen is expected to sign up is not in the spirit of an open, plural citizenship’ (Modood, 2011) and that shared values are necessary for any ‘sense of community’ and cohesion (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). However, in the period of the research and after the UK government has attempted through the law, and



other means, to assert a set of liberal values, culminating at the time of writing in Prime Minister David Cameron's 'muscular liberalism' speech:

We need a lot less of the passive tolerance of recent years and a much more active, muscular liberalism. A passively tolerant society says to its citizens, as long as you obey the law we will just leave you alone. It stands neutral between different values. But I believe a genuinely liberal country does much more; it believes in certain values and actively promotes them.

(Cameron, 2011)

Here I am more concerned with examining the set of liberal values promoted, how they are talked about, and which people and groups are referred to in this context.

While terrorism, violence and inciting hate are against the law, abhorrent attitudes are not. When official guidance was issued to universities on tackling extremism on campus a distinction was made between acceptable and unacceptable extremism:

Unacceptable extremism can range from incitement of social, racial or religious hatred, to advocating the use of violence to achieve fundamental change to the constitutional structure of the UK, to carrying out terrorist acts. Individuals can and do hold extreme views without espousing violence. This is entirely acceptable, provided these views do not pass the line of illegality.

(Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2008, p. 10)

This definition based in law, however, was given qualification by ministerial speeches in which further extremism was identified:

We have seen a greater challenge from extremist groups who are careful to avoid promoting violence. Instead they cynically skirt the fringes of laws that rightly

defend free speech to promote hate-filled ideologies. They may not explicitly promote violence, but they can create a climate of fear and distrust where violence becomes more likely. These are the groups that fail to speak out and condemn violence when any reasonable person would be outraged. In many cases, mosques, community centres and other institutions are being targeted by the Far Right, as well as by those peddling their particular brand of antidemocratic ideology in the guise of religion. On both sides, these extremists are trying to create the idea that being Muslim and being British are incompatible.

(Smith, 2008)

Official documents that spoke of non-violent extremists attacking our ‘shared values’ did not usually provide a great deal of detail of these values, describing them as ‘respect for human rights, the rule of law, equality of opportunity, freedom of speech and freedom of religious practice’ (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2008, p. 7). Occasionally further details were added, including reference to ‘a tiny minority who oppose tolerance and diversity’ – the far right – and ‘individuals preaching hatred and violence in the name of Islam’ (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2007b, p. 1). Hazel Blears, minister without portfolio, remarked at the National Imams and Rabbis conference that ‘no individual citizen should face barriers or discrimination within their religion either’ (Blears, 2007a) referring to the status of women in Muslim communities. An early version of the counter-terrorism strategy update known as CONTEST 2 defined extremists as those who: ‘advocate a caliphate, a pan-Islamic state encompassing many countries... promote Sharia law... believe in jihad, or armed resistance, anywhere in the world... argue that Islam bans homosexuality and that it is a sin... fail to condemn the killing of British soldiers in Iraq or Afghanistan’ (Dodd, 2009). Aside from listing attitudes that appear to be specific to Muslims, the only other value

distinction appears to be that of tolerance versus racism, referred to in the context of the far right.

However, even naming these values was done with trepidation. Policy makers were unsure whether to name Muslims or Islam in the Preventing Violent Extremism Pathfinder documents for fear of stigmatizing and antagonising Muslims. The list of radical Islamist attitudes listed above did not appear in the final CONTEST 2 policy documents. Furthermore, ‘some Pathfinders have deliberately chosen not [to make] the links between community cohesion and racism so as not to antagonise communities’ (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2004, p. 1) and PVE Pathfinders have been rebadged to avoid labelling Muslims as terrorists (Thomas, 2010, p. 453). Elsewhere, Thomas (2009) argues that ‘right-wing extremism is invoked in the Introductions to a number of the Government’s PVE documents... but this appears to be nothing more than a superficial nod towards even-handedness’ (p. 286). My reading of the policy documents suggests that policy makers attempted to create definitions of extremism that seemed to be based in a ‘neutral’ liberalism that does not name either the radical right or radical Islamism, but would include them, in order not to further inflame. The experiences of the ‘northern riots’ and the London bombs, and the subsequent analysis that presented conflict as being between two particular ‘communities’, had already pushed the two political extremisms of Islamism and the far right into the spotlight.

The concept of community cohesion has received a lot of attention in recent years, in part because of the impact of the increased terrorism threat. There is a belief that the threat of terrorism and terrorist incidents can cause communities to become in-cohesive as certain groups are marked out as potential perpetrators of terrorism.

(Green, 2007, p. 1)

## **Extremism and escalation**

In the previous section I have shown how simple definitions of extremism as either political values or a set of actions alone, both in academic and policy documents, do not adequately capture those mobilisations that are considered extremist. Violent extremism can be defined by particular actions, but the British government has attempted to demarcate sets of political values that constitute non-violent extremism and, while not illegal, to be tackled using a variety of methods.

As Stanley Cohen (1985) remarked, ‘what is perennially at issue, is how surface reasons can differ from ‘real’ reasons’ (p. 11). Examination of the content of the more detailed sets of values invoked in creating the extremist / moderate dichotomy suggests that the ‘false ideologies’, as Theresa May put it when launching a 2009 policy review, are not the only criteria. After all, belief that homosexuality is a sin, that women should obey their husbands, or that Palestinians should resist Israel with violence are not specific to radical Islamists or indeed Muslims. Nor is racism or Islamophobia limited to far right activists or indeed the white working class. If the aim is to tackle extremism by taking the moral high ground through robust articulations of substantive liberal values then many other individuals and groups would also be the targets of the policies. This also applies to the more general accusation of lack of loyalty to the state. Anthony McRoy, talking of his Christianity, states:

I know what it means simultaneously to be part of the British nation, yet to bear a higher allegiance to God and to relate to a transnational body that is the main part of my identity... Most religious communities share this dichotomy of identity. Hence, when Muslims often place their allegiance to the global Ummah above their UK citizenship, they are by no means unique.

(McRoy, 2006, p. 4)

Most cynically, and put to me by a police officer who participated in the process, the state decided which groups it wanted to define as extremist, and then set about writing an objective definition based on political ideology that would catch the correct groups. This parallels the attempts to put a legal ban on Hizb ut-Tahrir: Prime Minister Tony Blair 'held high-level discussions with police and counter-terrorism experts with a view to reviving plans to proscribe the group' which failed as they could not find sufficient grounds (Doward & Hinsliff, 2006).

The discourse of community cohesion and preventing violent extremism does, however, give substance to a definition of extremism, albeit one with a risk of circularity. Instead of an objective definition, this leads to a concept of problematic extremism as that which threatens cohesion or which may lead to violent extremism. As demonstrated earlier, the logic of community and culture, leading to the idea that within particular groups the problems of separation, difference, intolerance and conflict are necessarily connected, leads to an escalator view of extremism, for both individuals and communities. Therefore, extremist politics can turn to violence and can inspire others to violence. Furthermore, these perceived connections mean that extremist politics threaten cohesion due to a fear of such violence, and a defensive response, what Roger Eatwell (2005) describes as 'cumulative extremism'. The circularity comes because in naming a particular political group extremist, people gain a reason to fear it, whether or not any connection to violence can be substantiated.

Here, then, I briefly outline the backgrounds, ideologies and activities of the two extremist groups that are the focus of the research, the British National Party and al-Muhajiroun (more detail can be found in chapters 4 to 7). In particular I explore the reasons that may lead people to fear the political or quasi-political activism of these groups, whether as due to the activism itself, or as part of any escalator towards violence and other conflict.

Importantly, it addresses the question of whether such groups are symptoms or causes of conflict, or both.

## **The BNP**

The British National Party, as the UK's most prominent far right party campaigning with an anti-immigration and racist stance, undoubtedly receives a great deal of its support from 'white' people with racist and/or anti-immigrant attitudes. An intolerance to difference has been described as due to the working-class appeal of authoritarianism, itself due to authoritarian patriarchy in working class families (Lipset, 1960) and a lack of education and cultural capital (Houtman, 2003), or is a response to competition over resources, housing in particular, community change, and the consequent feelings of insecurity (Rex & Moore, 1967; Dench, Gavron, & Young, 2006). However, the appeal of the BNP goes beyond working-class people. Furthermore, many people with racist attitudes continue to support mainstream parties, and 'the [BNP] also succeeded in attracting support from the wider constituency of voters who do not harbour [strong racial] prejudices, but who are hostile to new immigrants' (Cutts, Ford, & Goodwin, 2011, p. 433): BNP voters' attitudes to race and immigration are shared by those voting for other parties.

'The BNP was founded in 1982, but spent its first ten years in the shadow of the National Front. When the NF split, the BNP became the main far right party in Britain' (Margetts, John, & Weir, 2004, p. 4). From the late 1990s onwards, the party attempted to 'modernise', encouraged by the electoral success of the French National Front: this has included distancing the party from violence, fascism, and anti-semitism, and adopting a more acceptable 'cultural racism' over biological racism (Goodwin, 2010b). However, this move towards right-wing populism has been thwarted by the stain of its historical roots:

new joiners are put off by the reputation, and ‘despite its claims of sidelining extremist elements simply cannot, for organisational reasons, fully purge its membership base’ (Goodwin, 2010b, p. 183). That said, in localities such as East Estate, the local campaigning of ‘respectable activists’ has allowed the party to gain a degree of local legitimacy (Rhodes, 2009; Goodwin, 2010b, p. 187).

Why the BNP has electoral appeal and for whom has been well researched by campaigning groups, polling organisations and scholars. Seeing the success of the BNP as a problem to be explained, this research has often aimed to examine the social bases of far-right support: which places, types of people, and attitudes are associated with the far-right vote. Reports funded by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust and Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust examined the far-right vote in London and across the nation, arguing that BNP tend to be in the lower socio-economic groups, living in places where they have no contact with non-white people, and which are ‘Labour heartlands’ that have been ignored by the main parties (Cruddas et al., 2005; John, Margetts, Rowland, & Weir, 2006). More detail was provided by Bowyer, examining local context and finding that ‘deprivation in the local housing market may be more important than labor market conditions’ (Bowyer, 2008, p. 619). Other have examined correlations between attitudes and voting behaviour finding that ‘political disaffection, economic pessimism and anxiety about immigration’ are associated with BNP support (Ford & Goodwin, 2010, p. 15), and that this anti-immigration attitude is sometimes the result of racial prejudice but not always (Cutts, Ford, & Goodwin, 2011). The continuing interest in BNP voting also brought polling data into the fore, as both the BBC and Channel 4 used survey data from Populus and YouGov respectively in order to discuss why the white working class was anti-immigrant and voting BNP (BBC, 2008c; Channel 4, 2009).

Much of this interest has been concerned with examining whether the rise in BNP support is due to rising levels of racism or a 'protest vote' against the mainstream parties, Labour in particular. According to Goodwin, Ford, Duffey and Robey (2010), 49% of BNP voters in Barking and Dagenham's 2006 local elections claimed to do so as a protest vote against Labour (p. 204), but this raises the question of why they chose the BNP and not other fringe parties such as Respect. Turned the other way around, however, we could ask why those outside the core constituency of 'middle-aged working-class men' (Ford & Goodwin, 2010, p. 16) did not vote BNP. After all, surveys show that there is widespread support for BNP policies, but that this support is lower when the interviewees are told that the policies are written by the BNP (Ford, 2010, p. 164). The association with extremism does keep some voters away: 'Middle-class voters who hold views consistent with BNP support may be less willing to vote for the party as a result of these negative associations.' (Cutts, Ford, & Goodwin, 2011, p. 434).

Alongside these 'demand-centered explanations', others have produced 'supply-side explanations', the political offer of parties and their competitors (Rydgren, 2007). At the largest spatial scale, cross-national comparative studies have sought to understand the relative failure of the BNP compared to their European equivalents (E. L. Carter, 2005; Ignazi, 2003). Copsey (1996) showed how the BNP has gained support in a number of cities through local campaigning on local issues, and gaining some respectability at this level while remaining beyond the pale nationally. More recently, through an analysis of BNP literature and interviews with activists, including Nick Griffin, Goodwin (2010b) has examined the 'modernization' of the BNP, a major aspect of the 'supply', as the party attempts to present itself as normal through changes in ideology, activities and appearance (p. 184). Gone are the marches by skinheads, replaced with suits and smart shoes worn for leafleting and doorstep campaigning. Both Goodwin and Copsey's later work (2004) find



the party unable to fully divest itself of fascism and violence as it finds it difficult to purge members of the 'extreme fringe' *or* attract a new, more moderate membership. Instead, like other political parties but with a much smaller membership, the party has to manage an 'internal trade-off between ideological purists and new joiners' (Goodwin, 2010b, p. 183). With regard to the BNP's electoral competition, Wilks-Heeg (2009) places the unwanted outcomes as a symptom of a perhaps deeper and more serious problem, finding that BNP success is 'the canary in the coal-mine' showing 'the advanced decay of local democracy' (p. 396).

These two approaches, however, have too little focus on the interplay between the extremist activism and the drivers of support. The supply-side analysis examines party offers, assuming that the level of compatible public sentiment stays the same, and the demand-side analysis examines attitudes such as anti-immigration and racism, assuming the party offer stays the same. A more holistic approach comes in studies of far-right activists and small area case studies. Goodwin examined why people became BNP members, suggesting that 'citizens are mobilized to join the party as a result of its campaigning activities' (Goodwin, 2010a, p. 50). Rhodes, examining BNP success in Burnley, shows how the local support for the BNP is based on a coming together of the particular forms of racism prevalent at the time, a political rhetoric that fits them that disavows 'real' racism, and a number of other factors including adopting local concerns and candidates (Rhodes, 2006, 2009, 2011)

These studies, then, go beyond a static snapshot of who voted BNP in a particular election and why. Much work on the far right examines the causes of BNP success and not its effects, taking its undesirability for granted, particularly due to the party's fascist past and, arguably, present (see Copsey, 2004). There is a small amount of academic and other

literature on these effects, but little is conclusive due to problems of discerning cause and effect:

Commentators suggest that radical right parties have probably had their greatest influence by raising public concern about... race relations, immigration policy, welfare reform and law and order thereby tugging moderate parties toward the extreme right.

(Norris, 2005, p. 264)

Even here, though, we cannot know whether moderate parties' response to a racist or anti-immigrant electorate needs a far right party as an intermediate.

More important here are any local effects. Of particular concern is the possibility that BNP activity encourages racist behaviour such as harassment and violence, or creates further racism or intolerance beyond the activists' themselves. Those campaigning against the BNP argue that racist incidents increase wherever far-right politicians are active. However, one international study found that racist violence was inversely correlated with far-right voting, arguing that this vote was a displacement activity (Koopmans, 1996). Voting for the BNP acts as 'a 'safety valve' which allows political discontent to be addressed through electoral activity' (Clark, Bottom, & Copus, 2008, p. 511). Ford and Goodwin point to the 'party's ability to mobilise white hostility to Muslims', but this could include translating already extant hostility into votes, inflaming such hostility into harassment or violence, or creating hostility where there was none before. The degree to which BNP activism is a spur, or whether BNP activists are leaders or merely responding to the desires of their electorate, are difficult questions to answer due to such activism and any racist actions having causes in common. Furthermore, any effect will be difficult to discern from the effects of more widespread racist messages, such as the constant Islamophobia propagated by the tabloid press: 'For *Daily Mail* columnist Melanie Philips, the veil is 'an Islamist

symbol which plays a role analogous to the use of the swastika by Nazism' ' (Williamson & Khiabany, 2010, p. 87). Similar questions should be asked about the members: does BNP membership or activism reinforce previously held ideas, or help develop more extreme ideas? Does membership increase the likelihood of violence?

There is little written on present-day far-right activists' development of their ideology and as far as I am aware there is little in the way of a 'radicalisation' narrative for any development from racism, to extremist politics to hate crime. Billig's study of 1970s National Front activists does examine individuals in the 'culture of prejudice', and makes particular note of the holding of conspiracy theories: he argued that joining the NF required making un-systematised ethnocentrism fit with conspiracy theories, and found that 'only one could be said not to uphold any variant of the conspiracy theory' (Billig, 1978, p. 298). Here, at least, a direction of causality is posited. In more recent work based on polls, there is no examination of whether conspiracy theorists are drawn to the BNP or made by the BNP. What is worse, however, is the lack of comparisons to the wider population in campaign literature: the anti-fascist campaigning magazine *Searchlight* said 'amazingly one third of BNP voters agreed or partially agreed' that there is 'a major international conspiracy led by Jews and Communists to undermine traditional Christian values', but did not report that a fifth of Conservative voters also agreed (see Lowles, 2009; YouGov, 2009).

Similar issues are raised with regard to violence, whether unorganised hate crime or far-right terrorism:

You could say that those individuals who are likely to go out and indulge in racist attacks are quite likely to have been radicalised through membership of the BNP expression of racist views, which is not to say that every member of the BNP is necessarily involved in violence.

(Communities and Local Government Committee, 2010, p. 124)

It is important to note that many racist attacks will have been committed by people who have never been a member of the BNP. Furthermore, the finding that hate crime rises after BNP electoral success is not consistent: analysis by *The Guardian* found that “voters [being] emboldened in their racist views by seeing the BNP in power” leading to increases in racist attacks was true in eight electoral wards, but *not true* in 14 (Booth, 2010). A number of far-right terrorists have been convicted in recent years, some with at least previous BNP membership (Goodwin, 2010b, p. 182), and David Copeland, the London ‘nail-bomber’ who killed three people had ‘quit the British National Party because he believed the far-right group was not hardline enough in refusing to countenance a “paramilitary struggle” ’ (Attewill, 2007). At the time of his bombing campaign, Copeland was the Hampshire organizer of the National Socialist Movement (Sykes, 2005, p. 135). Again, we do not know if these terrorists and perpetrators of hate crime would have done this without the inspiration of the BNP.

For the fear invoked by the far-right, though, these questions of cause and effect matter little. Despite the BNP vote being based on a mixture of protest against Labour, anti-immigration and racism, the presence of a large BNP vote is used as evidence of racist attitudes in a particular voting district, whether ward or constituency. There is no official survey directly examining racist attitudes,<sup>11</sup> so BNP support can, if the logic of community is accepted, be taken as a proxy for racism.

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<sup>11</sup> Instead, recent official surveys have asked about experience of racism - ‘Thinking about anything that has happened in this local area have you personally experienced harassment because of your skin colour, ethnic origin or religion in the last two years’ – and about perceptions of community harmony – ‘To what extent do you agree or disagree that this local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together?’ (Citizenship Survey 2010).

While potential victims of racist violence, harassment and other discrimination have cause to be fearful or apprehensive, it is not BNP activities that they are likely to encounter: as a party of a few thousand members, the BNP do not have the reach. However, as much ordinary racism remains unexamined and even unnamed due to it being part of mainstream Britain, the BNP can stand in as that which can be tackled, with an obvious home in white working class estates:

The rhetoric surrounding the race riots in the north of England in 2001 consistently portrayed the white working class as racist, useless, pointless and a blockage to global modernity.

(Skeggs, 2005, p. 972)

## **Al-Muhajiroun**

Unlike the BNP there is surprisingly little research into al-Muhajiroun support and activism, as the vast majority of work on radical Islamism examines it in a global context. Furthermore, much of this research since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 examines terrorism so the group is usually discussed with regard to connections to terrorism, whether this be in terms of individuals who have gone on to be involved in jihadi terrorism or in the context of the ‘tacit support’ (Saggar, 2006). Whereas the turn to electoral politics of the BNP has created a body of studies into this electoral behaviour, the day-to-day activities of al-Muhajiroun – the da’wah or proselytising – are little researched. That said, their conferences and antagonistic street protests have attracted a great deal of media attention, and al-Muhajiroun figures have been given a huge amount of television airtime.

As before, I will not discuss the origins of the various forms of Islamism and radical Islamism, suffice it to say that movements differ from country to country and across history: 'Islamist political formations are governed by the same logic of time and space as their secular counterparts' (Ayoob, 2005, p. 953). Islamism refers 'to the activities of organisations and movements that mobilise and agitate in the political sphere while deploying signs and symbols from Islamic traditions' (Ismail, 2003, p. 2). Furthermore this activism is not always radical, as described by US Assistant Secretary of State Robert H. Pelletreau in 1996:

We normally use the term "Islamist" to refer to Muslims who draw upon the beliefs, symbols, and language of Islam to inspire, shape and animate political activity. We do not automatically seek to exclude moderate, tolerant, peaceful Islamists who seek to apply their religious values to domestic political problems and foreign policy.

(Pelletreau, 2010)

Within this range of Islamisms, al-Muhajiroun is on the radical fringe and is a specifically British phenomenon:

The idea of recreating a universal caliphate is cherished only by the elements on the furthest fringe of political Islam, such as the al-Muhajiroun and the Hizb-ut-Tahrir, both founded by Muslim émigrés in Britain, headquartered in London and lacking any significant political base within Muslim countries.

(Ayoob, 2005, p. 954).

The group differs from more mainstream Islamist – using Ismail's definition – organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain as it is defiantly 'rejectionist' (McRoy, 2006), 'denounc[ing] any involvement with the secular democratic politics of the

West' (Abbas, 2007, p. 113). That said, it is only involvement in democratic politics that is prohibited, not involvement in wider society. Their aim is to establish the caliphate wherever there are Muslims, including Britain, and the ideology posits that this must be strived for through religious study sessions and public da'wah (proselytising) meetings and street stalls (Wiktorowicz, 2005, pp. 10, 48). 'Movement members are expected to promote al-Muhajiroun's ideology outside these movement events as well' through combining 'belief and sayings with action', being 'present among the masses' and 'make the people and the society feel their presence as an ideological Muslim who defends Islam and Muslims all the time' (Wiktorowicz, 2005, p. 49). Al-Muhajiroun activists do not do their activities in secret as a clandestine cell: the point of their activism is to engage with and change society.

Al-Muhajiroun was formed by Omar Bakri Mohammed in February 1996 as he 'had been compelled to leave [Hizb ut-Tahrir] after 18 years membership' (Taji-Farouki, 2000, p. 30), due to disagreements over how the group should act in the UK. Bakri had created a Hizb ut-Tahrir branch with an 'aggressive populist approach and high media profile... [with an] emphasis on street demonstrations, mass rallies and public conversions' (Taji-Farouki, 2000, p. 31). Central party leadership believed that activism in non-Muslim countries should be limited to recruitment and spread of ideology, not directly challenging the state.<sup>12</sup> Bakri's disagreement led him to form a new group, continuing the methods he had developed while leading Hizb ut-Tahrir UK (Taji-Farouki, 2000). Through street da'wah, marches and demonstrations the group's aim was to convert the nation, population and state, to Islam, until 'the black flag of Islam is flying over Downing Street' (Wiktorowicz, 2005, p. 78).

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<sup>12</sup> Wiktorowicz also argues that Hizb ut-Tahrir refrains from 'public demonstrations and activism, since these can incur the ire of authorities and impede the fundamental mission to establish an Islamic state in the Muslim world' (Wiktorowicz, 2005) p.78.

The vast majority of the research into the appeal of radical Islamism in the UK has not addressed the role of particular groups directly. Instead, academic and other research has examined the attitudes of Muslims that may be associated with joining radical groups, or provide tacit approval, and such attitudes are considered in the context of Muslims' integration into British society and Islamist terrorism (see above).

Paralleling the research into BNP voting, surveys have been used to demonstrate the prevalence of attitudes associated with radicalism. The Policy Exchange think-tank, reported that 'a growing number of young Muslims are becoming radicalized and are growing apart from the mainstream' (Mirza, Senthilkumaran, & Ja'far, 2007, p. 94), partially due to some younger Muslims seeing sub-continental Islamic cultures as irrelevant to their concerns and 'working out their own understanding of religion, often with very different and contradictory results' (Mirza Senthilkumaran, & Ja'far, 2007, p. 53). This study found a small minority that admired al-Qaeda's stand against the west, and a larger number (28% of British Muslims) who would rather live under sharia law than British law. However, not all of the former were part of the latter group, demonstrating that we should not conflate radicalization and religiosity.

Similar research has been conducted by Washington's Pew Research Centre. Their Global Attitudes Surveys have found that 'fully eight-in-ten (81%) British Muslims think of themselves as Muslims first rather than as British... [15%] said they see a struggle between moderates and fundamentalists in their country and sympathize with the fundamentalists' (Pew Research Center, 2006), figures that suggest lower integration and higher radicalisation than other European countries. More recently the organisation produced a survey of *Muslim Networks and Movements in Western Europe*, in which al-Muhajiroun was mentioned in passing as the organisers of a rally at which Abu Hamza al-Masri spoke



(Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2010, p. 33). However, the numbers of those joining or supporting radical Islamist groups are small, as they do not stand in elections there can be no surveys of al-Muhajiroun voters, and activists are unlikely to reveal this in surveys.

The only book-length study of al-Muhajiroun is *Radical Islam Rising*, based on interviews with the group's leadership and members during 2002 (Wiktorowicz, 2005). This examines the group as a social movement, showing how dissatisfaction or grievance – 'economic conditions, political repression and cultural alienation... a death in the family' (Wiktorowicz, 2005, p. 206) – leads to an openness to new ideologies, and the interest in wider oppression and solutions. The question asked by this book is why people join and stay as activists when their activities are inherently 'risky'.

'Prior to September 11, there was a general norm among moderate Muslim leaders and organisations that they should not publicly disparage other Muslims, including radicals' (Wiktorowicz, 2005, p. 59) and in wider society the group was regarded as an irritant and Omar Bakri Mohammed as a figure of fun (see Ronson, 2001). Post 2001, however, increased media coverage of the group created a fear amongst mainstream Muslim leaders that the group may be seen as representative in some way (Wiktorowicz, 2005, p. 59). This led to mainstream organisations attempting to ostracise the group, and also led to changes in terrorism law and policing in order to disrupt their activities. The group's leaders and activists became the subject of raids, arrests and convictions for inciting religious and racial hatred and soliciting murder (Wiktorowicz, 2005, pp. 69-70). The glorifying terrorism provisions in the 2006 Terrorism Act also appeared to be aimed at al-Muhajiroun

activity, and the group was banned under this provision in 2006, and again in 2010 due to its method of regrouping under different names.<sup>13</sup>

Despite all this government activity to stop the group, whether and how the group is a danger to society is still debated. The group has attempted to stay within the law, thus any official fundraising for proscribed terrorist groups abroad ended when this was made illegal in February 2001 (Wiktorowicz, 2005, p. 63), and the group's claims to be linked to terrorist groups that they could assist would-be jihadis to contact were toned down for similar reasons in 2004 (Raymond, 2010, p. 6).<sup>14</sup> Links have been found between the organisation and terrorist plots:

The organization of most concern is al-Muhajiroun... The Centre for Social Cohesion reports that 15% of convicted terrorists in the UK were either members of al-Muhajiroun or knew members of the network.

(Communities and Local Government Committee, 2010, p. 206).

However, these links are denied by the group's leadership with the argument that those convicted of terrorism had passed through but had since left the organisation. With regard to the 2003 bombing of Mike's Bar in Tel Aviv, Anjem Choudary stated 'that neither Sharif nor Hanif was a member of the organization... Sharif "studied there [with the group] for a couple of terms, and after that we don't know where he went" ' (Moore & Frankel, 2003).

Furthermore, it is also argued that the radical but non-violent activities of al-Muhajiroun help to divert young people away from violence. One chapter of Horgan's *Walking Away from Terrorism* is based on an interview with Omar Bakri, in which he argues for non-violent radicalism as an alternative outlet to terrorism (Horgan, 2009, p. 136). While it is

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<sup>13</sup> Wiktorowicz lists 50 names under which the group was operating in 2002 (Wiktorowicz, 2005, p. 121).

<sup>14</sup> It is claimed by one terrorism expert that MI6 was working with al-Muhajiroun to send jihadists to Kosovo in the 1990s (Curtis, 2010, p. 244)

extremely unlikely that the UK government will promote this offer, this analysis is not Bakri's alone. According to documents leaked to Andrew Gilligan of *The Telegraph*, a senior civil servant also argued that 'extreme groups [al-Muhajiroun and Hizb ut-Tahrir] may also provide a legal 'safety valve' for extreme views' (Gilligan, 2010).

Indeed, the second proscription of the group in January 2010 appears to have little to do with terrorism. Raymond (2010) asks, given that the group was banned in 2006 under other names, 'why was it allowed to continue to operate for over six months before being proscribed?' (p. 23). According to Timothy Garton Ash (2010) 'the timing of the ban makes it look like party political opportunism', coming as it did a few weeks after the group announced it was to march through Wootton Bassett with cardboard coffins, and a few weeks before a general election. The ban also created more publicity for the group, and 'sends out a worrying message about the rules: in this battle of ideas we will help our friends but we will also lock up our enemies for espousing ideas we don't like' (Malik, 2010).

As argued earlier with regard to the BNP, we do not know if the activities of the group – the da'wah stalls and meetings, the controversial demonstrations – are a significant threat to society. Ed Husain argues that the activities of Hizb ut-Tahrir in the 1990s, under Omar Bakri, contributed to an atmosphere of Islamic supremacy that resulted in a murder (Husain, 2007b, pp. 149-153). Paralleling the relationship between the BNP and far-right terrorists described above, Islamist terrorists have been associated with al-Muhajiroun and then left before becoming violent. Again, the common roots of radical Islamist activism and Islamist terrorism make any assessment of cause and effect difficult. Similar questions remain: does this activity create or increase any antagonism to non-Muslims amongst the group's audience, or is it already present? Does membership reinforce attitudes and make activists more extreme?

For the fear of the group's activities, however, these questions matter little, once again. The presence of radical Islamists in the public sphere, while unrepresentative of Muslim activism, are perceived to be the thin end of the wedge. The logic of community, circles of support and radicalisation means that the small numbers of al-Muhajiroun activists are deemed indicative of a wider problem. As Saggar reports, a Populus survey suggests that around 100,000 Muslims would agree that 'there are circumstances in which [they] would condone suicide bombings on British soil' (Saggar, 2006, p. 314). Saggar argues that these 'fence sitters' may be supporting violence through their omission, that is their failure to report suspicious behaviour to the police due to 'shared ideas and values' (Saggar, 2006, p. 317). More recent statements, including that of Prime Minister David Cameron (Cameron, 2011) have widened the problem to those that do not do enough to encourage Western values, including mainstream Muslim organisations.

However, if wider problems of non-integration and anti-Western attitudes are the problem it is not necessarily al-Muhajiroun activism that is the cause. Like racist violence and BNP voting, the relationship between radical activism and terrorism may be that of having causes in common: if we accept the figure of 15% of Islamist terrorists having had contact with al-Muhajiroun, this still leaves 85% that did not. Like the BNP, though, al-Muhajiroun are extremely visible. It is this visibility, from their street stalls to national television appearances, that encourages us to focus on this group above others.

### **Cumulative extremism**

This visibility of al-Muhajiroun and the BNP provides a further reason for their designation as problematic. Eatwell and Goodwin note the 'potential relationship between Islamism and the extreme right, which seems inconceivable between other forms of

extremism in Britain, such as animal rights' (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2010a, p. 243). In Eatwell's earlier article he described how the 2001 riots were precipitated by rumours of or actual National Front or BNP marches, and how the National Front planned demonstrations against radical Islamists, including al-Muhajiroun (Eatwell, 2006). Notwithstanding the conflation of rioting with extremist activism, it seems likely that at least some of the radical Islamist and far-right activity does have its opposite number in its sights. Indeed, Eatwell's article was published three years before the emergence of the English Defence League (EDL),<sup>15</sup> which on its creation named Islam4UK specifically as its *raison d'être* following the Islamist group's demonstration against homecoming troops (Garland & Treadwell, 2010).

Furthermore, this interplay between the two extremisms combines with the community analysis described earlier to potentially draw more people in. If extremism is conceived as a problem involving two monolithic opposing communities – white (working class) and (Asian) Muslim – then the actions of each extremist group are the most visible part of a broad fronted attack on the other community, recreating Huntington's (1996) 'clash of civilisations' at the local level. This attack elicits a defensive response in the form of more attacks.

Where violence is involved this interplay is in the form of hate crimes including terrorism. As Blazak points out, 'hate crimes are meant to send messages to larger communities' (Blazak, 2009, p. 634), and Eatwell and Goodwin fear that 'a major bombing by extreme right wingers which provoked some form of violent Muslim response (or vice-versa) could lead to a further spiral of violence' (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2010a, p. 244). Before this, though, it is the escalation from non-violent to violent responses that makes political extremism of concern: 'extreme acts, even if committed by a small minority within a

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<sup>15</sup> The EDL came to prominence in Summer 2009, as I was completing my fieldwork. If I had time I would have done fieldwork with this group too.

group, are often attributed to the entire group, and elicit an escalated response from the other side' (Coleman & Bartoli, 2002, p. 5). This may also affect those who would otherwise have no knowledge of these two forms of extremism: in this instance it is the person who has their car windows smashed by a group who believe the car belongs to one of the 'opposing' community. Victims of hate crimes 'are randomly selected and often misidentified... many victims of the 481 anti-Islamic hate crimes reported in 2001 (most of which occurred after the 9/11 attacks) were not Muslim' (Blazak, 2009, p. 634).

This potential for escalation may also explain why some acts and groups are deemed extremist, banned or prosecuted. The continuing antagonistic and set-piece meetings of al-Muhajiroun associated activists, who despite their proscription continue under the name Muslims Against Crusades, and the EDL, have resulted in arrests. The Islamists' activities – including burning poppies on Armistice Day and a planned disruption of the April 2011 royal wedding (Laville, 2011) – seem designed to anger the EDL. Similarly, the EDL's use of the Israeli flag seems to be directed at the Islamists, who are expected to hate Israel. While it would be difficult to define such acts as extremist, nor the attitudes behind them, it is the combination of ideology, action and audience that inflames tensions. Indeed, 'one of the reasons that Islam4UK was banned was because "the Muslim community has been complaining about this for ages" ' (MP Khalid Mamood quoted in Malik, 2010): ordinary Muslims fear that the Islamists are creating an image of British Muslims that can only fuel Islamophobia.

## ***Responses to extremism: contact, active citizenship and the ‘civil challenge’***

I have, above, shown how political and violent extremism, far right and Islamist, is conceived as a threat to community cohesion. Essentially, this argument states that the presence of extremism reduces the ability of people to trust or ‘get on with’ people of different backgrounds, defined in terms of ethno-religious communities. At the same time, the lack of meaningful contact between people of different backgrounds – Cantle’s ‘parallel lives’ – allows misunderstanding, stereotypes and intolerance that can lead to extremism. Both the community cohesion and preventing violent extremism policies have elements that attempt to put a stop to this vicious circle through bringing people together across supposed ethno-religious divides and also through engagement and empowerment that better connects communities to the state and wider society.

Of course, these are not the only responses to extremism. Violent extremism and forms of speech that incite hatred or glorify terrorism are prosecuted, and many Islamists *and* far-right activists have received prison sentences (see Crown Prosecution Service, 2010). Controversial measures such as longer pre-charge detention and control orders have been introduced since the 2001 terrorist attacks. Government also changed laws to create greater parity: replacing blasphemy, which only protected Christianity, with incitement to religious hatred, covering all faiths (see Werbner, 2005b, p. 763). Government has also used carrots as well as sticks: under the Preventing Violent Extremism banner, state funding has gone to think tanks, religious groups and thinkers, with the aim of creating a ‘moderate Muslim public’ (DeHanas & O’Toole, 2010; see also Glynn, 2009).

Of importance here, however, are those methods, found in the community cohesion policies, government statements and ‘received wisdom’ that, combined, make up what

government hopes will happen in neighbourhoods and cities with cohesion problems. These approaches aim to work on ‘contact’, disrupting ‘parallel lives’, and empowerment or civic engagement, which aims to disrupt narratives that suggest the state is ignoring or marginalising communities and to create a local sense of belonging. Taken together, contact and empowerment is theorised as reducing those factors that may lead to extremism, particularly where cross-cultural contact is done in the context of empowerment. A typical example could be Oldham’s Youth Council:

The Youth Council consists of 47 young people, representing different communities in Oldham. In 2007 over 4,600 young people voted in authority-wide elections. Supported by professionals based in the youth service, they organise quarterly meetings on a range of issues, having regular contact with senior officers, the LSP [Local Strategic Partnership] and elected members. This opens up ways for young people to engage, from different communities across the borough.

(Blake et al., 2008, p. 3 of summary document).

Furthermore, where legal extremist politics are already present, policy documents and government figures have pointed to the ways that these may be challenged. Such methods have been described in terms such as ‘rebuttal [of] far right and extremist messages’ (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007, p. 103), or the Home Secretary Jacqui Smith’s call for a ‘civil challenge’ (Smith, 2008): ‘Government must stand shoulder-to-shoulder with communities to challenge the extremist message’ (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008b, p. 13).

A full exploration of the theories of and histories behind such approaches is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, I will briefly demonstrate some of the tensions between such policies, and how they connect to the discussion of cohesion and extremism above.



At times explicitly, the community cohesion discourse and policies rely upon Allport's 'contact hypothesis' (Allport, 1958). Ted Cattle's Institute of Community Cohesion states that by 'bringing people from different groups together... prejudices towards the other will be reduced or eradicated' (Institute of Community Cohesion, 2010). Research in this area has pointed to the importance of the conditions under which such contact happens:

Members of the two groups should be brought together under conditions of equal status, in situations where stereotypes are likely to be disconfirmed, where there is intergroup cooperation, where participants can get to know each other properly, and where wider social norms support equality.

(Hewstone, 2003, p. 352)

Furthermore, critics of both the explanations for the 'northern riots' and the subsequent rationale for community cohesion policies, have pointed to a 'fail[ure] to acknowledge... the material roots of the disorders' (Pilkington, 2008), and so privileging the (internal) cultural explanations, discussed above, over the (external and internal) problems of deprivation, institutional and other racism or classism, and crumbling infrastructure (see McGhee, 2003; Burnett, 2004; Werbner, 2005b). While it would be unfair to accuse government of ignoring such issues and merely bringing groups together and hoping they will get on, the policies have not been accompanied by a major reversal of inequality and deprivation. Both 'supporting and promoting opportunities for interaction between residents from different ethnic groups' *and* addressing 'persistent inequalities and deprivation' (Oldham, p.2) are deemed necessary, but the latter is a much bigger problem to tackle.

Others have argued for theories of ethnic or racial threat (Blalock, 1967; Blumer, 1958), in which the white population perceives an economic and political threat as the minority population becomes more visible, and acts to stop that threat, both through political activity and prejudice (Quillian, 1995). In an influential lecture, Robert Putnam reiterated this as ‘the more we are brought into physical proximity with people of another race or ethnic background, the more we stick to ‘our own’ and the less we trust the ‘other’ ’ (Putnam, 2007, p. 142).

Recent research has attempted to reconcile these two theories by examining the conditions under which the predictions of each theory are likely to occur. Indeed, Bowyer (2008) examines BNP support, and Biggs and Knauss examine BNP membership, with reference to local BME communities and segregation, finding that co-existence with little contact creates a threat, but with more contact does not: ‘lack of contact exacerbates perceived threat’ (Biggs & Knauss, 2010, p. 2). This should, however, remind us that the use of the theories and resultant policies in the real world have to be mindful of the extant circumstances and policy limitations: community cohesion policy proceeds from the basis that a threat is *already* perceived and that contact needs to be made to reduce it, and that this should happen regardless of persistent economic inequality.

Furthermore, this context is more than just the sum of the two communities’ interactions with each other. Connolly (2000), writing in the context of the Northern Ireland peace process, points to the need to ‘locate racial and ethnic relations in the context of wider social processes and structures, while also recognising the complex, contradictory and contingent nature of these processes’ (p. 172). For Schiappa, Gregg and Hewes (2005) the notion of contact should also include the one-way mediated contact of television, finding that positive images of gay men and male transvestites reduced prejudice towards these groups. It is against or alongside this background that any policies must operate.

Questions can also be asked of the ‘reach’ of any intercultural engagement, especially in the context of institutional involvement, and so the value of ‘official’ cohesion activities. First, it seems likely that work such as the Church of England’s *Near Neighbours* – a £5 million government-funded programme which the Church claimed ‘would make more of a difference to community cohesion than the state’s £61m counter-extremism strategy’ (Butt, 2011) – may be preaching to the converted. Getting those with existing negative attitudes of the ‘other’ to attend ‘contact’ sessions is likely to prove difficult. Programmes such as these also privilege those activities that are government approved: Vertovec’s ‘civil-integration... everyday practices for getting-on with others in the inherently fleeting encounters that comprise city life’ (Vertovec, 2007, p. 4) and Gilroy’s (2004) ‘spontaneous tolerance and openness evident in the underworld of Britain’s *convivial* culture’ are sidelined.

Indeed, this ‘civil society’ solution sees the ‘third sector’ as a site for contact across divides, empowerment, and a resultant non-extremist or anti-extremist consensus. David Blunkett (2003) argued for ‘active citizenship’, in which people would be ‘actively involved in defining and tackling the problems of their communities and improving their quality of life...through the organised activities of community groups’ (pp. 6, 16). Drawing on the civic-republican strand of communitarian thought, this empowerment should reduce the general disillusionment with current political institutions and is also associated with community cohesion (Andrews, Cowell, Downe, Martin, & Turner, 2008). At the same time, the common endeavour helps to provide the conditions necessary for the contact hypothesis to be true. Thus, a stake in society, a feeling that one has a say, and that one is in the same boat as others promotes ‘a sense of common purpose and belonging’ (Jochum, Pratten, & Wilding, 2005, p. 15).

However, unless we assume that everyone coming into the public sphere is already committed to tolerance and diversity, some of the interaction in this ‘active citizenship’ will be with those who would wish to be intolerant. Drawing on Hardin’s (2002) idea of ‘crippled epistemology’, Sunstein (2009) argues that extremists form and reinforce their ideas through only having conversation with others in their group, thus not having the moderating force of having to assimilate new information from others. Perhaps this is the meaning behind ‘challenging the extremist message’, but it raises the question of whether it is merely those who are at risk of becoming extremist that need to be engaged, or the extremists themselves. In either case the contradiction in community cohesion policy is evident. If some ethno-religious groups do have value systems that are incompatible with the presupposed British value system, then engaging with them to ‘creat[e] a shared political culture, ‘which includes its public or political values, ideals, practices, institutions, mode of political discourse, and self-understanding’ ’ (McGhee, 2008a, p. 88 quoting Bhikhu Parekh, 2000b) suggests the necessity that some value systems will be changed. If it is only the extremists who have the alternative value systems, then we can either have a shared public that excludes them, and there is no opportunity for the ‘civil challenge’ suggested by Home Secretary Jacqui Smith (2008), or we can allow the extremists to have their say and be part of the public sphere in order to make the challenge. However, if and when we *can* make that challenge it suggests that the extremists are already part of that ‘shared political culture’, albeit antagonistically.

## **Conclusions**

The community cohesion policies and parts of the Preventing Violent Extremism policies have two ‘communities’ as their object, Asian Muslims and the white working class. While the parallels are not exact, not least because the word integration is not used for the ‘abject whites’ as they are assumed to be fully integrated, the policies name these groups as the

problematic source of the threat to community cohesion. While many forms of difference that could lead to conflict are mentioned in the policies, the policy focus is on difference that is at the boundaries of acceptability in our constitution. While violent acts can be detected and punished, the forms of political extremism discussed here remain legal, but are deemed to be a threat to community cohesion as they can escalate into conflict. Both forms of extremism are given the status of being representative of the named community, and each community is shown to be unmoored from wider society, with those most disconnected, socially and politically, and existing in a relatively closed world, with circles of tacit support, most likely to turn to extremist politics.

This, then, points to the questions of this research. First, to what degree are these extremists outsiders? Are they really unintegrated into wider society and lacking contact with ethno-religious others, or alternative politics and sets of values? Second, as extremist activists in the public sphere, how are these opposing sets of values expressed in engagements across the extremist/moderate divide? How does the definition of one side of any conversation as extremist affect such engagement?

### **3: Researching far-right and Islamist ‘extremists’ in context**

#### ***Introduction***

This study set out to investigate how, given the definition of some non-violent activism as ‘extremist’, those deemed extremist and those deemed ‘non-extremist’ or ‘moderate’ engage with each other in ordinary day-to-day and local situations. The research question had two parts: first, what were the individual’s backgrounds, including community and political involvements that had led them to be either an extremist or moderate activist? What was shared and not shared by those on either side of the divide? Second, how did engagement across a supposed ideological divide proceed? To what extent were these differences brought out into the open and thus able to be challenged, and to what extent did these differences exist anyhow? Taken together, did shared backgrounds within a local context lessen the divide?

These two questions, therefore, required a focus on activists’ pasts and on present engagement with others while in the role of representing, or being a member or associate of, particular groups. The fieldwork included participant observation, biographical and other interviews, collection of documents and ephemera from community meetings and events, and the gathering of local media accounts in order to access both the past and present of the activists. The two research sites – *East Estate* or the ‘white site’ and *Hilltop and Beyond* or the ‘Islamic site’ – were containers for a number of individuals and were also each a case study in themselves, as the individuals in each site engaged with each other.

This chapter outlines the methods used. It begins with an introduction to the city of Stoke-on-Trent and a discussion of the issues of accessing the field. Importantly, the research question necessitated finding extremist activists that were ‘out’ and required careful approaches in order not to reveal affiliations that were not known. I then move onto description of the two main data-gathering methods used, participant observation and biographical interviews, and the data analysis. The final section of the chapter focuses on some of the ethical and political considerations of this work.

### ***Finding the field: Stoke-on-Trent, East Estate and Hilltop and Beyond***

The city of Stoke-on-Trent was chosen not because it is my home town, but because of its recent history of extremist politics. Indeed, the project was first conceived while I was living in London and associated with Goldsmiths College’s Centre for Urban and Community Research, and only became a reality when I relocated to Keele, a few miles from Stoke. In the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Labour domination of the council began to crumble, and a plethora of smaller groups and independent councillors were elected, paving the way for later BNP success (Wilks-Heeg, 2009). The city was described as the party’s ‘jewel in the crown’ by party leader Nick Griffin in 2008 (“BNP leader Nick Griffin pays respect to killed activist,” 2008), and by 2009 the party had nine council seats out of 60. Griffin appeared in the city in 2008, for the funeral of a BNP activist killed by an Asian Muslim neighbour, and in 2010, for the launch of the party’s general election manifesto. The city also has a small Asian Muslim population, had a small disturbance in the summer of 2001 along with the other northern ‘riots’, and was named by Wiktorowicz

as having an al-Muhajiroun presence in 2002 (Wiktorowicz, 2005, p. 107). Other informants told me that Hizb ut-Tahrir had a significant presence in the city.

The city has seen significant decline in recent decades: the population has fallen and the economy has stagnated. Unlike in other cities, this decline has not been arrested despite the regeneration efforts made since the 1980s. Census data show that between 1981 and 2001 the city's population decreased from around 252,000 to 240,636. The West Midlands observatory claim that the population began to increase slightly after 2004, and the ONS's estimate for June 2007 is 239,000, suggesting stagnation. The population decline would have been more severe without the impact of migrants and their descendents, particularly from Pakistan, who tend to be younger and therefore more likely to be having children (Simpson & Gavalas, 2005). However, the city remains predominantly white working-class, with a small but growing Asian Muslim population, numbering approximately 9,000 at the time of the research.

The city has also seen decline in its three major industries. The coal mines and steelworks closed in the 1970s and 1980s and pottery factories closed in the 1980s and 90s (Hambrook, 1989, p. 40). Ceramics employed 79,000 after the second world war, declining to 7,000 in 2010; mining in North Staffordshire employed 21,000 in 1974, with all mines closed by 1998; the steelworks employed 10,000 after the war, closing in 2000; Michelin employed 9,000 in 1971 and 1,200 in 2010 (Johnston, 2010). While the rate of those claiming 'jobseekers' benefits is only slightly higher than the national average, the percentage of the working age population claiming 'incapacity' benefits is almost double the national average (Phipps, 2010, p. 9). 'Stoke has one of the highest level of young people who are NEET (not in education, employment or training) in England, a lot of whom go on to become adult JSAs or IBs' (Phipps, 2010, p. 10). Thus, 'gross household incomes (all sources) are more than 20% below the national average' and '[The city] is



ranked as the 16th most deprived local authority area in England (out of 354) [and] almost 30% of the resident population live in areas classified in the 10% most deprived in the country' (Johnston, 2010, p. 68). The city also lacks a significant middle-class. 'A perception that the City is a poor area in which to live [and] lack of a substantial executive housing offer' (Phipps, 2010, p. 11) means that professionals and managers tend to leave the city or live outside and commute in (Experian, 2007, p. 14).

This deprivation has led to a number of 'area based interventions' including government money under the names of Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, Education Action Zone, Coalfields Regeneration Trust and others. Fourteen neighbourhoods were prioritised for employment projects. The biggest of such projects was the Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder that aimed to revitalise declining neighbourhoods through demolition of substandard housing and building new homes (Interviews with council officers). Due to the city's configuration – the city was created as a merger of six towns in 1911 – there has long been a 'fragmentation of local identities' (Parker, 2000, p. 256) where residents would see themselves as belonging more to one of the towns, or a particular neighbourhood, than the city. Area based interventions have led to narratives of unfairness as particular neighbourhoods gained facilities while others almost as deprived did not, and often these narratives had a racial dimension (see Rhodes, 2011 for similar in Burnley).

In addition to the regeneration interventions, then, the city has received money as part of the Community Cohesion Pathfinder Programme (in 2003), Preventing Violent Extremism Pathfinder Fund (2006), and the more recent Connecting Communities (2009) programme. As described previously, these programmes aim to reduce conflict through 'meaningful contact' between people of different ethno-religious backgrounds, and promoting community empowerment and engagement in order to reduce the alienation that could be 'fertile territory for extremism' (Travis, 2009). The city's participation in such

programmes further suggests that Stoke is a suitable place to do research on both forms of extremism.

In my original proposal I said that I would:

... examine how extremist politics operates in circumstances in which it has a measure of legitimation. This legitimation can occur via electoral success or involvement in civil society through participatory democracy such as residents' associations and school governing bodies, or service delivery such as youth and education projects, drugs services and regeneration.

Of course, I could not be sure of finding *and* gaining permission to research in two sites where this was the case. The presence of BNP councillors meant that at least one site existed, but access was not guaranteed. I had discussions with Michael Keith at Goldsmiths in 2005 about the involvement of Islamists in civil society in East London, but could not be sure that similar circumstances could be found in Stoke-on-Trent. Persistence, and trying a huge variety of leads, was needed to find and access the social worlds I had envisioned. In the sections that follow I outline how I gained access to the two research 'sites': more details about the places are provided in chapters four to seven.

### **Accessing East Estate**

East Estate was chosen as the 'white site' as it had elected BNP councillors, and I knew them to be engaged in community activities. Community facilities on the estate include two working men's clubs, a council-owned community centre, two churches, a row of shops and one public house. Two community houses were in operation, used by two community groups: the Hemsby group and the North Area residents' association. The estate was also part of the Housing Market Renewal programme and so there were plenty

of opportunities for citizen involvement that would bring extremist and non-extremist activists together.

My breakthrough came in a series of meetings with Mark, a minister in one of the two local churches. I had worked in the area before as part of unpublished research under the auspices of the Young Foundation, and initial contact was made with Fran, the chair of Hemsby community group. In November 2007 I met with two council officers working in a local centre, who gave me a very quick overview of the community activities in the area, including details of residents' associations, churches, the community centre and other community bodies; the names of various community activists; and some information about past and future events. Mark was named as a key activist and I met him a few days later at the church, where we discussed his and my work.

It was only at this point did I discover that there was a 'field' in which I could research. Although some of my inspiration for this work came when a residents' association with a BNP chairman was operating in the neighbourhood of my youth, I could not be sure that similar engagement was happening in the here and now, and whether I would gain access. Mark confirmed to me that as chair of the East Estate Partnership<sup>1</sup> he worked 'closely with the BNP'. He listed the community activities he took part in and listed the regular participants in activities and meetings. He did not, however, invite me to join in them.

At the same time, I was also a regular attendee of Hemsby community group sessions. Fran had been particularly welcoming, and had allowed me to run a focus group with her members as part of my Young Foundation project. She suggested I speak to Peter Baggaley, one of the councillors who did his surgeries at the community house. When I called him he suggested meeting at Mark's church. At the end of January 2008 I met Councillor Baggaley in the church, and again outlined my research. He had more to say,

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<sup>1</sup> A full list of organisations and individuals can be found in Appendix 1.

being a politician, about the divide between party politics and serving the community, and thus the role of the, at that time two, BNP councillors. Towards the end of this meeting I asked about the possibility of attending the two regular meetings that brought together councillors, residents, church leaders and others. Mark, as chair of one of the meetings, was not immediately sure he could do this, but Councillor Baggaley said that as chair he could do what he wanted. At this point I was in.

### **Accessing Hilltop and Beyond**

Accessing the ‘Islamic site’ was a very different affair, with a breakthrough that was much more dependent on luck. There was no particular place that I expected to find contact between extremist and non-extremist activists, and in the end this was not exactly what I found, instead finding extremist activists engaging with the general public. Prior to this breakthrough I spent a great deal of time with a number of Islamic and other community groups, giving me knowledge of a range of community activities carried out by Muslims who are spread across the city.

Here, then, my participation was initially more scattered. Unlike the ‘white site’, I did not know where I could find those deemed extremist, or ordinary Muslims involved in local activism and politics (except, of course, the mosques). I took suggestions from council officers for meetings under the auspices of the council and residents’ associations that, by being in areas with small Muslim populations, may have had Muslim involvement. I made contact with three of the six Muslim councillors, and these contacts helped me gain good access to one of the city’s bigger mosques, and this then led to contact with a wider range of Muslim activists and community events.

In mid-2007 I began attending the mosque at Keele University, with the aim of learning a little about Islam and mosque etiquette. After a couple of visits, some of the attendees became curious as to my presence and so eventually I was talking to fellow PhD students, who happened to be Muslim, about my research. In the first few weeks of 2008 I made a call to a Muslim Labour councillor in an area with a small Muslim population. In a meeting at the civic centre I described my research and asked about the presence of those deemed extremist. This, of course, was a much more sensitive line of questioning than my searching for the BNP. As the BNP are having some success in elections, a researcher can at least find out where they are active prior to making contact: Islamic 'extremist' groups are less visible, and although active on the streets they do not necessarily draw a great deal of attention to themselves. Furthermore, the attention paid to 'Islamic extremists' and Islamophobia in general leads to reluctance to talk about the issue to outsiders: just as Preventing Violent Extremism funding is seen to stereotype Muslims as terrorists so does the interest by researchers. The councillor told stories of wayward youth coming back into the mainstream fold, but would not provide any guidance to finding an extremist group.

However, a subsequent conversation with this councillor led to a meeting with the spiritual leader and chair of one of the largest mosques in the city. Again, I outlined my research, and inquired about their backgrounds. I was invited to go along to the Thursday evening lectures and Friday prayers: for a few months I attended Friday prayers and, less often, Thursday lectures, with the aim of meeting those most active in the community. I was invited to events at other mosques across the city, and to interfaith events organised by Staffordshire Police. This was an 'in' of sorts, as I did not know whether I would find extremists through this participant observation.

In parallel to this fieldwork, I was also chasing those leads generated by my time in the East Estate. After participating in a number of community bodies, and gaining informal

local authority acceptance, I was able to search for similar bodies elsewhere in the city. Indeed, when making phone calls to ask permission to attend meetings involving councillors, council officers and residents, I found that my previous permission transferred with me: as I had already attended other meetings I was immediately trusted. I also spent time at meetings of residents' associations, looking for Muslim involvement. I found little, and of course those Muslims involved were mainstream activists, involved in the main mosques and often Labour party members too.

In the last few months of 2008, as I was wrapping up my work in East Estate, and as I began to fear I would not find a suitable 'Islamic site', I found details of a local salafi mosque,<sup>2</sup> and was also given a leaflet, after Friday prayers at my 'home mosque', for a Hizb ut-Tahrir meeting.<sup>3</sup> I had a number of conversations with a contact at the salafi mosque, and in early 2009, made a number of visits, but this did not lead into sustained fieldwork. I also spoke to two Hizb ut-Tahrir activists, including the local organiser. Like my early conversations with BNP activists, the activists were polite and reasonably sympathetic to my aims, but with an eventual 'not interested, too busy' response. Further research, particularly using the LexisNexis newspaper database, revealed that the Hizb ut-Tahrir activists were involved in local consultative bodies and so would have been comparable to BNP activists in East Estate, but I could not gain access to individuals or the context in which they worked.

I finally found the al-Muhajiroun activists in March 2009, although as I got to know them and their activities I realised I had met them around a year and a half before. As I left the

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<sup>2</sup> Mosques and individuals associated with Salafi Publications (SPUBS) have in the past been labelled 'extremist' due to their 'ultra-conservatism', connections to Saudi Arabia, and because violent jihadist groups around the world have also described themselves as salafi. Although SPUBS has consistently condemned terrorism, some media and government sources have associated 'salafi' with violent jihad (see Lambert, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> A meeting to discuss and condemn the publishing of *The Jewel of Medina*. Unfortunately, I could not attend.

Friday prayers I was given a leaflet for a meeting on the caliphate. On attending the meeting I saw Anjem Choudary, the leader of al-Muhajiroun, on stage and I knew I had found ‘extremists’, at least as defined by government. After the meeting I explained my research to the local activists and arranged to meet them at their regular street stalls.

### ***Working the field***

Once I had gained access to the site, I then embarked upon a process of negotiating access to individual activists, meetings and other events. While I was prepared to be flexible with methods, I was hoping to use similar methods in each site, and in particular using participant observation in order to see how everyday activism and engagement happens, and using biographical interviews to understand how people saw their pasts and presents fitting together. The former could also help create the familiarity and trust that would facilitate the latter. In this section, therefore, I outline the fieldwork process once fully in the sites, and then discuss some of the questions of research ethics associated with this activity.

### **Participant observation**

From February 2007 to October 2009 I carried out my primary research of participant observation, biographical and other interviews, and the collection of documents and ephemera from community meetings. Although the two ‘communities’ were treated as two separate cases, they are both in the same city and thus there was potential for individuals and events to cross-over and for me to be in both cases at the same time. Therefore I cannot say that I researched one community for a year, and then did another year elsewhere. Both my entering and leaving the two fieldwork sites was a gradual affair, with

me continuing to attend occasional events long after the fieldwork and interviews were over. Furthermore, I read the local newspaper and news websites, and other websites connected to far-right activism and radical Islamism from 2006 onwards.

These activities were attended in the manner of a snowball-sample. My first few visits to each 'site' included meetings with officials, some of whom I already knew. On explaining my research these informants told me of events and activities that may be useful. Some I attended regularly and some I would attend only once, with my early visits being used to meet new people and find out who attended and why. I concentrated later visits on those events that promised the most useful data. Social and fundraising occasions tended to be less useful with regards to my observations. However, these were also the occasions that people were most free to talk and so they were used as time for interviews. Within the main body of the 'Islamic site' fieldwork, there were many events that did not directly address the research. However, my lack of familiarity with Islamic religious practice meant that time in the mosque was useful to provide a context for other experiences. Amusingly, some meetings in Hilltop and Beyond also made a small contribution to the data on the 'white site': although I chose areas with a Muslim population many of the local forums are dominated by the white majority, and this included at least one BNP member.

The substantive part of the fieldwork in East Estate was conducted between January and November 2008. Although I had made contact with council officials and activists in late 2007, these had been one-off and occasional meetings. When I was fully engaged with the participants and activities in this site I was attending between one to four community events per week (the full list of events is listed in Appendix 1). The vast majority of these events were attended by at least one of my eventual interviewees, and BNP activists were present at around half of all the events I attended. In many of the meetings I was more observer than participant, feeling it was not my place to enter into debates about the future



of the estate. At other events I was just another volunteer: at the ‘Playground tidy-up’ I spent a great deal of time destroying a wall along with Gordon, the Labour councillor, and a member of Mark’s church. However, it was at this event that I had my first conversation with a BNP councillor: Joe made an appearance towards the end of the day to see how the work was going and to offer a hand, and I had the chance to say hello and explain my presence (see below).

In Hilltop and Beyond, the main body of fieldwork took place between October 2008 and October 2009. As there was little contact between mainstream Muslim activists and the al-Muhajiroun group I split my time between attendance at community and mosque-based activities, and out on the street with the al-Muhajiroun group, once I had gained access to this group (for a full list see Appendix 1). As I explain in chapter 4, the dispersed nature of the Muslim population in Stoke-on-Trent means there is no single centre and with both mainstream and extremist activists I found myself travelling from one end of the city to the other. Again, I was more observer than participant: in the mainstream mosque I spent a lot of time waiting and watching prayers and hymns before getting to the langar (free meal served after the gathering), where I hoped to speak to activists. With the al-Muhajiroun activists I sat and chatted to them when they were out on the street and they had no public to talk to.

In both sites this ethnographic-style fieldwork was not a full-time exercise in the style of urban anthropologists (see for example Hannerz, 1969; Liebow, 1967; Whyte, 1955). I did not ‘immerse [myself] in a way of life’ (Hannerz, 1969, p. 201) by being present or even living in the white estate twenty-four hours a day. Nor did I attempt to fit in by taking part in the religious activities in the mosque or by helping with the al-Muhajiroun street stall. In the vast majority of this participant observation, my emphasis was on observation.

## Biographical interviews

In all these environments, as I got to know and gain the trust of those involved I began to request and then conduct biographical interviews. I interviewed a number of participants in both communities, and concentrated on those giving their own time as activists/volunteers<sup>4</sup> and councillors,<sup>5</sup> exploring their lives as family and community members, citizens and activists through two biographical interviews a week or more apart. I took my cues from the Free Association Narrative Interview (FANI) method (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000) and Biographical-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) (Wengraf, 2001), being very open with my questioning and allowing participants to tell me about the experiences they saw as significant, for the most part with minimal guidance from me.

The biographical method was chosen over semi-structured interview techniques for two reasons. Firstly, the exploration of connections between community sociality, community action and political action required an attention to the histories of individuals and the place and community in which they live: these are the ‘problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society’ (Mills, 2000, p. 6). Through a whole-life narrative approach, I hoped to avoid both the compartmentalising of politics and political attitudes from individual experience, and also to avoid the discussion of politics and political attitudes being only in the context of the present (Jones, 2003, p. 60). Secondly, I wanted to avoid introducing the terms ‘politics’ and ‘extremism’ myself, as I feared anti-political sentiment and/or the highly politicised discourse of extremism and terrorism would lead participants to draw on well-rehearsed analytical frameworks: stories ‘[anchor] people’s accounts to events that have actually happened [and so] have to engage with reality’

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<sup>4</sup> As with the words ‘politics’ and ‘politician’, ‘activist’ is a label people are reluctant to use about themselves. This could be because ‘activist’ has the negative connotations of political agitation, or because ‘activists’ are seen as those who do activism on an almost full-time basis (see Lichterman, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Although paid for their duties, being a councillor is not a full-time job and the work is often done around a main job.

(Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p.35). Thus, I was hoping to hear how people talked of politics and extremism when this was *not* the main topic, and this included issues that I may have considered to be ‘political’, while the interviewee did not.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the fact that I was interviewing both mainstream and extremist activists, and this was known to interviewees, also meant that the topic of ‘extremism’ came as no surprise, but nor was it all encompassing. Given the controversial nature of al-Muhajiroun and BNP activity I needed to provide opportunities for interviewees ‘to speak about their thoughts, feelings and experiences with a level of detachment that is not threatened by accusatory questioning’ (Gadd & Dixon, 2011 p. 62). The biographical interview focused on ‘stories’, ‘anchoring people’s accounts to events’, as opposed to sets of abstract political attitudes.

As there is potential for any experience to inform community activism and politics, my questioning began in a very open fashion. I began with a preamble that mentioned ‘community-based organisations’ and activities, but the question used to start the conversation was:

Can you tell me the story of your life, starting wherever you like? All of the things that have happened that you think are important, and I’ll just take notes.

From here I followed the guidance of Hollway and Jefferson (2000), avoiding ‘why’ questions, and asking for more detail using the ‘respondent’s own words and phrases... in order to respect and retain the interviewee’s meaning frames... [and] not imposing a structure on the narrative’ (p.36). This is not to say that there was no input from me as interviewer: when an interviewee stopped talking I chose where to go back to, and this choice was a form of guidance towards the experiences and topics relevant to the research.

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<sup>6</sup> This would especially be the case if the interviewee defined politics as being only that which relates to representative democracy and political parties.

Furthermore, I did not come to the interviews without information about the participants' experiences. They were approached because of their current public profile, and I could sometimes read about their previous roles and activities, as well as important events in their neighbourhood, in the local press. By the time I proceeded to interview I would usually have seen the participant take part in community activity, and had informal conversations about this activity. Therefore I sometimes aimed to revisit previous conversations or bring up particular events in the style of 'at the meeting you said that...' or 'at the event you were doing...'. I would only actively push the conversation in the direction of community activity if the participant was failing to talk about this after around 45 minutes. Again, the question was very open: 'Can you tell me the story of how you got involved with this group?'

After the first interview I would arrange a second interview to take place a week or more later. Of the 18 participants, 11 took part in a second interview. Between the two I listened to, and transcribed, the interview, and then picked out sections of the narrative that warranted further questioning. I continued to use the participant's own words and phrases. Often I had also seen and spoken to the participant between the two interviews, and at each opportunity both the participant and I were able to refer to relevant stories that we had forgotten to mention or ask about.

In this way the participant observation and biographical interviews blended into each other. I did not restrict myself to encouraging participants to talk, *in the interview setting*, with non-directive prompts. The participants knew that I had been present during their activities and often assumed I knew all that was going on. Being a participant observer also allowed me to see many acts that those involved would consider to be everyday and trivial, and not worth mentioning: if I thought they were worthy of discussion I could guide the conversation towards them, bringing in the events as part of their activism. For some

participants, the interviews I conducted with a recorder were a section of a much longer narrative interview that I was conducting informally with people over a period of about a year.

Unlike Jefferson and Hollway (2000) and Gadd and Dixon (2011) I did not analyse and interpret my data with reference to psychoanalytic theories. However, the method generated data that enabled me to connect experiences over a whole lifetime to current community activities and current and historical worldviews. I did not, therefore, always take participants' accounts of political awakening and/or joining a particular group at face value. While more recent experiences or knowledge of recent events may have been a proximate and more easily recalled 'explanation', I, and sometimes the participants, made connections between experiences in their distant past and current attitudes. I also know that the data created in the interview is not the whole story: I did not generate 'some kind of pure account' (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 142) in which the role of the interviewer is minimal. Participants knew I was a researcher, and they were public figures, so their accounts may have been sanitised for my benefit. That said, I feel that because they were being asked about events prior to their activism I was able to gain access to relatively unrehearsed testimony. More importantly, this research is concerned with community activism and so it is the publically admissible versions of experience and attitude that are of interest, especially where facts and attitudes associated with extremist activism resonated with mainstream currents of thought.

In addition to those participants who took part in recorded and transcribed biographical interviews, I also had meetings with a small number of other local informants. These included a green party activist, who lived near to East Estate, and a Muslim Labour councillor who I met early on in the research. A number of council officers and workers in the voluntary sector also gave me information about community activities and community

activists, while also offering opinions on community, politics and the presence of ‘extremists’.

### **Extremists, trust and informed consent**

The process described above does not lend itself to a straightforward approach to gaining informed consent. Although the interview materials assessed by Keele’s ethics committee included an information sheet and permission form (see Appendix 2), many of those who were part of the research but who had not been interviewed did not have this more substantial knowledge of the research. The controversial and potentially hidden nature of extremist activism (Blee, 2009) creates further questions, as both researcher and researched may need to hide some information, or put a particular spin on information as part of a dance towards a research relationship.

As this research addresses the question of how activists engage with wider society when some of them are deemed extremist, I was only looking for public affiliations. In the context of my fieldwork, the question of how mainstream and extremist actors engage with each other is only relevant where people know of each other’s backgrounds or are acting as representatives of particular groups. In the ‘white site’, the BNP activists were councillors, candidates or campaigners, and so BNP affiliation is public. In the ‘Islamic site’, the al-Muhajiroun activists are known to the police and local state, and do a regular da’wah stall, so many people know what their group is about. Even though others may not know of the group’s designation as extremist, the group does not act in secret. Although there are likely to be people in all walks of life with views similar to those of the BNP or al-Muhajiroun, if these are personal and only revealed at the ballot box or in the home, the issues raised in this research are not present.

That said, the divide between public and private arenas is not so clear cut. Across a range of social contexts, an individual may present different faces, and this includes political ideals and affiliations. There were many occasions when I had to tread carefully as I could not be sure that affiliations were public in each particular context: individuals may be ‘out’ in one context, for example the street or community group, but not out in another, for example at work.

My attempts to contact Hizb ut-Tahrir activists presented this problem. One such activist I wished to speak to was both a Hizb ut-Tahrir member and on the board of a youth group. This seemed to be common knowledge (among some of my contacts, at least) and confirmable through archived press reports.<sup>7</sup> By dint of his work in the youth group he was also on the committee of a city-wide organisation. Thus if his membership of Hizb ut-Tahrir was public in this context then there was a clear case of extremist and moderate engagement: a fieldwork site. However, if it was not public – and as he was wearing his youth group ‘hat’ it need not be – then my approaching the chair of the committee to ask permission to research may have given away the affiliation, compromising his position.

In the ‘white site’ this was the case for Albert. Over a period of a few weeks I saw him make a decision to stand for the BNP in a local election, and in this community he was then known to be affiliated to the party despite not being a member previously. When this was brought to the attention of a national sporting association he was involved with he was threatened with expulsion. In the context I was working, however, the affiliation was unproblematic and widely known, so my presence could not have given anything away.

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<sup>7</sup> Some in the public sector may also have wished to hide the involvement of ‘extremists’ to avoid controversy. One contact told me that the Hizb ut-Tahrir member would also have been on the board of the city’s youth services due to his youth project, but when I spoke to the head of youth services he claimed to have never knowingly worked with anyone from Hizb ut-Tahrir.

Furthermore, BNP members are currently prohibited from employment in the police and probation services (BBC, 2008a). Trade union leaders have recently argued that BNP members should be barred from teaching and any public sector work (Helm, 2008). Both BNP and radical Islamist activists are subject to the 'no platform' policies of the National Students Union. When the BNP membership list was leaked to the internet in 2008 members were targeted by those opposed to the party, with 160 members complaining to the police of attacks on themselves and their property and others being at 'risk of dismissal from their jobs or disciplinary action' (Topping, 2009).

For the al-Muhajiroun activists the risks associated with their affiliation could be particularly high. The police know of this affiliation, and although the activists have a great deal of police attention, including having their homes raided under terror legislation, they cannot be 'discovered' again. However, when they are engaging with the public their affiliation is potentially extremely problematic. When their colleagues in Luton protested against the Iraq war at a homecoming parade they had to be protected by police from a potentially violent counter-demonstration (Garland & Treadwell, 2010, p. 21). Although the da'wah is public, I saw no evidence that members of the public associated the activists with 'extremism' or any particular group, with some passers-by being glad to meet a 'nice young man' to counter the media portrayals of 'extremists'. If the association with al-Muhajiroun was more obvious some of this sympathy could evaporate, and so in my dealings with other activists and the public I avoided making links clear, referring to 'Islamists', 'Hizb ut-Tahrir, al-Muhajiroun and the like', until the level of my interlocutor's knowledge was clear.

At the same time, however, I did not want to be in acting in a manner that could be considered 'covert' research. I was always keen to explain why I was present when asked, and would often begin conversations by talking about my work. In large gatherings, I was



not able to tell everyone present about my research, but nor did I go undercover: if it was the kind of meeting where we started with introductions I would say I was ‘a Keele researcher looking at community engagement’. If asked my opinion I would usually offer something, although I was less strident than I would be elsewhere, lest I alienated those I wished to interview later. I would also try to avoid using the words ‘extremism’ or ‘extremist’ until I was in one-to-one conversations: as these terms are politically charged I felt I had to ensure that I could explain my work adequately, and not leave people with a fleeting view of my research. My approaches to potential participants usually included mention of the ‘BNP’ or ‘Islamists’, and when I did use the word ‘extremist’ I emphasised that I was interested in circumstances where some had been labelled extremist and did not necessarily concur with this definition.

Therefore, the informed consent of participants was not either/or but incremental (Lugosi, 2006). Those I observed on the street or in large meetings may not have known I was a researcher. Indeed, one police officer who had seen me at a meeting called by al-Muhajiroun assumed I was a journalist with the local paper as I stood out from the Muslim crowd. ‘People in public spaces knowingly make their behaviour available for scrutiny by anonymous others... people's consent to being observed is implied by their simple presence’ (Murphy & Dingwall, 2007). In smaller meetings everyone knew I was a researcher but did not necessarily know my exact topic, although they could look it up on the university webpages if they wished. Those who participated in recorded biographical interviews were given an information sheet, had participated in discussions with me, and had the opportunity to ask questions about the research. At no point did I disguise or deny my motives: although the topic is controversial I studied those who are open with or at least have open articulations of their viewpoints, making covert research less necessary (unlike the infiltration of the National Front in Fielding, 1981). I ‘conduct[ed] research as

overtly as possible consistent with avoiding distress or disruption to the settings [I studied]' (Murphy & Dingwall, 2007).

The demonisation of both the extremist groups and the populations they are drawn from and claim to represent remained a barrier to the trust needed to conduct research. However, the relatively open nature of the community activities meant that I could at least 'hang around' doing my ethnographic research. But still, interviews were often difficult to arrange. When I first attempted to contact a BNP councillor I was told that 'I won't talk to you, and none of the others will either': in his opinion I was likely to be only interested in digging up dirt. Indeed, Margie, one of the BNP councillors, said she was happy to be interviewed 'as long as it is used for the right purpose'. As BNP activists are used to getting largely negative publicity, they are right to fear being 'stitched up': Joe told me which newspapers and TV companies he would and would not talk to, as he had opinions on whether he would get a fair hearing.

To some extent I *was* digging up dirt. Both the white working-class and Muslim sites are places with specific social problems that are both deemed criminal and deviant by the state and middle-class moral codes, and more importantly, are associated in the public mind with those kinds of places. My interviewees, and not only those involved in extremist politics, told personal stories of drugs, alcohol, youth disorder and violence. The Muslim site had hosted one of the 2001 'race riots', and at around the same time the white site had been known in the local media as 'little Chicago'. Although, these stories are the background to community and political activism, so need to be talked about, there is reluctance to revisit these episodes, especially for those who have 'pride in the community'. Similarly, individuals can worry that the researcher is there to reveal social problems, and how the individuals are themselves the problem:

My suspicion is couched in the collective memory of a people who have been academically slandered for generations... African Americans are at a point where we have to be suspicious of people who want to tell stories about us.

(‘Hakim’ quoted in Duneier, 2004, p. 94)

Furthermore, the demonisation and stereotyping of Muslims and the white working class as inherently illiberal, and likely supporters or sympathisers of extremist politics means that all outside interest is suspicious.

In the ‘Islamic site’ these suspicions were ever present. The context of the ‘war on terror’ meant that many people’s first assumption was that I was part of the security apparatus. Both the ‘extremist’ activists and those running and attending the mosque I attended made comments alluding to my possible membership of MI5 or special branch. In the mosque these comments were usually made as a kind of joke, along with threats that I would be kidnapped, or would have to go past the bomb-making factory. Even without me mentioning ‘extremism’ or ‘terrorism’, ordinary Muslims know that the reason they are of sociological interest is the same reason they are of interest to government agencies.

These jokes were never made by the al-Muhajiroun group, presumably because they are under more suspicion and this has had serious consequences including anti-terror raids and regular police attention. It was only natural that they should be suspicious of me, and many early conversations covered who I work for and my motivations for this research. On one occasion, after a few months of contact, I had a heated conversation with four activists which could have ended my research relationship. They wanted to know why I had chosen them to talk to, and I said I was interested in community activism in a context where some are deemed extremist. They then asked ‘who told you we were extremist?’ and ‘who sent you, who told you about us?’ Despite my finding the group due to a great deal of hanging around, and then being given a leaflet, they suspected that the police or local authority had

given me guidance on where to look. In a context where ‘you are either with us or against us’ – and for at least one of the al-Muhajiroun activists ‘if you don’t join us, then you might as well be BNP’ – I was immediately suspected of doing my work purely to undermine theirs. As I was not prepared to do covert research, was not recognisable as a journalist, and my description of the research was not black and white, the Islamists had difficulty placing me: it took a great deal of work to get to the point of interview.

### **Leaving the field**

As with finding and entering the field, the end to my fieldwork was a gradual affair. Indeed, the researcher never completely leaves the field if participants can make contact, or may be present in other circumstances. ‘The approach of deadlines for written reports’ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, pp. 120-121) did reduce the time I could spend attending meetings, chasing up interviewees and conducting interviews and eventually I stopped actively doing fieldwork.

How I left the relationship with participants depended mostly on circumstances. Those who had participated in a second interview knew that I probably did not want to interview them again. Where I attended a meeting or event on a regular basis, I told those present at the last two or three meetings that I would not be attending anymore, saying goodbye to those who organised them. Some participants I missed as they were not present at these events, and I could not say goodbye.

I also re-entered the field for special events. On these occasions I bumped into some participants while others were absent. Those who had no expectation of a finished PhD did not expect me to be producing a report; those who did know about the research process also understood that the writing process takes time. Furthermore, as my time in the field

was almost always in work-like situations, my relationships were more like professional relationships as opposed to friendships: it did not feel like betrayal to lose contact for a few months or weeks and then regain it.

### ***Other data***

In addition to the primary data gathered through observation, conversation and interview in the two research sites, I gained information and insights from a number of other sources, including local media, other academics, high profile informants, the police, the Home Office's Citizenship survey, and my own community activism.<sup>8</sup>

Like the knowledge gained through observation, reading the local media helped with gaining the trust of interviewees, and provided material for interviews. As many of my participants were relatively public figures, some information about them and their activism was in the public domain. Councillors and other community activists are quoted regularly, and meetings and events are publicised in the local newspaper. Some of the BNP councillors and al-Muhajiroun activists I spoke to have also appeared on television. These appearances, and other stories relevant to the research or the research site, would often be the first thing we would talk about, and could be a spur to conversation. However, as I will discuss later, combining the very public data of newspaper and television and the private data of interviews did make demands on the anonymisation of the research data.

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<sup>8</sup> At the time of writing I was chair of my local residents' association. I saw this as a very small example of action research. Relevant issues included BNP activism, requests for religious facilities and exceptions, and a racist attack.

## **Data analysis and storage process**

Throughout the time spent doing the fieldwork, data was being generated, analysed and archived. Here I outline the process: the ethical issues raised, particularly data anonymisation and security, are discussed below. Early on in the research I was persuaded to use NVivo, computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), and because analysis was done in an NVivo project this helped determine the analysis and storage process.

As promised to participants, any data that could identify individuals was only accessible by myself and my supervisor: analysis was done on an anonymised dataset. Transcripts and notes were made as soon after research trips as possible, with fieldwork notes often being made in the car before driving home. This generated a set of non-anonymised documents that were anonymised through the changing of names, streets, neighbourhoods and organisations. As these documents were generated they were imported into NVivo along with other data such as local newspaper stories.

Towards the end of the research, the non-anonymised data – always kept securely on an encrypted drive – was archived in the Research Institute. At this stage, I no longer had access to the original data but was working with the anonymised dataset.

The analysis of the dataset was a mixture of manual and automated interrogation (Welsh, 2002). At no point was I persuaded that a ‘grounded theory’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach was suitable, knowing that throughout the process I had particular theories and concepts in mind, particularly those associated with the government’s community cohesion policies: I did not use the software to code the data with every single idea I could find interesting. Instead, much of the analysis was manual, that is reading and re-reading

transcripts, making notes in margins and in the NVivo project, and thinking about connections, consistencies and differences.

The software was used to search across all or sections of the dataset for particular keywords and concepts. This was used in early stages if I wanted a quick way to find a number of instances of particular phrases or ideas. In the later stages, when I knew the dataset inside out, I could use the software to search for phrases that I knew a particular interviewee had used but did not know where in the interview: a search could be done that found key words in all data associated with that individual.

Finally, transcripts were re-read in the light of the theories that were being addressed in each chapter, so that the writing process was itself part of the analysis. The original data, memos, research diary entries and other notes were gradually combined into conference papers, draft chapters, and this thesis, and at each stage some re-reading of the data 'led to richer and different understandings of [the] data' (Ely, Vinz, Anzul, & Downing, 1997, p. 22).

### ***The researcher and the researched, understanding and misunderstanding***

Although issues of difference and similitude are part of all social research, and concepts of 'them and us', 'insiders' and 'outsiders' can be constituted through any attribute of human life, the very topic of 'extremism' amplifies these divides. In particular, and to be covered at the end of this section, these divides have political and ethical dimensions. But even without the divide between 'extremist' and 'moderate', the researcher enters a social world where people are different to him or her, and where the process and the social knowledge created is to some extent contingent on the social position of the researcher.

## **Stereotypes and the research relationship**

The cross-cultural nature of my research was played out in the assumptions we all make about the background, knowledge and experiences of others (Lamont, 2004). This included my assumptions about, or even stereotypes of the participants and their assumptions about me. It also included the reflexive assumptions about others' assumptions, that is my thoughts about how the participants viewed and stereotyped me and my reaction to this, and of course vice versa. Particularly in the 'Islamic Site', where I often stood out as the only non-Muslim in the room, this could create both opportunities for conversation but also misunderstandings that could close down or disrupt the research process.

In the 'white site', where I may be most expected to fit in, differences remained. Although I am from the same white working-class background as most of the East Estate citizens my life story has been very different. I did not attend my local comprehensive, but was a 'scholarship boy' at a nearby grammar / independent school. I left my home estate aged 18, vowing never to return, and went away to university. After time in Cambridge as an undergraduate, I lived in London, mainly in Notting Hill and Finsbury Park. While in London I enrolled at Goldsmiths for an MA and PhD while working in record shops and then social research. I have lived in both the very poorest areas of the UK and the very richest. I did not want to, and perhaps do not, appear middle class, but when people asked about what I do and where I live this could not be avoided.

Indeed, one aspect of my life that surprised many in both sites was the PhD itself. Although widening access to higher education means that many more people are familiar with university courses, it is undergraduate studies they are familiar with. Many participants were surprised that I had over three years to complete a research project,



expecting me to be doing a dissertation in the space of a few months. More importantly, I was not getting myself into student debt, but being paid to be at university.

My age and family life also played their part. Whereas Liebow (1967) said that being in his mid-30s meant there was little effect on his engagement with the participants of Tally's corner in their 20s to 40s, I had differing experiences with older and younger participants. Most of the participants in the 'white site' were of my parents' generation or older, being in their 50s, 60s and 70s. I was sometimes seen as young, often younger than I actually am, stereotyped as living a student lifestyle of drinking and leisure, and not having worked for a living. Conversations would often include 'you won't remember this, but...' or similar. I in turn would mention my family life and background to show that I am a responsible father of two in my mid-30s, with a memory of the 1980s at least. The al-Muhajiroun group, however, were much younger than me, aged 18 to 25, and this to some extent led to me feeling as though I had to act as a father figure or at least to impart some of my knowledge if it helped them. On many occasions I left them thinking about how naïve *they* were.

Of course, a history of anthropologists on colonial adventures and sociologists studying ghetto corners has emphasised racial or ethnic difference in research encounters. This has sometimes been characterised as an unbridgeable divide that needs researchers to research those of shared ethnicity through 'racial matching', although more nuanced analysis has shown that race is not the only important 'social signifier' (see Twine, 2000). In the 'Islamic site', almost all participants were of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin. However, they were also of the English Midlands and North, like myself. I am not religious, and had never set foot in a mosque before beginning this research. However, I have spent time with Muslims (friends, neighbours, colleagues) and in Muslim places. Indeed, I have probably visited a greater variety of Muslim countries than most of my Muslim respondents. When

the imam said that people are scared to come into the mosque, do not know what to expect, he meant me too. In this instance, placing me as a non-Muslim, in a city divided on ethno-religious lines, could stereotype me as someone who is ignorant of others, and possibly racist too.

These assumptions, made in either direction, can have an effect on the knowledge produced by research, and this had much to do with my decision to do ethnographic fieldwork as well as biographical interviews, and work in two sites as opposed to one. As someone who has moved from the very poorest sections of English society to the richest, I have long been aware of the way that aspects of life that are common to all in a social world are rendered invisible or at least unremarkable by the lack of difference. As Frankenberg (1993) shows, the normative and therefore 'neutral' nature of 'whiteness' and 'white culture' leaves it unexamined by those who are themselves white. 'The things we take for granted often do not end up in our field jottings' (Duneier, 2004, p. 100). In this research the apparently unremarkable nature of participatory democracy, with citizens in the 'white site' attending meetings with the police and councillors, was not replicated in the 'Islamic site', where other structures seemed to be more important. Only by comparison is this revealed. Furthermore, some aspects of life, for example, conversations with neighbours, are considered so normal as to be unworthy of comment. In interviews participants focus on those things they believe the interviewer will be interested in, those that seem unusual or not the norm. However, the time spent as an observer allowed me to discover some of those social facts that seem unremarkable to the participants, and follow them up in conversation.

This was much more so in the 'Islamic site'. Of particular importance to my study was the importance of da'wah or proselytizing in almost all Islamic contexts I spent time in. Despite announcing myself as a researcher, those involved in the mosque would steer me

to discussions of belief, with the aim of inviting me to become a Muslim. My surprise to find this helped me later to make sense of the activities of the al-Muhajiroun group.

### ***Dangerous research? Further ethical and political considerations***

In this final section I discuss further the ethical and political issues raised by the research. In particular, I examine issues of anonymisation, how the researcher behaves towards the researched, and the potential for harm caused by the researched or done to the researched and researcher. This concludes with a discussion of an approach made to me by counter-terrorism police in which they requested that I break confidentiality and allow them access to the research data.

### **Networks and anonymisation**

Although I assured everybody anonymity throughout the research, my study of ‘community’ as well as individuals, and the public nature of activism, meant that creating anonymity was problematic. Many of my interviewees are public figures locally, either as councillors, community leaders or street preachers, and have been written about in local media and appeared on local and national television. Many know each other or work together, making anonymisation work more complicated.

Besides the promises made, there are other reasons why my data should be anonymised. Much of the information is of a sensitive nature, and some is about illegal activities albeit in the past, which could cause distress or harm to the participants if revealed. The research site, that is the city and particular neighbourhoods, could also be harmed, and although the

‘localities have become synonymous with deprivation’, I wish to avoid further stigmatising (Clark, 2006, p. 4).

In some studies using biographical methods (e.g. Gadd, Dixon, & Jefferson, 2004), each individual is a ‘case’, or even the only case (e.g. Shaw, 1930). By changing names and places the researcher can ensure participants are harder to identify. In this study, each community is also a ‘case’, as well as providing the context for the individuals. Many of the participants in each site know each other, talk to each other and often work together or have worked together in the past. Some of the participants doing city-wide activities know others in the other site. In interviews these participants referred to each other, and the ethnographic fieldwork was done with many participants present, so the data relates to individuals and networks or communities. Therefore, when an interviewee expressed a preference not to be anonymised, I had to insist on it as one name could be used to link to many others. Furthermore, many of the participants, including those allied to ‘extremist’ groups, have relatively public profiles. They have been mentioned in local and sometimes national media and, as activists, sometimes put across their opinions in letters to the local newspaper. For these reasons, I anonymised the neighbourhoods as well as individuals and organisations. However, this means I cannot provide references for a small number of citations of public data such as official statistics and newspaper coverage.

### **Being a citizen, colleague and informant**

The production of research data, both in interview and elsewhere, is done within the context of human relations. Although I may have tried my best to elicit a neutral account from the participants, my judgements will certainly have had some effect on that which

was told. However, I argue that it is in the researcher's interest to 'give something back' in order to maintain the research process and this will entail making judgements.

Although Weis (1992) argues that, as a 'guest' in the fieldwork setting, the researcher should 'suspend judgement and become an insider to the best of one's ability' (p. 54) this may hinder an engagement with the 'other' with whom there is disagreement. It is certainly true that I listened to things I disagreed with and did not challenge the speaker. However, participants can ask questions of the researcher, and these cannot always be evaded. Sometimes I answered my respondents' questions in a sideways fashion, saying that 'I expect you would say that'. At other times there was no avoiding the question, and I had to give an account, usually very brief, of my own beliefs.

Gadd (2004) refers to being 'struck by the way [his] interventions seem to be geared towards establishing [his] intellectual authority' (p. 395). In researching those with whom you disagree politically or theologically, I could be in danger of trying to establish some ideological authority. However, getting people to talk, and talk about interesting topics, did not usually require intellectual combat (see Ezekiel, 1995; Wellman, 1977) but required me to act 'normally'. On two occasions, once in either site, interviewees asked me what others had talked about in their interviews. In Hilltop and Beyond I felt that the interviewee wanted more steer on what he should talk about and was perhaps worried that he might say the wrong thing. Both times I deflected the question, saying that I could not break confidences, but also gave an extremely general answer that repeated what was stated on the information sheet. More interesting was when al-Muhajiroun activists asked me what I thought of the BNP, and when BNP activists asked me about researching 'an Asian area'. Although I had no real answer to give – I was not about to say I really enjoy or hate being in a particular social milieu – I did feel a need to assert that people and circumstances are not so different. Here, then, my own notion of what being a good citizen means came to the

fore: this was not so much a challenge to extremist beliefs but more of an assertion that I was prepared to see the good in anybody, and was not stereotyping anyone as extremists and only extremists.

Like Blee, I ‘shared the assumptions and opinions of my informants on a number of topics’ (Blee, 1991, p. 6), and also some of the background. I used my own life story as a way to connect to the participants, emphasising my working class upbringing for some, and my work and family for others. I often talked about the work I have done in the community sector, especially with regard to how volunteering can be undervalued and hidden. With my younger participants I occasionally talked about previous ‘shit job[s]’, and, like Weis (1992), I then worried about how this may sound to a teenager who has only known this kind of work (p. 55).

More importantly, I listened with enthusiasm. Not because I wanted them to see me as a friend or a political ally, but because this is first common courtesy, and second is conducive to a good interview. Questions asked, even if not direct, and questions answered, help in gaining trust and rapport, partially because it shows you are interested and listening, even if not in agreement. ‘Communication rests on my candour, their interest in being heard, my deep interest in understanding the phenomenon’ (Ezekiel, 1995, p. xx).

I was also careful not to allow ethical constraints to stop me acting and speaking in ways that would be normal aspects of social engagement. When engaging with extremist and non-extremist activists I treated them as I would treat others I meet in the course of work or being in public spaces. In the East Estate meetings, then, I would sit around the table with everyone else but would not be contributing unless asked (for example, my opinion of a newsletter). Where work was to be done at community events or the community shop I

gave a hand, and in both sites I was willing to give participants a lift if I was going in their direction. However, it was important not to be partisan, so I did not do work for any particular group but allowed myself to be a more active participant where I perceived this to be open to all.

This included, in a very small way, giving advice to my interviewees. If, for example, someone was discussing local affairs and was not sure about something I would provide information where I had it. My research, and particularly my regular reading of local media, meant that I sometimes knew more about events than the participants. Thus, a senior Stoke-on-Trent politician learnt about central government intervention in the city's affairs from me, and I also told some of the Stoke al-Muhajiroun activists of the formation of the English Defence League. This was information that was in the public domain and came up as part of normal conversation outside the interview process.

On one occasion the al-Muhajiroun group planned to visit London as part of the group's Islam4UK branded 'Islamic Roadshows', and I became aware of how little one of them knew about travelling in the capital. I gave him advice on getting from central London to Kingsland Road, so that he would not end up in Kingston.<sup>9</sup> Although even this help could be considered an ethical issue, assisting extremists to carry out their activism, I felt that my social citizenship required me to treat them as normal.

## **Empowerment and politics**

As previous comments demonstrate, the question of 'whose side are you on?' dominates research into groups considered extremist or dangerous. The very fact that individuals' ideas of what is *the good* can differ considerably problematises the standard starting point

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<sup>9</sup> A long way from their proposed destination.

of conversations about research ethics. To begin by saying, as Hippocrates, that the researcher should ‘do no harm’ to participants (Economic and Social Research Council, 2010, p. 3), often with a supplementary requirement to ‘do good’, raises the question ‘what is good?’ When a BNP member and research participant suggested that she was happy to be involved ‘as long as [the research] is used for the right purpose’, was the ‘right purpose’ the furtherance of her or her party’s political aims? Even if this was not the case, it seems unlikely that the ‘right purpose’ would include the furtherance of the aims of political opponents.

Thus, the topic of the research as a whole, ‘empowering extremists’, becomes a question of the research process too. ‘Much has been made in both Left and feminist work of the idea of empowerment, often implying that ‘woman-centred’ research might empower women’ (Walkerdine, 1997, p. 74), and this has been extended to all kinds of marginalised groups (Andrews, 2007, p. 41). However, just as recent scholarship and popular comment on the practice of multiculturalism, including this, raises the problem of empowering the marginalised when they have illiberal beliefs, the research itself may empower those who have attitudes the researcher disagrees with.

This is not only a question of how the research is written and read. The process of meeting, observing, participating and interviewing the research participants could empower them. My presence and interest in all that was happening could be seen as validating particular points of view or processes, giving extremists ‘new found legitimacy’ (Jipson & Litton, 2000, p. 161). In formal interviews and other conversations, the participant may gain knowledge as well as the researcher. More importantly, for all my attempts to be neutral and a mere sponge for the interviewee’s story, my reactions could provide clues for future self-presentation. Although all interviewees were members of ‘marginalised groups’, they are also political or public figures, who from my reactions can learn for future talk.



Furthermore, my interview participants received money for their time, and while the ethical issues are not in the same league as those for Hamm (1993), who was told that his payments to violent racist skinheads could be used to ‘buy 50 rounds of ammo’ (p. 90), these resources could be used for furthering the agendas of the participants. The al-Muhajiroun group said that my money could be used to copy leaflets and CDs for their stalls.

Further questions are raised when considering the researcher being seen as a representative of the authorities. As I discuss later, those allied to extremist groups also see the state as an enemy. The potential for academic slander of marginalised groups (see above) can also be interpreted as further attacks on the group by the state. Just as Joe, the BNP councillor, saw the media as likely to misreport and demonise the BNP as part of the liberal conspiracy, so my actions in the field and in my writing may further prove that the academic is part of the conspiracy. I hoped that my treating people as fellow citizens, regardless of political or religious affiliation, helped me not to reinforce any notion of ‘them’ and ‘us’, even if it was unlikely to weaken it.

### **Danger to the researcher**

Much writing on research ethics, drawing from medical models, concentrates on the impact of the research on the researched (Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000). However, there is also a risk of harm to the researcher in all social research, and particularly ‘when studying groups that hold threatening beliefs about other members of the community and which may be engaged in illegal activities’ (Jipson & Litton, 2000, p. 147). Research involving political extremists, from the data gathering to the dissemination can involve day-to-day dangers while conducting the fieldwork, and dangers to reputation on dissemination.

The potential for ‘physical danger’ (Jipson & Litton, 2000, p. 147) was never realised nor did I ever feel that I was in any danger. All my interviews were in public places, and although they were sometimes in empty buildings, or on doorsteps out of view, I was never in a place I could not leave quickly. More importantly, I never felt that our conversations became heated. I interviewed people in ‘as open and non-judgmental a manner as it is possible’ (Jipson & Litton, 2000, p. 149), and avoided telling the interviewee that I disagreed with particular ideas and attitudes. At the same time I had to avoid appearing as a potential recruit to my interviewees’ causes. In particular, almost all the Muslims I interviewed tried to engage me in conversations about religion, attempting to convert me to Islam. A very British avoidance of the subject was impossible, especially with direct questions about my belief, so often I would end up telling them about my lack of religious belief and then steering the conversation towards the methods used to talk to people about religion.

More importantly was the risk from those opposed to the extremists. Although I avoided attending private meetings of any groups (whether extremist or mainstream) I did spend time with them in public arenas. Whereas in smaller meetings it was usual that everybody attending would know of my research project and most would be potential interviewees, on the street or at larger events I could not predict who would see me. This could require me to explain my presence, and try to deflect the ‘guilt by association’ that occurs when one is seen to be allied to those deemed ‘extremist’

In the white site, two events stand out, one on the street and one in the city’s civic centre. Prior to the 2008 council elections, I spent time walking with both BNP and Labour activists as they were leafleting the houses on East Estate. I was careful to observe and not to help, doing no leafleting or carrying, but I may have helped or hindered through being ‘company’. I was hoping that the two sets of activists might meet, and I could observe their

conversations, but this did not occur. However, while I walked with the BNP a non-aligned community activist spotted me, and after saying hello asked me what I was doing with the BNP. Similarly, at the count for these elections I bumped into a black community worker I had known for a number of years. Again, his first question was ‘what are *you* doing hanging round with the BNP?’ By spending time in the company of the BNP it would be very easy to come to the attention of ‘anti-fascist’ activists, particularly if I had attended BNP meetings or marches, who would assume I was a member or sympathiser.

In the Islamic site, the dangers of ‘risky activism’ (Wiktorowicz, 2004) of radical Islamists also transferred to me. As well as interviewing mainstream and ‘extremist’ activists, and attending community meetings and events, I also spent time at two public meetings organised by al-Muhajiroun and stood next to their da’wah stall, observing the interaction of the activists with the public. There were many occasions when abuse would be hurled at the Islamists, and although I was not dressed appropriately I could easily be mistaken for a sympathiser. While I was spending time with the Islamist activists there were a number of marches and protests organised by the English Defence League and others who are fighting ‘Islamic extremism’, in particular al-Muhajiroun, many of which have ended in violence. If they had decided to protest against the Islamists’ stall when I was sitting behind it I would have to somehow emphasise my neutrality in their argument.

Furthermore, as I left the stall one afternoon in August 2009 I was pulled over by the police, and told that my car triggered the Automatic Number Plate Recognition System, but also that the system does make mistakes. After giving my insurance company and address details, I asked if the stop was because of my visiting the stall. Although the officers replied ‘no’, they were very interested in asking about my work and whether I carried any of the Islamists’ leaflets. After searching my car and bag one officer asked ‘Are you interested in Islamism?’ in a way that seemed to be trying to draw a distinction

between my professional interest and any possible attraction to Islamist ideologies. My later inquiries, and a meeting with the officers, confirmed that the stop was made by officers from the Community Resilience Team, funded by Preventing Violent Extremism funds, although again they assured me that the stop had nothing to do with who I had been conducting research with.

### **Doing the right thing in the war on terror?**

Once the fieldwork was over, however, similar questions are raised in the dissemination of the research. In a political field where many believe one is either ‘with us or against us’, a position spelt out in this exact formation by both the Islamists and anti-fascist activists, researchers can be under pressure to state where they stand, and to work for the right side. Particularly where research disrupts any ‘them and us’, and emphasises a common humanity, it can be seen as working for the extremists and normalising them. The researcher can be viewed as ‘an intellectual outrider for the BNP’ (Taylor, 2004). Again, this mirrors the current debates about whether the BNP or Islamists can be allowed media time, and whether mainstream politicians should debate with them. Colleagues may feel the researcher must sympathise to some extent to do this kind of research, else the research should be done with a view to ‘debunking extremist ideology’ (Jipson & Litton, 2000, p. 159).

Finally, this question of where I stand was raised in such a way that could have threatened the very viability of the project: it certainly delayed the final writing-up process. On 19 January 2011 I missed a call on my work-related mobile number: the voicemail was from a member of the West Midlands Counter Terrorism Unit, saying that he needed to speak to me but that I was not in trouble. In the next few weeks I had a long telephone conversation

with this police officer, and a meeting with a Staffordshire Special Branch officer and a Counter Terrorism Unit officer. It transpired that at least one person I had encountered during the research with the al-Muhajiroun group had been arrested and charged with a terrorism offence. The stop and search record from August 2009 had led the police to me.

During the telephone conversation I was asked about my engagement with the group, whether I had their leaflets and CDs, and whether they had ‘tried to impress their faith upon me’, with the officer eventually asking if it was possible to see the original data. In this conversation I was also told that this was a matter of national security, and that if I did not agree to hand over my material they could get a court order to force me to do so.<sup>10</sup> The officer said that it was possible that they could turn up at my home to examine the data.

A few weeks later I met with a Special Branch officer and a Counter Terrorism Unit officer. I was supported by my supervisor, the chair of Keele’s ethics committee, a criminology professor representing the Research Institute, and a criminal defence solicitor. An earlier meeting had allowed me to talk to the Keele staff and the solicitor about our approach. We agreed that allowing the police access to the dataset was not desirable as this would breach the assurances of confidentiality given to participants, and was unnecessary as I had no data pertaining to terrorism offences. At the meeting, then, I explained that breaches of confidentiality would create serious problems for me, the university and how sociology is conducted: if respondents could not trust academics to respect these promises then they would be less likely to take part. I also talked about how participants had not necessarily told the truth, may have embellished their accounts, and may not have given me real names. The activists’ suspicions that I was a police officer meant that they had perhaps not revealed anything to me that they would not have revealed to police officers.

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<sup>10</sup> ‘American sociologist Rik Scarce spent several months in jail in 1993 for refusing to give information to law enforcement officials about whether he had interviewed people involved in a raid on an animal laboratory’ (Jipson & Litton, 2000, p. 155)

After all, during the period that I spent with them, a year before the arrests, they were in contact with the police on a regular basis. At the time of this thesis' submission it appears that the police will not be following this up.

It is important to note that at the time of the research Keele did not have 'any system, policy or procedure in place for dealing with any potential actions taken by the authorities against the institution, its students or staff under Terrorism legislation' (Keele, 2010). While the university has an obligation to co-operate with the police if laws have been broken, it also has a duty of care to its employees, students and the wider community. This research had been cleared by the ethics committee, but this scenario was not imagined at that time. A member of Keele's senior management was informed about the police stop in 2009, so the call and meeting were perhaps less of a surprise. The ethical statements also make it clear that if I believed that any participant planned to harm him or herself or others, then I may have had a duty to report this to the police. However, as can be seen in the case of the 'Nottingham Two' (Miller, Mills, & Harkins, 2011), one does not have to break the law to become a suspect. It is important, therefore, for researchers in this area to work transparently, being honest with participants, the authorities, and university colleagues: as everyone knew what I was doing there could be no misconceptions and the university should have had little fear that their assistance to me could be construed as problematic. That said, I believe that my position was helped by my whiteness and lack of religion: if I had been of Asian Muslim background I may have been treated more as a suspect than a potential data source.

## ***Conclusions***

Unlike Blee, researching women of the Ku Klux Klan, I did not expect to ‘hate and fear my informants’ (Blee, 1991, p. 6). ‘I have no trouble knowing the racist [or extremist] is a comprehensible human: We went to school together’ (Ezekiel, 1995, p. xx). I believe that the one thing I had in common with all participants, moderate and extremist, was the experience of living in the city, knowing the places, the histories and stories of the neighbourhoods I was working in. In both East Estate and Hilltop and Beyond I had insider knowledge – of schools, football teams, politicians, events and so on – that helped me connect to participants. Although I may have been seen as middle-class, and over-educated, I was not from outside the city, something which may have created further barriers.

Furthermore, the embattled nature of estates and communities that are stereotyped as prone to intolerance and extremism provides the greatest barrier to research. As I described in chapter 2, the white working class has had a great deal of media coverage and come under academic scrutiny aimed at finding out why this group is racist and supports the far right. Similarly, reporters and academics have descended on Muslim populations, secretly filming sermons and surveying young people for potentially extremist views. The background to this research – that picking out certain groups as extremist and making them, and the communities associated with them, the focus of government – is also a barrier that I had to surmount.

## **4: ‘I fought the law, and the law won’: the backgrounds of the activists of ‘Hilltop and Beyond’**

### ***Introduction***

This chapter examines the backgrounds and life histories of the community activists in the ‘Islamic site’, with particular reference to individuals’ degree of integration. Drawing on the biographical interviews conducted with five al-Muhajiroun activists and three mainstream Muslim activists, I address theories of ‘radicalisation’ which suggest that those the government deems to be ‘extremists’ have backgrounds of disengagement from the mainstream life of the nation. These arguments posit that extremists have grown up in the ‘insular and disengaged urban ghetto’ (Maher, 2008) or ‘enclaves of ethnic populations that are largely Muslim [that] serve as “ideological sanctuaries” for the seeds of radical thought’ (Silber & Bhatt, 2007) where there is a great deal of tacit support for actions of violent extremists (Saggar, 2006). I argue that while the al-Muhajiroun activists were very integrated into mainstream Britain, there are moments in at least some of the extremists’ lives when their integration and empowerment has been rebuffed in the manner of Jock Young’s ‘citizenship thwarted’ (Young, 2003b), perhaps explaining their ideological rejection of Britishness and integration that is at odds with their *actual* integration.

I begin with a short portrait of Stoke-on-Trent’s Muslim ‘community’. This includes some details of the recent history of Islamic institutions and Muslims’ community involvement, and provides the context for the activists’ stories. I then move on to analysis of the activists’ integration into society, as described in biographical interviews. I discuss three related aspects of integration: first, engagement with ethno-religious others in social, work



and educational settings; second, forms of empowering integration and involvement; and third, the setbacks to their integration in these arenas.

Despite the sometimes uncompromising rhetoric of isolation, the al-Muhajiroun activists did not grow up without contact with ethno-religious others, and nor did they have this isolation while being extremists: older mainstream activists were more tied to their specific community. Furthermore, most of these activists had histories of wider integration, through work, education and community activities. Histories of crime and deviance were important to two of the five al-Muhajiroun activists, who described their proselytising as being reparation for their past behaviour.

I therefore dispute the conventional wisdom that posits an unintegrated Asian Muslim population, living ‘parallel lives’ to mainstream British society and not sharing British values (Cantle, 2001) and so produces members who can call for the death of an author or bomb the London Underground. Instead, I will argue that some of the integrative actions of the al-Muhajiroun activists, and significant others, were challenged or denied by those with the power to do so, and this rejection became a spur for a stance which sets them against the world. Where mainstream activists emphasised successes and downplayed obstacles, al-Muhajiroun activists emphasised those occasions where they had challenged, and been challenged by, authority.

### ***Hilltop and beyond***

At the 2001 census Stoke-on-Trent was home to 7,658 people who described their religion as Muslim, amounting to 3.2% of the city’s total population. Although three quarters of these Muslims lived in only four of Stoke’s twenty wards, none of the wards had a Muslim population greater than 16.6%, and at least a small number of Muslim residents could be

found in every ward. The majority of Stoke's Muslims have a Pakistani heritage. 6,360 of Stoke's residents described their ethnicity as Pakistani, and if most of these people consider themselves to be Muslim then they make up the majority of the Muslims in Stoke. At this time a further 572 residents chose to describe themselves as Bangladeshi. The Muslim population will, of course be supplemented by others from all over the world, including people from Turkey, Bosnia and Kosovo who appear as 'white other' in the census, African Muslims, and black and white British converts. The Muslim population is not as diverse as that in London, but it is by no means entirely synonymous with the Pakistani population.

Furthermore, the Pakistani population is itself geographically divided. 'Most Muslim populations to cluster by country of origin and ethnicity with ethnically distinctive distributions' (Change Institute, 2009, p. 19). 'Cobridge and Tunstall were occupied by predominantly Mirpuri families from Azad Kashmir, as was Longton, whilst Shelton became populated with families from a range of districts around Rawalpindi' (Michael, 2007, p. 146). Stoke's spatial form means that, like the rest of the city's people, these people are not one 'community' – Tunstall to Longton is a long journey – and so these Pakistani residents make 'four distinct concentrations' (Michael, 2007, p. 146) that are at the core of the Muslim population, and thus the mosques' congregations. This total population of Muslims is also so small that there is no neighbourhood that is a majority Muslim area: using the city's own Neighbourhood Zone analysis, there is no area that has a less than 70% white-British population.

While not all Muslims attend the mosque regularly – in the England and Wales Citizenship Survey it was found that 80% of self-described Muslims consider themselves actively practicing their religion (Ferguson & Hussey, 2010, p. 7) – the city's mosques are community hubs in a way that churches are not. The four biggest mosques that comprise

the ‘mainstream’ Islamic provision became, in 2009, part of the Stoke-on-Trent Imam and Muslim Advisory Network and were of a Barelwi-Sufi tradition catering for a congregation that is mostly, but not exclusively, from or with parents or grandparents from Pakistan. In my visits to three of these mosques I also found a small number of white-British converts and African Muslims – likely to be more recent refugees – attending. In addition to this provision Stoke is home to around ten smaller mosques, including two competing Salafi groups and a number of mosques providing for non-Pakistani ethnic groups. Here it is important to note the Pakistani/ Barelwi mosques’ role as part of a Stoke-on-Trent Pakistani ‘political establishment’ (see Michael, 2007): the middle-aged and male Muslim community activists I met, including the Labour councillors, were often also very involved in their mosque as committee members. I found no activists in their 20s or 30s involved in this kind of activity.

The Muslim population of Stoke is small and dispersed, but the areas they live in are still characterised as ‘Asian’ or ‘Muslim’ areas by the state, the media and racist activists. In July 2001 rumours of a National Front or British National Party march through Cobridge sparked violence that involved Asian and white youths fighting each other and the police. There was potential for a repeat of this disorder in January 2010 when some involved in an English Defence League demonstration decided to walk towards Cobridge after the main event, shouting ‘BNP, BNP, BNP’ as they were turned back by police (bnpinfo, 2010). After the former event, though, Cobridge was wrongly characterised as housing the majority of Stoke’s Asian population or described as an ‘Asian area’ (Dodd, 2001), when even here the majority of residents are white.

These people and areas, then, are anonymised as *Hilltop and Beyond*, as the spaces in which I did the research included three of the biggest mosques, a community centre and various street settings in the ‘distinct concentrations’. Unlike in the ‘white site’ (see

chapters 6 and 7), there was no single organisation, body or group which could serve as the main context for the research. At the time of the research, a city-wide BME consultative body *did* have a small number of Hizb ut-Tahrir activists as members and was also involved in organising multicultural events, so would have been directly comparable to the East Estate Partnership. Without access to this group, I instead made contact with mosque officials and Muslim councillors across the city and eventually conducted my research on the street with al-Muhajiroun activists and in ‘mainstream’ mosques and other ‘mainstream’ settings. While I did biographical interviews with eight activists, a number of others did provide some information about their background but were less keen to participate fully.

### ***Parallel Lives?***

While Ted Cantle’s (2001) ‘parallel lives’ thesis was applied to both the white and Asian residents living in the towns that experienced the ‘northern riots’ – hence the use of the word parallel – the concept was operationalised in different forms for the two communities. For the white (working class) population it is argued that a combination of a lack of contact with any ethnic other and both political and economic ‘disempowerment’ leads to voting for the far right and racist violence (see chapter 6). The equivalent argument for the Pakistani Muslim population goes much further than this, suggesting that they are choosing to live in mono-ethnic ghettos, and to isolate themselves on a day-to-day basis: ‘central to this assertion is the claim that people of South Asian origin,

particularly British Muslims, are failing to be active citizens by withdrawing from social and spatial interactions with wider British society' (Phillips, 2006, p. 25).<sup>1</sup>

When we add in 'separate educational arrangements, community and voluntary bodies, employment, places of worship, language, social and cultural networks' (Cantle, 2001, p. 9) we find the familiar anxieties that migrants, this time Pakistani Muslims but previously Jews, Jamaicans, and so on, recreate the culture of their homeland and fail to integrate or assimilate into the culture of those around them (see Modood, 2011; Abbas, 2004). As the rioters were young and brought up in the UK, the 'parallel lives' thesis suggested that Muslim-only schools, Qur'an classes after school, and a home-life with imported television channels and food, led to youth who did not subscribe to the 'values and laws of the nation' (Cantle, 2004, p. 8). A lack of a 'sense of belonging' (Cantle, 2005) to Britain meant that these young people could burn Salman Rushdie's books, riot, join extremist groups or commit acts of 'home grown terrorism'. 'Community cohesion' policies therefore aimed to 'promote interaction between communities' (Cantle, 2005) changing attitudes and values through contact with others, echoing Allport's (1958) 'contact hypothesis' in which social engagement in conditions of equality and common goals was found to decrease prejudice.

However, none of the al-Muhajiroun activists interviewed had lived a 'parallel life', isolated from 'mainstream' British people and culture. Through their education, work and social lives these activists were themselves members of mainstream British life. Furthermore, the presence of Yasir, a white-British convert to Islam, in the city's al-Muhajiroun group was evidence of a street culture that was not limited by ethno-religious identity.

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<sup>1</sup> If a homogenised white population is posited as the mainstream society, it is logically impossible for white working class people to be deemed unintegrated. But what of the white citizen who does not watch television, or similarly take part in 'mainstream' cultural life?

At the 2001 census, when all the al-Muhajiroun activists would have still been at school, only 3.2% of Stoke's population was Muslim. As the Pakistani/Bangladeshi population is younger this figure is higher within a school-age population, but still only 5.5% for children aged 0 to 15 (Simpson & Gavalas, 2005). Even allowing for school-choice based segregation, the small numbers of Muslim children means a Muslim dominated school is impossible. The secondary schools serving Hilltop and Beyond had an ethno-religiously mixed intake. Valley Town High School had a 'high proportion of Asian pupils' in 1998, with ethnic minority children making up around a quarter of the pupils, a figure that rose to nearly half by 2008. Hillside High, where at least one mainstream and two al-Muhajiroun activists were schooled, had a small minority of Asian Muslim pupils comprising 7.3% of its school roll.<sup>2</sup>

Munir, a 'mainstream' activist and social entrepreneur, described Hillside's ethnic relations as being a mixture of conflict *and* cooperation:

There was always these three groups of lads. There was me and my group of lads, who weren't really interested in fights and we were more chasing the girls kind of thing. There was another group of lads who were mainly Asians. There was another group of lads who were mainly white. And all throughout the year, all the way up to fifth year, we always just got along, never any problem. Now on fifth.... in the fifth year, there was this big clash between this Asian group and white group of lads. And the group of lads we were.... I used to hang around with, were a mixed group of black, Asian, white; we were just mates, you know, growing up together... And it was funny. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, these groups of lads would just batter the crap out of each other, you know, lunch times, break times, school times. And

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<sup>2</sup> Data on schools was obtained from archived Ofsted reports.

on Wednesday, they used to walk up [to the Catholic school] together to fight [the pupils from the Catholic school].

(Interview 1)

Yasir, the white convert to Islam and an al-Muhajiroun activist also attended Hillside High, and it was his engagement across ethno-religious lines that led to his activism. He had been ‘involved with the Asian community’ from the age of 13, as he and his group of Asian friends were involved in drug taking and later drug dealing:

I started indulging in drugs, so smoking cannabis, smoking, you know, weed, all different kinds of weed. And then started drinking, you know. Generally, that was my lifestyle, every day, day in day out, drinking, smoking, drinking, smoking. Having one night stands with girls and loads of different stuff, whilst having a girlfriend this was as well, you know what I mean. Obviously cheating behind her back and whatever because I had no loyalties to her. Or to no one else.

(Interview 1)

At this time he was not Muslim and his conversion came after another of this group was imprisoned and returned a practising Muslim, renouncing his past behaviour.

This kind of integration into a particular British way of life that has a ‘delinquent value system’ (Junger-Tas, 2001, p. 22) is feared by some parents. Haseen, another al-Muhajiroun activist, was getting into this kind of trouble when young – ‘Obviously before I wasn’t so good, you know, er I used to do a lot of bad things. I don’t like to say what they were.’ – and at the age of 13 was sent to an Islamic boarding school in the UK:

Well obviously the reason they sent me was because they wanted me to, you know, have a Muslim upbringing. Not a, not a, you know, er, you know they didn't want me to have an upbringing of a, of a, of a, kafir, in other words a non-Muslim. They

don't want to have an upbringing of that, they wanted me to have an upbringing of a Muslim. A Muslim upbringing. A Muslim who submits to Allah, a Muslim who does not drink alcohol, a Muslim who does not take drugs, a Muslim who does not do all these filthy things, who does not fornicate, who does not take part in adultery. Do you understand me?

(Interview 1)

On his return from boarding school, two and a half years later, Haseen found it very difficult fitting in with the local youth lifestyle when he went to a local sixth-form college. He said: 'The people were there were just, it's absolutely ridiculous, because er, they do as they want they smoke, they take drugs, they drink.' While this may be disapproved of by most parents, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, Haseen now found socialising more difficult too:

I didn't find it hard, hard, but I didn't like the environment, that's why I left. I didn't like the environment... obviously doing things I wasn't used to. Free mixing with women, socialising with women.

(Interview 1)

Nasir, again an al-Muhajiroun activist, seemed to have no such trouble. He also went to Hillside high and claimed to have had good relations with staff and other pupils:

...and that time there was er ... you know, we had ... I was a sort of a social ... social person at that time, you know, mixing with all the different types of people and, you know, I still am. You know, there's ... you know, you always have that, er, social side to you... the teachers were always praising me and, er, I had a good relationship... I had a good, er relationship with, er, you know, my form tutor and my head of year.

(Interview 1)



Furthermore, Nasir was a talented sportsman, captaining the school cricket team and also enjoying a short but successful amateur boxing career in which he ‘had a very good relationship’ with his trainer, a respected white and non-Muslim local coach (Interview 1).

Of the six al-Muhajiroun activists I talked to (the sixth, Muhammed declined to be formally interviewed), four were in employment at the time. Abu Q, Muhammed and Nasir were all working in a call centre for a national company and Yasir was temporarily working in a telesales environment due to a downturn in the construction industry. In all of these workplaces the al-Muhajiroun activists worked alongside non-Muslims, and Nasir told me that he was open about his Islamist activities and continued the da’wah (proselytising) at work.

Indeed, as the activities of the al-Muhajiroun group were largely street-based, they would often bump into people they knew through other parts of their life. These seemed mainly to be old friends, especially as some of their contemporaries from school were studying at the university and sixth-form near to the activists’ stall. One conversation with a white-British young adult was finished with ‘you’re being good now’ as Yasir saw his friend to have given up drugs. Other conversations were often gossipy: how such-and-such a person is, or is he out of prison yet. The street culture also involved engagement with local eccentrics: in Hilltop, shouts went out to a middle-aged black man who I believe to be a street drinker and who was known to the activists as ‘the Captain’. Thus, not all the social contact of the activists, even when doing the activism, was wholly characterised by their being members of al-Muhajiroun.

Of the five al-Muhajiroun activists, then, only one had had any time in his life in which contact with the ethno-religious other was not commonplace. All had been to mainstream schools and colleges, except for Haseen’s two years in an Islamic boarding school. Yasir continued to have a close relationship with his non-Muslim mother, although this was

strained by his activism, especially after Yasir's home was raided by counter-terrorism police:

She disagrees with maybe some of the views that I've got, obviously about the democratic system's failing. She's seen that there were... terror raids and stuff like that, which was, we were involved in... and basically, she's obviously worried... Well, er, she disagrees on certain aspects, but she doesn't really indulge in it too much 'cause look, my mum, she isn't a religious person, she doesn't know much about anything, to be honest with you, she doesn't know much about any religion at all.

(Interview 1)

Family, school, work, on the street, and other leisure activities could thus be the context for social lives that included a positive contact with ethno-religious others, and which goes beyond Vertovec's 'civil-integration' that merely comprises 'getting-on with others in the inherently fleeting encounters that comprise city life' (Vertovec, 2007, p. 4). As I will discuss in the next two sections, this social integration can go hand-in-hand with divergence in values: the young al-Muhajiroun activists were not anomic in all counts. Furthermore, the 'empowering' integration into civil society activities and institutions does not necessarily stop people becoming extremists as an examination of the activists' previous 'good works' will show.

### ***'Empowering' Integration: pathways into civil society***

As shown earlier (chapter 2), civil society has a special place in the integration of people into society. Civil society organisations and activities are both a place of contact with others, however defined, in which co-operation and common goals are present *and* a site of

‘community empowerment’ in which people can help themselves and others. Involvement in such activity not only provides a space in which people can get on with each other and build social capital, but also use this social capital to better their lives, reducing the sense of powerlessness that makes extremism attractive.

It is important to note, however, that the integrative capacity of such community activity varies. Even without the spatial divide that is posited by theories of ghettoisation, many civil society organisations arose from anti-racist and identity politics and have a base in particular ethno-religious populations. Such community groups exist to promote the interests of particular groups, whether in policy or fact. Provisions in equality legislation for positive action allow discrimination, as does the exemption for community groups that are providing services or cultural activities for a particular ethnic group. As Back, Keith, Khan, Shukra and Solomos (2009) point out, BME ‘faith groups... become involved in struggles for resources... through the development of cultural associations’ (p. 13). For long-term community activists these organisations eventually create a pathway to activism that crosses ethno-religious divides, but they begin as ethnically divided support and representation. While this may fit with the outlook of an older generation who needed to provide support for themselves against widespread racism, this activism fits less well with young people who have grown up in the less racist era of the 1990s and after. For this reason, it is difficult to compare the activist backgrounds of the older and younger activists.

Mainstream activists Councillor Khan and Iftikhar, the spiritual leader of Valley Town’s main mosque, were in their early 40s and had a long history of community activism and public service. Councillor Khan had arrived in Stoke-on-Trent in the early 90s, moving into Hilltop and ‘immediately integrated within the existing community without too much of a problem’ (Interview 1). Educated and in his 20s Khan was seen by others as a potential community leader and approached to join the board of the local race equality

body. This led to further voluntary work with his estate's residents' association and then in 1997, he was a founder member of a voluntary group that was:

Aimed at trying to bring the Muslim community and get them to be an integral part of the general community and improve relationships with the other communities that were living within the area.

(Interview 1)

Khan was encouraged to stand for election, and became a Labour councillor for Hilltop in 2006. He was quickly propelled into position of power due to his previous community work: 'I was taken in straightaway because of the work I had done in the communities'

(Interview 1)

After a number of short-lived jobs Iftikhar had set himself on the path of being a religious leader. After religious training he worked as an educator, and then as an imam in public sector settings with extra work on 'multi-faith and diversity'. While at Valley Town's mosque he did local government sponsored work, helping to set up an umbrella group for the mainstream mosques that 'united all the clerics in the city [to work] towards greater cohesion and understanding [and] allay any misconceptions about Islam' (Interview 1). He was also instrumental in opening the mosque to organised visits by non-Muslim schoolchildren and did talks in local schools as part of community cohesion work.

Munir, the youngest of the mainstream activists, was not connected to any Islamic organisations, despite his father having worked as an imam in a local mosque. As a teenager he frequented Hilltop Community Centre's youth club, and after the 2001 disturbances he was picked out by a local youth worker as a potential youth leader, leading to Munir's first job employed by the city's race equality body. After this he worked for a mainstream housing association – not one associated with BME residents – as a

neighbourhood warden, patrolling two white estates. He also worked for the city's voluntary sector umbrella body, helping to organise a number of government funded youth projects. By the time of the interview, Munir was a social entrepreneur, running a company that manages music and arts events with an approach that embodies the hybridity and syncretism described by theorists of 'new ethnicities' (Back, 1996).

Asif, one of the al-Muhajiroun activists began with an almost identical career path. He claimed to have been involved in youth work activities from the age of thirteen or fourteen and after A-levels and his law degree, in which he also volunteered for the Citizens' Advice Bureau, he was recruited by the city's race equality body as a detached youth worker. He also did youth work for the local authority and further education colleges. Parallel to this youth work career Asif rediscovered religion at the age of 23 and began his al-Muhajiroun activism around four years later.

Nasir also had a history of community activity in a non-Islamic setting. At his secondary school he organised an event that raised money for a local children's charity, was heavily involved in his local youth club, and as an older teenager he helped to set up a boxing club for local youngsters: 'we just organise[d] events once a week, just to get the youth off the street and to get them into something active, so they can start motivating themselves' (Interview 1). Again, this was prior to Nasir's becoming religious and becoming an Islamist activist.

The differing career paths of older and younger activists suggest, following Michael (2007) a generational change in approaches to activism. Previous generations organised within the 'community', meaning the population with ties back to a specific homeland or within a particular estate, keeping themselves to themselves but having community representation through individual co-option into city-wide structures. Thus, Councillor Khan made his way to representing an electoral ward by first being the chair of a residents' association

and organising a body that aimed to unify the city's Muslims. Khan's approach is a mixture of the 'clientelism' that is typical of first generation migrants – 'support of community leaders is based on their ability to extract concessions and accommodations for Muslim demands' (Choudhury, 2007, p. 19) – *and* working towards wider 'community cohesion' through the engagement of Muslims with non-Muslims in the context of community-based organisations.

The paths of younger activists such as Munir and Asif show a different approach, bypassing community organisations in a way that makes sense in a post-racist environment. Although Munir and Asif were picked out for their youth work posts because they were Asian Muslim, and supposedly more able to engage with Asian Muslim young people, they did not want to be stereotyped into being *merely* a Muslim activist or worker who works with other Muslims. Asif, who was eventually to become an al-Muhajiroun activist described his earlier work:

So that's the kind of thing I got involved in and, plus, I have this ability to be able to be able to communicate with people at all different levels, different backgrounds, different whatever, and I enjoy doing it. So I got involved in, er... in the youth work.

(Interview 1)

Extremist and non-extremist alike, therefore, were integrated in structures that were potentially empowering, and brought these young men into co-operative contact with the ethno-religious other. Of the five al-Muhajiroun activists interviewed, two had a history of civic activism that was decidedly secular. While this activism was certainly a spur for social mobility for Munir, the mainstream activist, this social mobility was blocked for the two extremist activists. As I discuss in the next section, being stereotyped as a Muslim activist or worker, working with only Muslims, limits individuals' opportunities to be a

normal activist or worker and this may contribute to a loss of faith in the extant societal arrangements and the seeking of an alternative.

### ***Criminal Pasts and Blocked Social Mobility***

Wiktorowicz (2005) argues that the ‘risky’ nature of al-Muhajiroun activism, adequately demonstrated by the 2008 arrests and terror raids of two of the interviewed activists, is not irrational but is the result of personal ‘grievances or dissatisfaction’ or wider conditions (p. 206). These conditions ‘prompt a cognitive opening in which the affected individual [becomes] open to alternative belief systems and ways of looking at the world’ (Wiktorowicz, 2005, p. 206). The lives of Stoke-on-Trent’s al-Muhajiroun activists do not contradict this finding, with blocked social mobility, criminal pasts, and experiences of racism being a feature of their accounts of growing up. Indeed, for those with other negative experiences of the justice system, the risks of arrest associated with their activism are not a significant departure from the risks they ran beforehand.

Abu Q, Haseen and Yasir were all involved in crime prior to their becoming activists. Outside of the formal interview Haseen admitted that at 16 and 17 he was ‘leading a bad life, smoking weed, chilling out’. Abu Q did not want to talk about the bad things he had done as a child, but telling me to ‘imagine how a normal youth goes on’ (Interview 1). Yasir, however, was much more forthcoming, telling me about his life before becoming a Muslim:

When I got to about 16, 17, I started selling drugs. I was selling crack cocaine, and was selling, er, heroin as well, and I was selling that for about two, maybe two years...My house got raided a couple of times, my family house where my mum lived and my stepdad, and they weren’t happy at all. But I didn’t care what they

thought, cause like I said, I had no loyalties to no-one. I didn't er, you know, er, there was no limits for me there was no boundaries.

(Interview 1)

Indeed, Yasir's drug dealing followed the activities of his father who 'was basically in and out of jail, so he did a bit of jail here, there and everywhere, you know what I mean, for, you know, because of drugs' (Interview 2).

He then went on to describe how others, all Asian Muslim by birth, in his drug-dealing gang began to reject this way of living after a friend came out of prison a practising Muslim, and Yasir did the same. After converting to Islam, Yasir was looked after by some Hizb ut-Tahrir activists:

They were just, you know, befriended me, looked after me, I needed a house to move into so they got me a house, you know. Because they see me as a new Muslim that needed help to get on my feet, because basically when I first become Muslim obviously I told you my family had a bit of an issue with it initially... But then what they did is they helped me out so they got me a house, they got me some furniture for inside of the house. They got a lot of things, they helped me out in a lot of ways.

(Yasir, Interview 2)

Abu Q had more to say about racism and in particular an incident which seems originally to have been designed to wind up the teachers, in the manner of other working-class boys (Willis, 1977) and increased Abu Q's resistance to authority:

I was fasting that day. That is the only day I fast. Like I wasn't practicing but I, I really wanted to fast this day. I woke up in the morning to fast and I said I'm never, not going to break my fast. No. I said to my teacher no I said to her I'm fasting I



don't want to... We were making cakes or something. She said you have to make it. I said I don't want to you know what I mean bro? I don't want to. Because I'm fasting. She said go to your own country and fast. Go there and do the fasting. I got angry. I got angry. I was an angry kid them days. I started throwing stuff. I got very, very angry. Then the head teacher came and like the senior head came in and they all... I said she said go to my own country. And why didn't they say nothing to her because she was an authority. They didn't believe me. And that stuck to me hard. I said aye up, why they believing her over me? Aren't I a human being too? But they didn't believe me. They called me a liar. I said I ain't a liar. I'm even fasting: how can I lie? You aren't allowed to lie when I'm fasting. This was this statement hurt me a lot. But I found out this wasn't her country. This wasn't the white people's country. This wasn't the brown people. This wasn't nobody's country. This land ain't created by nobody. It's created by God.

(Interview 1)

Unlike the other al-Muhajiroun activists, Asif and Nasir had done well in their education and should have been more socially mobile than others of their background.

Nasir's *curriculum vitae* should have made him attractive to employers: as well as the community activity described above he was also his school's cricket captain. When he went to university he continued to be involved in sports. However, his original choice of university and degree was changed when his father had a heart attack, and Nasir felt he should attend a more local university. Instead of the vocational science course he had hoped to do, he did a more traditional science degree but this did not lead to a job in science – he had interviews with big companies in the south of England but no offers – and at the time of interview Nasir was working in a call centre.

Asif also had the potential for social mobility. As a teenager he had a 'rebel phase' in which he had travelled around north-west England, working and staying in hotels. He then returned to do A-levels and a Law degree at a local university. However, like Abu Q he wanted to challenge the authority of those teaching him:

I disagreed with the assignment on a fundamental point and I was told, well no, you can't... you're not really supposed to disagree with it at that point. You know, you're supposed to disagree from this point beyond. And there's a couple of issues, you know, a couple of times when I went to them and I said, "Look, I can... I can provide a very academic argument, and I'm talking scholarly arguments, so we're not just talking, like... I'm not just talking opinion. I'm talking a scholarly argument, but it's... it's viewpoints of different people. And they said, "No, no, no, we can only accept people whose books we've written as part... as part of the necessary reading." And I said, "Well, I don't believe that's education. I believe that's training. And you want me to have a certain viewpoint about that and that's wrong."

(Interview 1)

This led to him receiving a lower grade for his degree than otherwise. Asif's sense of social justice also led him to challenge elsewhere. While working for the race equality body he challenged a council officer after a community cohesion event where there was no halal food provided. Asif also complained about a visit from his MP, canvassing for the election, in which the MP began by saying what he would do for his Muslim constituents although Asif did not consider himself to be a Muslim. However, his most serious challenge to authority led to him spending time in prison. In 2005, Asif witnessed an incident in which a white police officer was alleged to have hit a young Asian man with a baton, and conversely the police alleged they were racially abused. In a subsequent trial he

was called as a defence witness for the young Asian man, but was then prosecuted for intimidating the jury:

...as they walked past they heard me say the words ‘not guilty’ and cause they’d heard me say the words ‘what’s the verdict? Not guilty’ they felt intimidated, and hence I was guilty of intimidating the jury.

(Interview 1)

At the time of interview Asif had only recently been released from prison, and although he described himself as a youth worker, he was not working.

Wiktorowicz (2005) found that ‘most [al-Muhajiroun] activists are university students or recent college graduates with aspirations of upward mobility... [believing] that they face a discriminatory system that prevents them from realizing their potential’ (p. 91). While this rang true, and the story told by Nasir contains little for which he can personally be blamed, the majority of these activists were challenging authority or *the authorities* prior to their Islamist activism. The interplay between individual demands – for the right to not take part in a home economics class, to halal food – or the street behaviour of Abu Q and Yasir and the authorities’ response to this sets them up on a path to confrontation.

Indeed, it is useful to compare the al-Muhajiroun activists’ descriptions of suffering with that of Munir, the social entrepreneur. As one of ‘only two Bengali lads, Bangladeshi lads’ he was in ‘a mixed group of black, Asian, white’ (Interview 1) but had problems with the white and Pakistani groups. He was also stabbed in the arm in one incident at the school due to mistaken identity, but did not tell me if the perpetrator was white or Asian: he did not racialise this incident. While he was working in NorthSide, a very white suburban estate, as a community warden he was racially abused on more than one occasion:

In NorthSide I got glass bottled there three times... I remember working with a guy who was a community warden, he was an Asian guy who had somebody pull a knife at him. Um, that was down because he was Asian and walking through the NorthSide area.

(Interview 2)

Later, on Munir's first day in his youth work job he was also an early victim of the Islamophobia arising from the terrorist attacks of 2001:

Actually, the first I heard about 9/11 without realising I heard about it, was when I got off the bus: I was walking through Hanley and somebody come out of a flat. And, um, this thing was along the lines 'I bet it was your dad who did it', and I didn't think anything of it I was thought he was just a pisshead walking over to the pub.

(Interview 2)

These experiences, however, had not led Munir to anger and extremist politics. As I will discuss in the next chapter, many of Munir's opinions about societal Islamophobia, the war on terror, and the state's relationship to Muslims were similar to those expressed by the al-Muhajiroun activists. However, his success as a social entrepreneur meant that he felt his voice was heard:

I mean I suppose [my work] also challenges some of the government initiatives. I was quite heavily involved in challenging their extremism pathfinder, um which sort of.... it took a long time but it was something that was quite close to my heart. Um you know, I just felt the government was demonising Muslim communities, you know, you're setting up a project just to challenge um, what to call it,

extremism in the Muslim community... and to be honest, I think the LSP and city council kind of understand where we were coming from.

(Interview 1)

Compared to Munir, then, those who became al-Muhajiroun activists gave me stories of their lives that emphasised the setbacks they had suffered. Munir, the mainstream activist, mentioned that ‘there’s a lot of racist views out there’ (Interview 2) as merely a matter of fact, and then talked of his dealings with BNP councillors and his day-to-day work challenging the racism of young people in particular. The extremist activists, however, dwelled more on stories of injustice, and those in which people of authority – teachers, lecturers, and police officers – were cast as the perpetrator.

This difference raises questions about what these young people are supposed to integrate into, and for what purpose. Many first generation migrants remained integrated into cohesive groups based on ties to place, language and culture of their homeland, and allowed community leaders to be their representatives to British power structures. Communal establishments such as the mosque were places that sustained this integration. As hoped for by politicians of all sides, the children of such migrants integrated into British society and the British way of life through schooling, work, and on the street, but this has led to a rejection of those communal establishments and structures. As one of Stoke’s Muslim councillors put it: ‘The young, they seem to be a community of their own and really they do live their own parallel life with the community’ (Michael, 2007, p. 178).

What these young people integrate into is not always the ‘upstanding’ and empowered community that will enable them to fully participate in society. In the American context, Portes, Fernández-Kelly, and Haller (2005) note that ‘it makes a great deal of difference whether they [assimilate] by joining the mainstream middle class or the marginalized, and largely racialized, population at the bottom’. In Stoke-on-Trent, with the second smallest

proportion of middle-class people of any local authority in England and Wales,<sup>3</sup> the integration that would assist social mobility – perhaps bridging social capital to people with professional jobs – is not possible. The young Pakistani Muslims of Stoke-on-Trent are more likely to integrate into white working-class society, thus Abu Q's challenging of the teacher mirrors the behaviour of white working class boys. Haseen's parents sent him away to boarding school as he was beginning to integrate too much into the lifestyle of a certain segment of local youths.

Thus the integration of young Pakistani Muslim men is not accompanied by empowerment or social mobility. 'While growing up in a British system that preaches tolerance and multiculturalism, they experience both racial and religious discrimination' (Wiktorowicz, 2005, p. 206). This, in Jock Young's words, is 'citizenship thwarted' (Young, 2003b), where the descendents of migrants come to believe they have full and equal citizenship as they were born here but find that, when push comes to shove, that they do not.

Talking of places like Bradford and Burnley, Young argues that any possibility of 'genuine cultural diversity', qua new ethnicities, is stymied by 'segregated housing policies, single faith schools, backward looking community leaders and, above all, the glib allocation of people to fixed ethnic categories' (Young, 2003b, pp. 459-460). Stoke has so few Asian Muslims that the epithet of 'ethnic ghetto' would be impossible to justify. However, the recruitment of Asian youth workers for Asian youth, and the approach of the local MP to Asif, certainly is based in fixed categories.

For Nasir and Asif, the very real chance of social mobility never came to pass: their university degrees have left them in either unskilled jobs or unemployed. Prior to their Islamist activism, Abu Q, Asif, and Haseen all challenged the authority of teachers, parents, lecturers, and police officers and lost. Perhaps it is a step too far to see this as

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<sup>3</sup> Analysis of neighbourhood statistics, using social grades AB as a percentage of total population.

political citizenship thwarted. However, these young people are given, in our liberal democracy, the idea that challenges to authority, including debate and protest, are integral to a healthy polity. If their challenges are dealt with more harshly than those of their white counterparts – as was also true in the case of the 2001 disturbances where longer than expected prison sentences were used to ‘teach these communities a lesson in law and order’ (Bagguley & Hussain, 2008, p. 127) – then this is surely citizenship thwarted, a theme I will return to in chapter 8.

### ***Conclusions: oppositional integration?***

I haven't got no friends who are not Muslim. As Muslims we do not befriend, we always treat them right, but we do not befriend non-Muslims, so we won't, basically I've never been rude to you, I've always been polite to you, but I'd never ever, ever, ever put my life on the line for you.

(Yasir, Interview 2)

And I don't integrate into no society. Why? Because I follow... I've got my own values and you've got your own values.

(Abu Q, Interview 1)

I have argued here that the ‘parallel lives’ thesis, the idea that those attracted to extremist ideas and actions have grown up in ethnically divided neighbourhoods that are isolated from the rest of society, does not explain the paths of the al-Muhajiroun activists. Neither these activists, nor the home-grown terrorists that carried out the London bombs, came from:

Muslim communities [that] are filled with comparatively poor, disenfranchised permanent residents, with no hope of naturalization for themselves or their children (as opposed to, say, the more integrated Muslim experience in the United States).

(Forest, 2006)

These explanations ought to be seen at one remove: it is through the rejection of first generation migrants' enclave communities that the children of migrants are pushing to be treated the same as their classmates. Their experiences of not being treated the same lead to 'a strong, learnt sense of economic, political and social citizenship thwarted' (Young, 2003b, p. 460).

In some measures of integration, these young men were more integrated than the older mainstream activists. They had grown up without a great deal of religiosity: some even described their home lives or previous lives as pretty much secular. They had attended ordinary schools, with the exception of Haseen's two years at boarding school, and had social lives that were not limited to engagement with Muslims. They were certainly socially integrated with those, Muslim and non-Muslim, around them.

However, this particular social integration is not necessarily helpful in terms of social capital or empowerment. Integrating into one of the most working-class cities in England, with few opportunities for any young people, does not help social mobility. Integrating into the normal behaviour of teenage boys at failing secondary schools meant challenging teachers, skipping school, and taking drugs, 'this part of the story [being] eerily reminiscent of Paul Willis' (1977) endogenous account of how 'working-class kids get working-class jobs' ' (Joppke, 2009, p. 460).

Even the 2001 disturbances can be seen in this light. Although the sparks for the 'riots' in Bradford and Stoke were far-right mobilisations or rumours of such action, the violence



directed at the police was also a response to continuing conflicts with police. Not only did these events mirror the 1980s riots in Brixton and elsewhere (Young, 2003b), but also other disturbances in Blackbird Leys in Oxford and the West End of Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the 1990s, which were never analysed in racial terms as the rioters were white and working class. The 2001 rioters' actions may demonstrate 'the degree of cultural assimilation by second generation Muslims young men... into a masculine culture that valorises violence' (Pilkington, 2008) and not a lack of integration.

Furthermore, Munir, the mainstream social entrepreneur, mentioned the 2001 'riot' in Cobridge as another instance of white/Asian integration that was stereotyped as a racial divide. He remembered the local newspaper describing the rioters as '100 Hardcore Asian Thugs' (Interview 2), despite the accompanying photo showing a mixed group of teenagers. This is likely to be this photo of a small group of Asian and white teenagers, with one of the Asian teenagers throwing a brick at a police line (see below):

[Third party copyright material removed: this front page photo from the Sentinel, 14 July 2001 was copied from microfilm in Newcastle-under-Lyme library.]

Source: Sentinel, 14 July 2001, p.1.

Institutional racism stops this social integration becoming full economic and political integration. As Tahir Abbas (2007) puts it, these young people ‘have been positively disposed towards integration but, as a result of ongoing racism, they experience a sense of dislocation and alienation, perceived or real, which negatively affects their outlook’ (p. 291). To racism I add the lack of opportunity that comes with growing up in a place like Stoke.

Furthermore, the religious seeking that led these young people to extremist activism is itself evidence of the integration of ‘western’ values and culture. Despite the Islamists’ rejection of individualism, it is their individualism, in their rejection of the mainstream Islamic provision and desire to find a ‘correct’ ideology without guidance, which brings them to al-Muhajiroun:

I looked into the Bible. I looked into like the Torah. Like I researched on the Internet what’s Judaism... Rastafari.

(Abu Q, Interview 1)

This got me started to study, not just Islam at the time, but look at various different ideologies and religions, including Judaism, Christianity, ideologically, looking at Marxism and socialism and stuff like this.

(Asif, interview 1)

These young men are not conforming to a long-standing communal or Pakistani Islam or Islamism, but are rebelling against that conformity according to the norms of individualism: ‘contemporary fundamentalism is very much a child of modern plural societies and the celebration of ‘difference’ and ‘authenticity’ (Malik, 2009b).

Indeed, some of the articulations of their rejection of integration carried evidence of such integration. Abu Q told me ‘I have to reject democracy. I have to reject communism. I

have to reject socialism. I have to reject every ism and schism on the face of this earth.’ (Interview 1), in an almost word for word echo of Rastafarian inspired reggae tracks.<sup>4</sup> On another occasion the Islamists’ argument that music is forbidden did not stop Asif recognising the latest Lily Allen song when it was played on the radio in the café we were sat in. Their belief that mainstream media is an instrument of the government was not enough to deter Abu Q from watching Ross Kemp’s *Gangs* on Sky television, as he was to compare my research with Kemp’s ‘documentaries from various gangster hotspots around the globe’ (Stubbs, 2009).

Perhaps, then, it is necessary to know what one is rejecting before rejection, and to continue to take an interest so that one knows it is right to continue rejection.<sup>5</sup> The al-Muhajiroun activists were socially integrated, but this has developed into an oppositional style of integration. The claim to not have non-Muslim friends does not mean that they are not friendly with non-Muslims, including in the case of Yasir members of his family. On the one hand an activist told me that in his vision of the sharia state, league football would be banned as it encourages nationalism, and yet another activist told me that he still supported Manchester United, and another said ‘I’m not tied down to any specific football team. The best players are obviously the best players’ (Asif, Interview 1). It is in the realm of values and worldview where these activists differ from mainstream Muslims and wider society. Negative attitudes towards the state and authority come not from a lack of contact with authority, but from contact where the young person challenged and was knocked back.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, ‘me can’t stand the ism and schism’ (I Roy, 1978) and ‘some a dem want socialism, some a dem want capitalism, some a dem want communism, they all want all kind of ism’ (Mundell, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> This has parallels with the development of Sayyid Qutb’s Islamist ideology. Qutb, one of the key figures of radical Islamism spent a number of years in the United States. He was sent by the Egyptian government, his employer, which may have hoped that such contact would make him favourable to Western ideas. However, he found the US to be decadent and racist, supporting his anti-Westernism (Calvert, 2010).

Talking of Islamist terrorists, Abbas (2007) believes that ‘what these sets of people share in common are limited opportunities to engage with others in *particular* spheres, a lack of a sense of belonging and exclusion from mainstream politics.’ (p. 296, my emphasis). In other spheres there may be a great deal of integration: for the al-Muhajiroun activists of Stoke-on-Trent a lack of integration through blocked social mobility or a battle with authority is behind the exclusion.

## 5: Religion and politics: everyday (responses to) radical Islamist activism

I was leafleted outside [the main] mosque on Friday 13th. It was a fairly amateur leaflet, B&W photocopy, for an event on the Khilafah at Hilltop Community Centre. Obviously the Khilafah theme made me think it could be HT, but I was prepared for it to be a fairly mainstream organisation too. The leafleters were young w. Palestinian solidarity scarves,<sup>1</sup> so I guessed they'd be relatively angry young men... people who've been on the marches etc. but it could still be MAB or Respect.

Anyway, I arrived a little late and had to change my four-month-old's nappy first. I went in my usual entrance and met a couple of young women in headscarves (no burkas here, despite the media saying that Anjem Choudary says all women should wear burkas) and they helped me sort it out. When I showed the flier they went to help immediately, and were doing a 'isn't she cute face' and then pointed me to the 'Brothers entrance' round the back. When I walked in with my daughter I realised this was better than I thought. I recognised two of the people on stage. One I couldn't remember where from: it was someone who I'd seen on a video [talking about] police raids in July 2008. The other was Anjem Chaudary, who was also on the front page of *The Sunday Times* that day as [he is] 'now considered by many politicians and religious leaders as the most dangerous Islamist extremist in Britain'.<sup>2</sup> Not that I knew this at the time!

(Fieldwork notes made 16 March 2009, the day after the meeting)

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<sup>1</sup> Here I refer to the Islamists use of the keffiyeh, the scarf associated with Palestinian nationalism.

<sup>2</sup> 'Hate cleric leads jihad cash appeal' (Taher & Foggo, 2009, p. 309)

## ***Introduction***

This chapter moves the discussion on from the backgrounds of the individual activists in Hilltop and Beyond to how people engaged with each other across what are assumed to be deep ideological divides. When these divides are played out in international and national politics and media-led public debate the protagonists assert the existence of two camps on opposing sides: internationally the war on terror is characterized as a ‘clash of civilizations’ and nationally the UK’s response to Islamism has been predicated on a characterization of Muslim groups and individuals as either ‘moderate’ or ‘extremist’ (Greater London Authority, 2007, p. xviii), with al-Muhajiroun activists taking centre-stage as the most prominent extremists prior to their proscription as a terrorist organisation (Home Office, 2010). Extremists are defined as opposed to the British values of democracy, human rights, tolerance, and free speech (Smith, 2008), while moderates are for such values.

The chapter begins with a discussion of where this divide between moderates and extremists was placed during the period of the research. This is a movable divide, with Huntington’s ‘clash of civilisations’ (Huntington, 1996) placing it between Muslims and the West – conceptually followed by extremist Islamists themselves and by neo-conservative think-tanks – and the UK government attempting to produce an objective definition based on particular ideologies. I then move on to discuss what the al-Muhajiroun activists did in the public spaces in which I accompanied them, and compare this to mainstream Muslim and non-Muslim activism. This is followed by sections on attitudes to the ‘other’ and anti-Western politics, again comparing al-Muhajiroun activists’ attitudes with wider currents. The chapter is completed with sections on the relationship of the al-Muhajiroun activists and the local state and the anti-political sentiment that perhaps sets them apart.

At the local level, then, this research found that individuals on opposing sides of any ideological divide were not wholly defined by this opposition. I use data generated in both the biographical interviews with extremists and non-extremists and participant observation to illustrate how engagement across the divide was conducted. Through an examination of the day-to-day al-Muhajiroun activism – leafleting, public meetings, and proselytizing – I demonstrate that much of the time there was a level of agreement between extremist activists and their audience, both Muslim and non-Muslim. Furthermore, there was often an absence of the kind of conversation that would necessitate the ‘civil challenge’: instead conversations were within the realms of ‘normal’ politics, and conducted with civility, even if the Islamists’ proposed policy prescriptions were beyond the pale. Finally, I find that the anti-establishment or anti-political themes are shared, to an extent, by extremists and non-extremists alike. Here the response of the state to extremism takes centre stage, as this weighs heavily on the Muslim ‘community’ as a whole: although it is the al-Muhajiroun activists that are arrested, the younger mainstream activist also felt part of a ‘suspect community’ (Pantazis & Pemberton, 2009; Hillyard, 1993).

### ***Al-Muhajiroun and the ‘clash of civilizations’***

Unlike the British National Party (see chapter 7), al-Muhajiroun have never been engaged in either a modernisation process to make them more electable, nor have the group’s activists been involved in ‘normal’ community politics. Throughout the period from the group’s formation in 1996 to their proscription in January 2010, their main activities have been demonstrations, conferences and street proselytising (Wiktorowicz, 2005). Instead, it is the state’s response that has changed in the years since the group formed, informed by Islamist terrorist incidents and the subsequent ‘war on terror’. Omar Bakri Mohammed, the

group's founder, was originally seen as 'little more than a loudmouth by parts of the British media and the intelligence services... more as an irritant than a threat' (Fielding, 2005). Like the leadership of the BNP, al-Muhajiroun activists were subject to ad hoc scrutiny and prosecutions for inflammatory statements, but alleged connections to terrorism were not strong enough to bring prosecutions. In January 2010, shortly after my fieldwork was completed, the group was proscribed – 'outlawed in the UK' for 'glorifying terrorism' – the only group to be banned under new laws introduced in 2006 (Home Office, 2010).

Leaving aside the reporting of radical Islamism overseas, it was the 1989 'Rushdie affair' that first brought Muslims and radical Islamism full square into the UK's public consciousness. News coverage of Bradford's Muslims burning copies of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* 'seemed to expose the chasm between so-called Western 'values' and Islamic ones' (Werbner, 2000, p. 309):

The Rushdie affair represented a pivotal moment in the political self-assertion of British Muslim communities and the end of the homogenizing and now politically irrelevant 'British Asian' identity that had persisted throughout the 1970s and 1980s. This was a moment at which Muslim 'cultural difference' became the focus of an array of new questions about the possibility of integration and indeed—with the support offered for the Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa against Rushdie—the very 'Britishness' of British Muslims.

(Brighton, 2007, p. 7)

This politicising of Muslims *qua* Muslims led to the formation and reconfiguration of Britain's Islamist organisations, defined here as groupings which act for Muslims with an Islamic-inspired politics. These were formed by both bottom-up and top-down forces: ordinary Muslims were asserting themselves as Muslims *and* government wanted 'an



umbrella organisation for British Islam' (Bright, 2006, p. 11) to do business with. At the same time, Kenan Malik argues, policies of multiculturalism provided the space for the growth of radical Islamism:

The abandonment by leftwing organisations of the politics of universalism in favour of ethnic particularism, and the wider shift from the politics of ideology to the politics of identity, pushed many young, secular Asians towards Islamism as an alternative worldview... Secular Muslims came to be seen as betraying their culture (they belonged to the 'white left') while radical Islam became not just more acceptable but, to many, more authentic.

(Malik, 2008)

In the post-9/11 climate, the whole spectrum of Islamist political mobilisations, including the Muslim Council of Britain (founded 1997), Islamic Society of Britain (1990), Muslim Association of Britain (1997), and the Muslim Public Affairs Committee (2000), have sometimes been declared beyond the pale. Right-wing commentators such as Melanie Philips and the self-declared neo-conservative Douglas Murray have argued that all Islamist politics is extremist, and pamphlets from Policy Exchange, a right-wing think tank, have described government relationships with the MCB as 'flirtation with radical Islamism' (Bright, 2006) and a terrorism policy 'mistake' (Maher & Frampton, 2009).

Unlike this analysis, based on Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' between Western and Islamic cultures (Huntington, 1996), UK policy at the time of the fieldwork aimed to divide Islamist political movements into moderates and extremists. The 'participationist' (McRoy, 2006) MCB and MAB have worked with government via the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board. Al-Muhajiroun, alongside other 'rejectionist' (McRoy, 2006) groups Supporters of Sharee'ah (SOS) and Hizb ut-Tahrir, was thus positioned as extremist.

Prior to 2005, the government dealt with al-Muhajiroun in a similar fashion to other extremist groups such as the National Front and BNP by prosecuting individual members when they broke particular laws. Omar Bakri Mohammed was previously arrested while leader of Hizb ut-Tahrir for suggesting on the eve of the first Gulf War that Prime Minister John Major 'could be assassinated if he went to Saudi Arabia' (Wiktorowicz, 2005, p. 9). Al-Muhajiroun was formed after he was dismissed from Hizb ut-Tahrir for such overt activism, and Bakri continued his controversialist methods. He endorsed al-Qaeda's 1998 embassy bombings (Norton-Taylor, 1998) and later published an open letter to Osama bin Laden saying 'May Allah protect you and grant you victory' (Macaskill & Rufford, 1999). In the same period Anjem Choudary said 'we will support the Jihad and from these shores' in response to proposals to deport Islamists (Jones, 1998), and was also described as 'a key recruiter for the military wing of bin Laden's International Islamic Front' (Associated Press, 1999). 'After September 11 al-Muhajiroun became a central focus in debates about political expression and national security... because of their past and current support for violence' (Wiktorowicz, 2005, p. 7). As the group walked a fine line between glorifying and encouraging violence they were dealt with through ad hoc warnings and prosecutions for offences such as incitement to racial hatred and organising protests without notifying the police (BBC), and police raids on Bakri and Choudary's homes (McRoy, 2006, p. 206). Most seriously, four members of the group involved in a protest against the Jyllands-Posten cartoons in 2006 received between four and six years' imprisonment for incitement offences, including soliciting murder, after waving placards with the words 'Annihilate those who insult Islam' (Dodd, 2006).

After the London bombs of 2005, Tony Blair announced that al-Muhajiroun, along with Hizb ut-Tahrir, would be added to the list of proscribed terrorist organisations. A new Terrorism Act in 2006 widened the definition of terrorism to include statements indirectly

encouraging acts by ‘glorif[ying] the commission or preparation (whether in the past, in the future or generally) of such acts or offences’. At this time al-Muhajiroun was operating under the names ‘the Saved Sect’ and ‘al-Ghurabaa’, and both were banned for disseminating materials that glorified terrorism. Omar Bakri himself was by now living in Lebanon after being refused re-entry into the UK, ‘having been deemed a threat to national security’ (Horgan, 2009, p. 120). Anjem Choudary was therefore the de facto leader of the group, operating under the banners of *Ahlu Sunnah wal Jamaah*<sup>3</sup> and Islam4UK during the period of the research.

It is important to note that changes in the law or government policy have resulted in changes to the group’s activities. At first, when the UK government was less concerned with overseas Islamist terrorism the group was ‘calling British Muslims to go to Bosnia and Kosovo’ (Horgan, 2009, p. 120). ‘He has publicly declared his support for Osama Bin Laden’ but condemned the events of 9/11 (Horgan, 2009, p. 119): his concept of the ‘covenant of security’ means that he did not encourage people to commit violent acts in the UK (Raymond, 2010, p. 7). The organisation and its members appeared to want to stay within the law, while continuing to campaign for their stated goals: in November 2005 ‘[Prime Minister] Blair... made clear that "successor organisations" to al-Muhajiroun would be looked at but the language used by the group's ex-leadership today was markedly more measured than in the past’ (Allen, 2005). After the 2006 Terrorism Act outlawed ‘glorification’, Anjem Choudary said 'we will have to choose our words a little bit more carefully' ("Scuffles as extremist Muslim group orders men and women to be segregated at public meeting," 2009). Thus, group names and particular actions were outlawed, but those involved regrouped to continue other activities that remained legal.

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<sup>3</sup> This translates as ‘people of the Sunnah and the community’, and can be used to refer to Sunni Islam, but here is claimed by the al-Muhajiroun group.

Without this legal distinction between normal politics and violence, the divide between extremism and moderates has been made by reference to ideological incompatibility. Like other legal extremisms, then, both the al-Muhajiroun spokespeople and their opponents have postulated a deep divide between British values and those of the radical Islamists. Home Secretary Jacqui Smith defined such extremists in November 2008:

As we have rolled out the Prevent strategy and become more effective in challenging extremist ideologies, we have seen a greater challenge from extremist groups who are careful to avoid promoting violence. Instead they cynically skirt the fringes of laws that rightly defend free speech to promote hate-filled ideologies. They may not explicitly promote violence, but they can create a climate of fear and distrust where violence becomes more likely. These are the groups that fail to speak out and condemn violence when any reasonable person would be outraged.

(Smith, 2008)

[These] people may not have broken the law, but nevertheless act in a way that undermines our belief in this country in democracy, in human rights, in tolerance, in free speech.

(Jacqui Smith on BBC Radio 4's Today Programme, quoted in Percival, 2009)

Extremists are here defined as those not sharing those values that are 'shared values', which are endorsed by everyone else. However, more specific definitions of these hate-filled ideologies and shared values were less forthcoming. Prior to these speeches *The Guardian* reported on a leaked draft of guidance that suggested:

People would be considered as extremists if:

- They advocate a caliphate, a pan-Islamic state encompassing many countries.
- They promote Sharia law.

- They believe in jihad, or armed resistance, anywhere in the world. This would include armed resistance by Palestinians against the Israeli military.
  - They argue that Islam bans homosexuality and that it is a sin against Allah.
  - They fail to condemn the killing of British soldiers in Iraq or Afghanistan
- (Dodd, 2009)

However, when the counter-terrorism strategy was published the repeated mention of ‘shared values’ and ‘the ideology behind violent extremism’ was not accompanied by definitions beyond that of associating al-Qaeda with the Caliphate and sharia (Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for the Home Department, 2009).<sup>4</sup>

Conversely, the rhetoric of al-Muhajiroun places the ‘shared values’ as being beyond the pale. The group’s ‘stated aim is to overthrow the British government, without using violence, and to establish an Islamic state in the UK based on Shariah law.’ (Raymond, 2010, p. 8). It campaigns against democracy, describing it as ‘man-made law’ and seeing it as being at the root of evils such as homosexuality, adultery, drug and alcohol use, rape and paedophilia:

Whether we like it or not, there are two camps in the world today. A camp which believes that sovereignty and supremacy belongs to man. At the head of that is Barack Obama. And the other camp believes that sovereignty and supremacy belongs to God, and at the head of that is Sheikh Osama bin Laden.

(Anjem Choudary speaking on CNN, 29 October 2010)

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<sup>4</sup> By the time of writing the Cameron government had moved the parameters of this divide by talking of ‘muscular liberalism’ and saying ‘the state must confront, and not consort with, the non-violent Muslim groups that are ambiguous about British values such as equality between sexes, democracy and integration.’ (Wintour, 2011)

The global ‘clash of civilisations’ is then recreated internally between radical Islamist and the rest of the British population. Unlike the ‘war on terror’, however, al-Muhajiroun’s ‘clash’ comes through leafleting, street stalls, and demonstrations.

### ***Outside the mosque***

My first conscious engagement with Stoke’s al-Muhajiroun activists was being handed a leaflet outside Valley Town mosque. The activists did this ‘*Jum’ah*<sup>5</sup> distro’ when they had a public meeting to advertise, and occasionally on other Fridays but not as often as they professed to do. This was where they had the best chance to promote their activities to practising Muslims, but they had little success. Their attention was not welcomed by the mosque’s leaders, and few of the mosque-goers engaged with them. On the one occasion I observed a sustained interest it was clear that the mosque-goer was not going to be attending any of the activists’ meetings.

Valley Town mosque was well attended: around three to four hundred men turn up each week for the Friday prayers and khutbah (sermon), and latecomers either squeezed into spaces in the main hall, or took a space in the overspill hall where they heard the prayers and sermon via the PA, but could not see the speaker. The vast majority of worshipers would be categorised as British Pakistani in the census, although there were a few African Muslims too. The old and frail would arrive early, some having chairs available, and those entering got progressively younger as those in their 20s and 30s would rush in late from work. As well as myself visiting as a non-Muslim, the commander of Valley Town policing unit also visited a couple of times when I was there, having a guided tour of the

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<sup>5</sup> Friday prayers.

mosque and a meeting with the Imam. The mosque also received visits from local school children in order to ‘break down barriers’ (Iftikhar, Interview 2).

This mosque was also the space of the local Muslim establishment. After most of the congregation had left the Imam, the mosque committee, and other leadership figures including local councillors and community activists would stay behind to talk business. While this happened, the al-Muhajiroun activists sent to this mosque – one described the prayers as ‘a bit weird’ after the *hadra dhikr*<sup>6</sup> that he had not encountered before – went outside and began giving leaflets out. Two young men, one wearing a similar shalwar kameez as the other mosque-goers, the other in dark trousers and a dark hooded top, but both with the addition of the *keffiyeh*,<sup>7</sup> a not-so-subtle indicator of their radicalism, handed out the leaflets and told people the time and place of the next meeting. Iftikhar, the mosque’s imam did not like the fact that the al-Muhajiroun activists leafleted outside, and felt the government was failing to tackle them:

They’ve got a right... members of the public, freedom of speech, freedom to distribute. They’re trying their best to promote the ideology and work on vulnerable people and Muslims especially. But, you know, when we say we’ve got ... we’re tackling this, we’re tackling that, we’re tackling this, they’re tackling it up in the air somewhere because on the street nothing’s happening, yeah. It’s all make a policy, make yourself look pretty, do this, get a pat on the back, pat each other and the world’s still falling to bits around you. It reminds me of the Carry On film, ‘Up the Khyber’ you remember it.

(Interview 2)

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<sup>6</sup> An addition to normal Friday prayers that is part of Sufi practice, dhikr being the chanting of the names of god while swaying side to side.

<sup>7</sup> See note 1.

At the same time however, he was himself ignorant of, or at least simplifying, who and what was going on in the wider community. In the same part of the interview Iftikhar complained about a small mosque allied to Salafi Publications and related this to ‘little raids here and there and surveillance’, despite the fact that the Salafi mosque had recently organized a meeting to denounce those who were being raided and surveilled, as extremists.

This ignorance or simplification, in which everyone is divided into moderates or extremists and divided no further, is possible due to a lack of transparency. Just as the government did not name particular groups as being the target of the anti-extremism rhetoric, so the Salafis did not name any particular group, and much of the time the al-Muhajiroun activists did not introduce themselves as a particular group. Working out where to draw the line between extremists and the rest of society is a political process, especially when those doing the naming rely on the vague concept of ‘shared values’. Without clarity and consensus as to which groups or ideas are constituent of extremism, people know that extremists are ‘out there’ but not how to identify them.

### ***Da’wah***

Unlike the elected BNP members, or Hizb ut-Tahrir activists embedded into local service provision, the al-Muhajiroun activists were not invited to community activities run in their neighbourhoods or the city: they are in no way engaged with as ‘community representatives’. However, they spent many hours each week engaging with the general public on street corner da’wah (proselytising) stalls, bringing them into contact with the general public, police and council officials. Their professed belief that it is an obligation to spread Islam publicly, and that this is necessary for an Islamic state to arise, means they are



out on the street up to five days a week working to ‘enjoin the good and forbid the evil’ (Wiktorowicz, 2005). Although they set up their stall in places that could be stereotyped as ‘Asian areas’, excepting their Saturday stall in the city centre, these areas are not majority Asian Muslim as described earlier in chapter 4. This activity, along with the leafleting, meant the al-Muhajiroun activists were engaging with a wide variety of people, with a majority being non-Muslim.

Usually manned by two or three young men, the stall was a fold up trestle table draped with a black flag with the Arabic *shahada*<sup>8</sup> written in white. On the top they had leaflets and CDs, most of which were badged Islam4UK, and covering a range of topics for which they believed they had the correct Islamic answer. The leaflets were in plastic wallets, so the whole thing could be folded up and taken away quickly, but this was not deemed adequate protection from the elements so that rain or strong wind usually meant that the stall would not happen: ‘the leaflets would be blown away and get soggy’.

For non-Muslims, then, the activists had a number of leaflets designed to persuade people that Islam is the only correct religion for the population. For those of no religion the activists had leaflets that aimed to persuade that there must have been a creator (*By Chance?*) or that the Quran contains scientific facts that could only have been revealed by a creator (*An introduction to Islam*). For those of other religions they had leaflets titled *What is your purpose in life?*, *Jesus is Alive*, *Why Hindu’s should embrace Islam* and *Why should I bother finding out about Islam?*. These leaflets argue that people of other religions are worshipping the wrong god or gods. All leaflets were in English and were available at the stall, but the activists judged which leaflets to give to each person who passed: ‘it’s different for Muslims and non-Muslims and depends on the level of knowledge’.

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<sup>8</sup> The declaration of belief in God and Muhammed.

For Muslims, and those who took an interest in the group's proposed programme, they had a number of leaflets on how the world would change for the better with sharia law. Leaflets on education, welfare, the environment and prisons showed how taxes would be fairer, education would be free and crime and litter would be eliminated in their vision of the Islamic state. One, comparing 'the British legal system vs Shari'ah' addressed mugging, burglary and rape and the much harsher punishments that sharia would bring. Finally, they had leaflets that were aimed more squarely at practicing Muslims, arguing that voting is a crime as it gives power to 'the rule of man', and promoting 'modest dress' for women.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, many of these leaflets were destined not to be read. Most people walked by without taking anything, and some took a leaflet, saw what it was and discarded it. However, once or twice each hour a member of the public would stop and talk to the activists. While one activist may be continuing to shout out that 'one day will come when Islamic state will rule the world' (Abu Q, Interview 1) and other very general pronouncements on the superiority of Islam, another activist would be having a civil conversation about Islam with a pedestrian. Like the leaflets these conversations made a lot of all the problems of the world, especially drugs, alcohol, promiscuity and rape. A conversation between a young Islamist and a white British pensioner couple about the evils of 'fornication' seemed to produce assent. To my ears the word 'fornication' sounds old-fashioned and associated with religious zealotry, but to a generation that grew up in the 1940s this might be less so.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> A reference to '90s woman' in this leaflet given out in 2009 led me to find that just under half the leaflet was copied directly from the Toronto Star of February 17, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> At the time this reminded me of the 'hellfire' rhetoric of Ian Paisley.

Even where there was disagreement about religion those talking to the activists were left with a positive impression:

There's a woman in her late 20s/early 30s talking to all three. They're having some debate about religion/society but I don't get to hear very much of it. I think she's saying how do we know there won't be another religion, and also saying that she's glad that she has met them as they are a good example of religious people engaging with others, dispelling the fear.

(Fieldwork notes, 14 July 2009)

Although these activists were in a group labelled 'extremist' due to their provocative marches and demonstrations, the fact that they were politely talking about their religion meant that non-Muslims could see them in a positive light. The majority of the non-Muslim public know very little about Islam bar media coverage of the 'war on terror', thus one middle-aged white woman told me that she was glad to have talked to the activists as it was in contrast to 'all the stuff you see on TV about extremists'.

Even I, with some knowledge of Islamist activism did not at first make the connection. After a few weeks of visiting the group's street stalls I realised that I had previously met them in summer 2007 as I had left a restaurant with my family. Holding my then 18-month-old daughter, I had a discussion with them about God as creator, with them saying that my daughter, as a 'miracle' was evidence of God. At that point I did not know that they were designated as an extremist group by the government.

While these conversations were aimed at getting people interested in Islam, I did not see the activists get as far as attempting to convince them of the religion: instead the talk was more about social problems. On the few occasions when I observed sustained attempts to persuade someone to become Muslim, I was the object of the proselytizing. This was usually with the very simple formula that the only route to Paradise is Islam, and so I was

destined to go to Hell. When they discovered that I am an atheist they began talking to me about the creation of the universe and what they claimed was the impossibility of the evolution of the eye, both standard creationist arguments. After a while they seemed to get tired of trying to convince me, especially as I said I was comfortable with ‘not knowing’, but would usually begin conversations with ‘are you a Muslim yet? You’ve had time to read everything and do the research’ (fieldwork notes, 18 April 2009). Towards the end of my research, the activists pointed to the length of time I had spent with them, arguing that I would surely be going to hell as, unlike most non-Muslims, I had plenty of opportunity to become a Muslim.

When the counter-terrorism police first contacted me with regard to possible data access this was one of the first topics: ‘did they try to impress their faith upon you?’ (notes from phone call, 19 Jan 2011). It is difficult to see the relevance of such a question to the investigation of possible terrorism. Islam is, like Christianity, a proselytizing religion and throughout my research I came across people who wanted to ‘save’ me by presenting the true path. In the mainstream mosque I was also regularly told that I should become a Muslim, even after I made my lack of interest clear. Towards the end of my first interview, Iftikhar, the imam of Valley Town mosque, asked about my religion and I informed him that I was not religious. His response was similar to that of the Islamists:

What you’ve got to think about is this. Is this all a load of rubbish, or is there actually a heaven and hell. What happens when you die, because you do die? No-one’s ever come back from the dead. In normal circumstance, no-one comes back. What if there is something after, and what if I made the wrong choice? Majority of the world believes that there is something... Why are you willing to take that gamble? You need to spend some time with me.

(Interview 1)

Here Iftikhar was using Pascal's wager, arguing that one should believe in God because not doing so is a great risk without any benefits, whereas the Islamists, like Aquinas, appealed to the need for a first cause or first mover. However, both proselytised using the threat of hell for unbelievers.

Furthermore, when researching the 'white site' I spent time with members of the evangelical church, one of whom also began by asking me if I was religious and trying to persuade me to come along to one of their services. While I had no interest in being involved in religious activities in either setting, I also knew that my status as researcher did not mean I was outside the relationship that the religious have with those they might save (see Blanes, 2006). One unanswered question is whether I was treated differently to real 'officials' such as the police, those having a job to do as opposed to merely hanging around and taking notes.

### ***Attitudes to the 'other'***

The engagements with non-Muslims described above were conducted with civility, but do not reveal much of the activists' attitude to the 'other'. As noted above, government definitions of Islamist extremism included negative attitudes to Israel and Jews and homosexuality. During my time observing the da'wah stall, leafleting and public meetings I saw no expression of such views, although the activists may of course have chosen not to express them in the public arena. Even in interview and informal conversation, however, these attitudes were rarely expressed, except by Haseen. Instead, the group spoke against Western society, not necessarily western individuals, as being full of 'wickedness' and corruption.

Haseen was the only person to mention homosexuality in interview. In the interview I gained the impression that homophobia was an important driver of his Islamism:

You cannot on [the] one hand believe in democracy and believe in Islam. The reason being democracy, erm, preaches homosexuality. Democracy gives freedom to homosexuals. Democracy gives freedom to thieves. Democracy gives freedom to drug addicts.

Your son, are you gonna put him into a group of I don't know, people erm who actually erm, you know are homosexuals, are you gonna put him with a group of homosexuals or are you gonna put him with a group of people who are not homosexuals?

(Interview 1)

Mohammed, the group's de facto leader, said in an informal conversation, 'being homosexual cannot be natural'. However, this was an isolated event: the activists did not express homophobic sentiments as part of their public engagement.

Similarly, most of the activists made no statements publicly that could be considered anti-semitic, and only very rarely mentioned Israel, preferring to direct their anger at America and Britain. Again, Haseen was the exception, telling me, outside the interview process, that Jewish ownership of all media was the reason why they were represented as extremists when others were not. On another occasion, however, Haseen told me that it was the government's control of the media that meant that the reporting of Iraq was biased.

Furthermore, such attitudes are by no means limited to the extremists. While doing the research I had a conversation with a member of the Valley Town mosque congregation that included him telling me that 'Israel controls everything, the clothes you're wearing, everything' (fieldwork notes 27 March 2009). At a meeting organised by the Muslim

Association of Britain, considered by the government to be Islamist but not extremist, it was a middle-aged white Conservative councillor that came closest to talking of a Jewish conspiracy when he said that Palestinians will not get help through the UK government because ‘all the main parties [Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrats] are funded by the Jewish lobby’, mentioning Lord Levy’s funding of the Labour Party and the Labour and Conservative Friends of Israel (fieldwork notes, 22 Feb 2009).

Munir, the mainstream social entrepreneur, felt that any al-Muhajiroun activists’ anti-Israel or anti-American rhetoric was aimed at governments, not people or societies:

It could be like something like ‘Them Israeli’s’ or... You know, what I mean? But they don’t mean every single Jewish or Israeli in the world, they’re on about the government and army there. Do you know what I mean? Um, you know, when they’re talking about America and what they’ve done, they’re not talking, you know, every guy off the street in America. They’re talking about those people responsible for the deaths of thousands of, you know, people around the world.

(Munir, Interview 2)

This was echoed both in Munir’s assessment of his own attitudes – ‘that doesn’t mean I hate America, but what I do not like is the Bush administration for what they’ve started’ (Interview 2) and the Islamist Abu Q’s attempt to make a distinction between the American government and American people:

I don’t mean the Americans, the American people, I don’t mean erm certain I am specifically saying that individual that. I’m saying the American people by saying the American government.

(Abu Q, Interview 1)

That said, the al-Muhajiroun activists' 'us against the world' mentality drew them to seeing individuals and organisations, unless their own, in negative terms and finding it difficult to see good in them. Two conversations I had with the al-Muhajiroun activists about my own worldview and experiences illustrate their stereotyping of British society and politics. The first was with Haseen, in which he was trying to show why he did his Islamist activism, and the second was with Nasir, and a non-activist friend of his, where we were talking about the reporting of the war in Iraq.

Prior to a recorded interview with Haseen, I spoke to him about the interview process and my rationale for talking to people about their life histories. I described the activism as something that not all people do, and something that takes time that could be spent watching TV, for example, hopefully leading him to think about his motivations. His response was revealing, not with regard to his motivations, but what he thought of *my* motivations. He was trying to make the point that his faith makes da'wah activities an obligation, and an obligation that he cannot refuse even if his family and friends are against it. In order to illustrate this he said 'what if you were working at *The Sun* [newspaper], making lots of money, and your family and friends didn't like it because they thought it immoral, what would you do?'. When I replied that I wouldn't be in that situation because I would not work for *The Sun* on principle, he said 'but you're making lots of money'. The use of this example ground to a halt as he was trying to make the point that financial reward would outweigh everything for me, as a non-Muslim, a point which was countered by 'if I was interested in money I wouldn't be doing a PhD' (fieldwork notes, 3 July 2009).

Later that month I had a long conversation, again not part of a formal interview, with Nasir about the war in Iraq. A friend of his was present, although one who disagreed with the al-Muhajiroun approach, saying that Anjem Choudary is 'too much', always talking about hell, and this will not invite people to Islam. As usual, the target of their ire was 'Western



media' and biased reporting that failed to mention civilian deaths. Although the topic had been raised previously I had not made any intervention. On this occasion, however, I felt a need to, and so began telling them about the Iraq Body Count project, which 'records the violent civilian deaths that have resulted from the 2003 military intervention in Iraq'.<sup>11</sup> Although they did not know anything of the project they were quick to dismiss it as a tool of the government: 'we only get western media... it's under the control of western governments'. After much explanation they were able to concede that 'it is a step in the right direction' (fieldwork notes, 16 July 2009). Although the al-Muhajiroun activists were able to engage with and get on with those who did not share their religion or their views, they first saw others as being part of what they are against.

Despite professing to be against Western society and Western values, this appeared not to become outright hatred for those they met. *The Observer's* Henry Porter (2007) described 'the loathing and violence of the language used by [radical Islamic] preachers about the 'kuffar' or infidel', and this did have echoes in some of the rhetoric of the al-Muhajiroun activities, particularly when talking to Muslims who were not keeping to the straight and narrow path that the activists would prefer; 'this dirty way of life that they are living, away from drugs, away from alcohol, away from women' (Yasir, Interview 1). Despite an oppositional approach that prohibits friendships with non-Muslims – 'I haven't got no friends who are not Muslim... as Muslims we do not befriend, we always treat them right, but we do not befriend non-Muslims' (Yasir, Interview 1) – this depends on how friendship is defined. Yasir told me his wife, another al-Muhajiroun activist and Muslim convert, has a normal 'mother and daughter relationship' with his non-practising Christian mother. Similarly, not 'befriending non-Muslims' did not stop some of the al-Muhajiroun activists giving high-fives or ostentatious hand-shakes to other young men, some Muslim,

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<sup>11</sup> This organisation is co-founded by John Sloboda, an ex-Keele academic, and I personally know some Keele-based contributors. See <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/about/>

some not, who they had not seen for a while. The rhetoric may be uncompromising, but the reality of their social life did not live up to this standard.

The few observed instances of animosity on the street were initiated by white youths in passing cars. Particularly when the group did their Friday stall on a busy crossroads – largely involving shouting their message at traffic – an occasional window would open and someone would shout ‘Fucking Pakis’ across the street as they sped off. The activists’ response was a mixture of resignation, as they have seen it all before, and assertion of their own toughness. After one instance, Yasir held his arms out in a stance which suggested a ‘come and have a go’ message, although he told me that these shouts only ever came from cars that were well past their position and not waiting at the traffic lights. At these moments it seemed possible that the gang culture of many of the group returned, and they would have enjoyed a set-to with any group that came to challenge them.

### ***The ‘war on terror/Islam’ and anti-western politics***

Of course, the al-Muhajiroun activists’ engagement with other practicing Muslims did not need to begin with proselytizing. Their time doing the da’wah stalls was predominantly taken up with talking to non-Muslims and non-practicing young Muslims: the leafleting after Friday prayers and the public meetings were where the group engaged with other Muslims. In these instances conversations were geared towards world and national politics, and in particular the role of Western governments in the war on terror and associated conflicts, and interference in the affairs of ‘Muslim nations’. This is best illustrated by a conversation between an al-Muhajiroun activist and a mosque-goer and the public meeting I attended.

On a Friday in August 2009, Yasir stood outside the mosque in Hilltop, giving out leaflets advertising a meeting he had organized on ‘Preparing for Ramadan’. In addition he carried copies of a magazine, *The Islamist*, which also provided information on al-Muhajiroun’s beliefs that Muslims should take Ramadan more seriously. However, when I arrived Yasir was telling Amin, a regular at this mosque, a joke about Hizb ut-Tahrir.<sup>12</sup> This was part of a conversation about the Saudi royal family in which the two were in full agreement about the problem – the corruption and lack of legitimacy of Arab governments and the Western support for them – and the solution – a full implementation of Islamic society and government. Throughout the conversation Yasir had presented himself as representing *Ahlu Sunnah wal Jamaah*, another of the names used by the al-Muhajiroun group. Towards the end of the conversation Amin asked about speakers at the meeting. It was at this point that Yasir mentioned Anjem Choudary, and Amin then realised that this was a group that he wanted nothing to do with: ‘I’ve seen him on Channel 4 news’. At this point he passed back the leaflet and the magazine and said that he would definitely not be attending any meeting.

The group never expressed support for any overseas government as they felt that no current government was implementing the Islamic system that they proposed. Thus, when non-Muslims said that things were not perfect in Pakistan or Saudi Arabia, they would immediately respond that these were not to be considered Islamic governments. At the meeting I attended on re-establishing the Caliphate one speaker talked about the Caliphate as it was originally created, and another told the audience that it was their duty to work towards its re-establishment. A video was used to illustrate how life would improve under their proposed system.

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<sup>12</sup> ‘How long does it take Hizb ut-Tahrir to change a light bulb? First they have to elect an Emir, then establish the Caliphate, then the Emir can decide who should change light bulb.’

However, the meeting began with a video and ended with a speech that were wholly focused on western governments. The former was put together from a series of photos of killed and injured Muslim civilians from various conflicts including Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan, with an Islamic hymn in the background. The images used were not overly graphic and many UK adults will have seen more shocking images on post-watershed news. Anjem Choudary, the final speaker, talked mainly about freedom, democracy and the British government, all negatively. In particular, Choudary talked of the government's newly proposed plans to tackle extremism: 'this new thing... called Contest 2... for people like us, who want to see Islam dominating'. The connections were made between civilian deaths in Iraq and the crackdown on Islamist activity in the UK, to give the audience the idea that the war on terror is a 'war on Islam' (Baran, 2005).

These attitudes are not only held by the Islamists, however. Munir, the young social entrepreneur expressed similar sentiments. Munir spoke in defence of the Islamist activists:

You know, and the fact is the war in Iraq and I mean you know? The war in Iraq's unlawful and it is a crim-... you know, a criminal act. Any human... any human being with a decent brain's going to say that, it doesn't make them a terrorist.

(Interview 2)

Although he had little time for them, describing them as 'flipping idiots', Munir also said that he felt they were not terrorists and that the terror raids on some of the group were a 'publicity stunt' given that a year later there were no arrests or charges. For Munir, tabloid Islamophobia had led the government to pass 'terrorism laws [where] basic human rights have been violated' (Interview 2).

Furthermore, Munir had far more to say about world affairs than the Islamists. Through his job he was invited to go to Spain to work with 40 young people from Israel and Palestine.

He told me of his response to images and news similar to that used by al-Muhajiroun in their video:

You know, you look at the stuff on Israel and Palestine where, you know, there's pictures of a mother losing four daughters. That got me kind of emotional about it, do you know what I mean? Um, you know, when you see stuff like, you know, prisoners being pissed on by soldiers and stuff like that, that's an emotion. Do you know what I mean? You get think-... And it doesn't necessarily have to be because they're Muslims or not Muslims, you know, things are happening in Rwanda that got me pee'd off.

(Interview 1)

Munir was not anti-British but he did 'think Britain has to take a lot of blame for what's happening Israel and Palestine'. After telling me of a 'young Palestinian guy [who told him]... you [Britain] are the reason thousands of people... Palestinians have been killed' Munir concluded by saying 'maybe most British people aren't proud, maybe they are, I can't say, but I'm not necessarily proud of it.' (Interview 2)

The al-Muhajiroun group, on the other hand, did not have a great deal of historical knowledge of foreign affairs<sup>13</sup> and their anti-British sentiment seemed to be rooted solely in the post 9/11 wars and the government's response to Islamism, or more specifically *their* Islamism. Although the call for the Caliphate suggests an affinity with the *ummah*, a global community of Muslims, the activists said little in interview or in their activism about Muslims in other nations except as current Iraqi and Afghan victims of British and American forces:

The other oppression is oppression against the people. Now people oppressing people like Pharaoh used to oppress the Hebrew, the children of Israel. Like erm

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<sup>13</sup> Including ignorance of the history of India and Pakistan.

Bush oppressed the Iraqi. Bush erm Senior I'm talking about. He put a sanction on the Iraqis. Saddam Hussain nothing happened to him at that time. He was chilling on his erm toilet made out of gold but the babies of Iraqi they starved to death because they put sanction. That's oppression. The oppression what erm America did on Afghanistan. What the oppression what Israel is doing on Palestine.

(Abu Q, Interview 1)

Other nations became part of their analysis only as further examples of western 'oppression' and interference, with the activists citing Pakistan's role in the war on terror, renaming General Musharraf as 'Busharraf'. The continued government attempts to curtail their activities which culminated in the group being banned twice meant that they could place themselves as victims alongside Iraqi civilians, with the British and American governments as their nemesis.

### ***Al-Muhajiroun and the local state***

Although al-Muhajiroun activists, unlike some BNP and Hizb ut-Tahrir activists, have no formal engagement with the local state, their activities do bring them into contact with police, council officers and other government representatives. For the most part these seemed to be conducted with civility, although the activists expressed resentment about the way they were treated. Indeed, given that some of them had been subject to arrests and raids on their homes under terrorism legislation I judged them to be on remarkably good terms with the local police. Of the mainstream activists, however, only Munir had any contact with the al-Muhajiroun group, hinting at the lack of relationship with elected representatives and other community activists.

The group's public meetings were much like any other public meeting, although they did have to be a little dishonest in making the booking. When I spoke to Hilltop Community Centre's manager in November 2008 he told me that their policy for meetings stated that 'religious or political meetings' were only allowed if private. The local Labour group used the space for their meetings that were not open to the public, and a number of charities used the space for meetings and events. 'Muslim groups' had community meetings open to the public. However, in the period of the research meetings at the centre included a Hizb ut-Tahrir meeting to discuss opposition to the publication of *The Jewel of Medina*, the meeting organised by the Salafi mosque, and the two meetings of the al-Muhajiroun group. All of these were organised by religious and political groups and were advertised by leaflets and/or the internet. At other community centres the al-Muhajiroun group's bookings for meeting rooms had been cancelled at the last minute: on one occasion Nasir asked if I was willing to talk to the centre manager to say that I had seen their leaflets and activity and could vouch that they stay within the law. Questions of whether such centres should have taken bookings from al-Muhajiroun parallel the policy question of whether the Church of England and Methodist Church should allow BNP meetings, or meetings where BNP activists will be involved, on their premises (Mission and Public Affairs Division, 2010; Methodist Church, 2007). Distinctions between political, religious, and 'community' meetings are difficult to make.

The two al-Muhajiroun meetings I attended were attended by around 40 to 50 people, most of them aged between 18 and 30. Almost everyone attending was Asian Muslim, and although the activists had leafleted outside the city's mosques they admitted that most of those attending were already known to them. The room was that used for dances and wedding receptions, with a licensed bar at the back, but the group organised its own catering with food and drink bought at a local takeaway. Men sat at the front and women

sat at the back, and a number of people had small children with them. The first meeting I attended also began late as Anjem Choudary was giving an interview to a reporter from the local newspaper.

This meeting was also attended by PC Clare Johnson, one of the Hilltop area's neighbourhood policing team. PC Johnson was well known to the group, visiting the da'wah stall regularly to collect samples of the leaflets. After the raids in 2008, when a number of the group had many of their belongings taken away, she was faced with anger, and in a public statement said 'I hope to be able to maintain a good relationship between the Muslim community and police'. According to Asif, PC Johnson told him that she felt the raid 'destroyed all the trust that we'd built' but she was unwilling to break ranks with the police and say this publicly (Interview 1). While a good relationship between the activists and police was unlikely, the relationship was not constantly antagonistic. When the activists attempted to leaflet at the train station they were moved on by the police, and Nasir's refusal to give his details led to a dispute. On another occasion, the officers collecting the leaflets and CDs had a good-tempered debate with the activists about the monarchy and what would replace it if it was abolished. Abu Q said he had a relationship with the police, 'not a good one', but when the police did approach each side acted politely and professionally.



Relationships between al-Muhajiroun activists and community leadership figures were non-existent. Despite Abu Q having been a family friend of Councillor Naeem, his response to my mentioning local politics was to accuse the Muslim councillors of ‘doing nothing for the community’. Nasir bemoaned the fact that there was a great deal of discussion *about* their activities, but no attempt to approach and talk *with* them about the activities:

Now the problem is that these councillors they’ve never approached us, they’ve never discussed with us, they don’t know who we are. I mean a lot of these are so called Muslim councillors we’re talking about and er ... so they’re very ignorant and er what we ... what we want to do is we want to sort of um have a discussion with these or have a debate about what is the truth, you know, and what ... what we’re doing here is it illegal, is it legal and er what are you harassing us for sort of thing?

(Interview 1)

However, Councillor Khan and Councillor Naeem did attend the *Jewel of Medina* meeting organised by Hizb ut-Tahrir:

They [Hizb ut-Tahrir] want to just educate the community at this stage, they will be doing a series of marches, and all the rest of it. And they want, to basically, for people, the Muslim communities, to know that there is this drive to discredit Islam and our prophet, and basically you need to be warned of that. Now myself and Councillor Naeem were there, and we said ‘Right, okay, well that’s good. Obviously nobody wants this book published from a Muslim community because it is quite, um, a ... derogatory book and it does, it is going to create problems. Let us work with ... One of the options is obviously a protest, which is fine. What about doing some work on the ground in terms of meetings with MPs and councillors and

city council, to try and get their support on board?’ And we pressed them on this but they weren’t having it... [Hizb ut-Tahrir’s reply was] ‘What’s the point of talking to the MPs?’

(Councillor Khan, Interview 2)

Here we see a version of the ‘civil challenge’ in action. While the councillors supported the aims of the Hizb ut-Tahrir meeting, they are arguing for engagement with the political process. Hizb ut-Tahrir activists were not interested: like the al-Muhajiroun group their anti-political stance begins with the idea that there is no point engaging because those with power are not listening, despite two Labour councillors turning up to make that case. However, for the al-Muhajiroun activists, the relationship did not even get this far.

As a younger activist, however, Munir did have contact with the al-Muhajiroun activists, and also with Hizb ut-Tahrir members, and his differing approaches are indicative of how the ‘civil challenge’ can happen. Munir’s opinion of the al-Muhajiroun activists was that they were ‘not the brightest of the guys... they’re flipping idiots’ and he would ridicule them: ‘So I know they are doing a stall, I’ll open their windows I’ll blast the music, for instance. Or say ‘you know, do you wanna go clubbing tonight’ and love that.’ (Interview 1). Munir’s friend in Hizb ut-Tahrir, on the other hand, is more serious: ‘I’ve had quite in depth conversations to him about a lot of things, you know, not just about Islam but all sorts of things.’ (Interview 1). Although politically Hizb ut-Tahrir and al-Muhajiroun are in a similar position, their approach and people are very different, provoking a different reaction from those around them.

## ***Anti-politics***

While some of the analysis of the problems of the UK and the wider world – including some which do not conform to any liberal consensus – are shared across the Islamic site and more widely, the al-Muhajiroun activists differ from the mainstream by the vehemence of their anti-politics. Unlike Muslim councillors and other mainstream activists, the al-Muhajiroun group could see no good anywhere in the current social and political apparatus. As I describe later, some of the white working class activists, BNP and otherwise, share the anti-political sentiment that the national government is corrupt and can do nothing right. Here Islamist activists take this further, articulating the sentiment that the system as a whole is corrupt and is not worth engaging with as ‘the democratic system’s failing’ (Yasir, Interview 1).

In the weeks prior to the local and European elections in June 2009 the al-Muhajiroun activists began to campaign against democratic participation. They handed out copies of leaflet titled *The Expenses Scandal*, on corruption in politics, and also told people that voting is forbidden in Islam. On one occasion they were visited by the two police officers – I later found out they were the Community Resilience Team – who asked them if they were planning any demonstrations against the election. After the police left they told me that they knew they needed a license for demonstrations. On the day of the election I did not find them in their usual spot, but instead heard them driving around with a loudhailer telling people not to vote.

This assumption of system failure is not limited to state institutions, but is applied to any group that is associated with the state. For the al-Muhajiroun activists all societal organisations, including mainstream Muslim bodies, were part of the problem, and the only fix was an Islamic state and sharia law. The ‘Muslim Council of Britain’ was renamed the

‘Apostate Council of Britain’ by Haseen (Interview 1), and the mainstream mosques were deemed to be under the control of the government.

This strong anti-political attitude was not shared by Munir, Iftikhar or Councillor Khan. Each had, in their own way, become incorporated into mainstream political structures and had not, at least so far, become jaded like the older activists in East Estate (see chapter 7). Iftikhar was part of a number of city wide organisations, being chosen as a non-political representative of the city’s Muslims. Councillor Khan, successful and middle-class, was also finding himself in influential positions. Neither were likely to be anti-political as they were becoming part of the city’s establishment. Munir had become a successful social entrepreneur, being paid by local government to create multicultural events. He was perhaps the most interesting interviewee as he shared some of the attitudes of both the younger al-Muhajiroun activists and the older mainstream activists. He was certainly very willing to complain about counter-terrorism policies that were creating a suspect community and was in favour of free speech for the al-Muhajiroun group. At the same time, however, he was able to feel empowered by challenging the government agenda as it was articulated locally:

The extremism pathfinder projects across the country, which, for me, you know, it’s kind of almost demonising the community, for me. Um, I mean you look at, you know, some of the terrorism laws that’s passed through, basic human rights have been violated and stuff like that... and sort of the media fuelling some of the sort of... I think some of their... their words they’re using, some of the things they say are only just sort of making things worse, in the long run... as soon I knew about I was completely against the whole... the whole idea of... You know, the BNP are rising, issues of racism are getting high and the government’s not challenging that. Yet, they’ve got specific money out there to challenge Muslim extremism. And the

fact is, you know, more people get killed from probably racist attacks than terrorist attacks in this country. Do you know what I mean?... we kind of took that up and told the whole PVE agenda in Stoke to sort of like change its name.

(Interview 2)

Despite being a young Muslim challenging the government, Munir did not exhibit the self-reinforcing ‘citizenship thwarted’ and anti-politics couplet that led the Islamists on a collision course with the state.

## ***Conclusions***

Rhetoric of the ‘clash of civilisations’ and of ‘extremists’ as an enemy within suggests an all-encompassing conflict, whether this is a conflict of violence or a conflict of incommensurable ideas. Al-Muhajiroun were led by a man who regularly appeared on television to proclaim his desire for a sharia state in the UK, and who was prepared to glorify Islamist terrorism until the law changed and he had to choose his words more carefully. During the period of the research al-Muhajiroun carried out or proposed a number of set-piece demonstrations and events that propelled them into the national consciousness. These included a demonstration in Luton against the returning Anglian Regiment, outside the Danish embassy against the Jyllands-Posten cartoons. A proposed march through Wootton Bassett, carrying cardboard coffins to represent Iraqis and Afghans killed by coalition forces, coincided with the group being banned in January 2010. Activists associated with al-Muhajiroun have continued under the name ‘Muslims Against Crusades’ and gained further headlines when they chanted and burned poppies during the 2010 Armistice Day two-minute silence (H. Carter, 2011).

However, during my fieldwork with the Stoke-on-Trent activists I observed other activities that would be harder to define as ‘extremist’. While loudly proclaiming that only Muslims have the true religion and non-Muslims will go to hell is uncommon on the streets of Stoke, it is also a message propagated by mainstream Muslims and some Christian groups. The al-Muhajiroun activists’ leaflet arguing that Muslims should not involve themselves in Christmas bore a great deal of similarity to a leaflet used by the Association of Christian Teachers that argues that Christians should not involve themselves in Halloween. The occasional shouting of *Takbir* and *Allahu Akhbar*<sup>14</sup> are replications of the call and response that occurs in the mainstream mosques and also in evangelical churches. Furthermore and as demonstrated on the occasional Saturday with fine weather, the Islamists were not the only group to use a trestle table and leaflets: their preferred spot in the city’s main shopping street was five meters from the Socialist Party’s stall.

Given that most of the groups’ conversations with the public were on the problems of society and how religion was a solution they were not seen as extremist by those they spoke too. Indeed, some considered them a welcome change from the media image of Muslims as firebrand preachers and potential terrorists. The problems they identified – drugs, promiscuity, violence, political corruption – are concerns shared by many people, especially in the locality. Until they got to arguments for the sharia state and a global caliphate, their politics were also not unusual: opposing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, anti-Americanism, anti-capitalism are not unique to extremists or Muslims. Furthermore, ‘it should not be a surprise that an increasing number of Muslims regard Western society as morally decadent, when this is the prevailing view within Western culture’ (Mirza, 2006). It is difficult to see how those engaging with the extremists could do the ‘civil

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<sup>14</sup> *Takbir* is the name given to the phrase, *Allahu Akhbar*, itself meaning God is Great. *Takbir* is shouted during sermons and hymns in appreciation of the speaker or singer, with the expectation that the audience will respond with *Allahu Akhbar*.

challenge’, when much of what the activists said was uncontroversial: ‘there’s nothing, nothing offensive about them’ (Munir, Interview 2).

Due to their lack of participation in any formal politics they were also ignored by mainstream politicians. Throughout our conversations, the Islamists maintained that they would be ‘up for a debate’ with anyone but no-one of any influence was interested in taking this on. As I will discuss later, they claimed to have had one discussion on the street with BNP activists, but their hope that Councillors Khan or Naeem would walk past and talk to them was never realised.

However, their designation as an extremist group, even while engaged in legal activities and prior to their banning, meant that they were treated as such by the local state. Whereas BNP councillors, the quintessential example of extremists engaging with wider society, are treated normally in their council duties due to their elected status (see chapter 7), the al-Muhajiroun activists had their stall monitored by police, were moved on from some spots, and were largely ignored by mainstream community leaders. As some of the activities and expressed attitudes are as close as possible to the edge of the law they may have their homes raided under terror legislation. Taken in *combination*, their activities and attitudes do differ from other activists, perhaps justifying the state’s response. Designating them as extremist is not just about ideology, but refers to ideology, actions, and the response of society and the state.

The group also differed from other activists in the degree of their anti-politics. As I will discuss in chapter 8, the relationship between state approaches to extremism, and the anti-political sentiment of extremists and others may be self-reinforcing. This relationship creates more of the ‘citizenship thwarted’ found in the backgrounds of the al-Muhajiroun activists, and so does nothing to encourage them to become better disposed to the state.

This is less true for mainstream activists with anti-political attitudes who nevertheless are involved in 'official' politics and activism.



## **6: Rebels with a cause: the backgrounds of East Estate's activists**

### ***Introduction***

This chapter examines the backgrounds of the East Estate activists, in particular examining the extent to which British National Party activists exhibit the 'marginal, pathological and violent attributes' that have long been associated with the joiners of extreme right movements (Goodwin, 2010a, p. 32; see also Klandermans & Mayer, 2006b). Drawing on biographical interviews with both BNP activists, and mainstream and non-aligned activists, I discuss three aspects of background that feed into theories of the extreme right *and* theories of the underclass; violence and criminality, engagement with the 'other', and community empowerment and engagement. Implicit in such theories is the assumption that a dysfunctional white working-class community and culture is sustained by its lack of contact with outsiders and thus is the seed bed for extremism (Sunstein, 2009).

I begin with a short portrait of the 'community' itself. This is important as questions of integration and community involvement need to take into account the history and composition of the neighbourhood: individuals can only engage with, or integrate into, what is placed before them. I then move onto an analysis of the community activists' life histories, as described in biographical interviews. First, I examine engagement with the ethno-religious 'other', finding the BNP activists undermining the stereotype of 'white flight' and total avoidance of ethnic others, talking positively about their contact with black and minority ethnic (BME) family and friends. Second, I question the association of violent backgrounds and extremist politics that is predicated on the thesis that people comfortable with violence are attracted to far right extremism, finding that histories of

violence, both as perpetrators and victims, were common and were part of *mainstream* activists’, but not extremist activists’, explanations of their involvement in community activity. Finally, I look at issues of community engagement and empowerment, in order to question the relationship between ‘disempowerment’ and extremism. I find that the BNP activists were activists first, and BNP members second, thus theories of the socially isolated and disempowered being picked up by an exploitative far right do not apply, nor conspiracy theories of BNP activists ‘infiltrating’ civil society. This long-term engagement in civil society has meant that these extremist activists have had sustained contact with political ‘others’ that, along with previous family contact, does not support ideas of a political culture in which activists become more extreme because they talk only to other extremists (Sunstein, 2009). Instead, two of the four BNP activists talked of particular instance in which they had been engaged, felt they were acting correctly, and had been ‘knocked back’ in a manner that parallels those instances of ‘citizenship thwarted’ (Young, 1999) described in chapter 4.

### ***East Estate***

The ‘white site’, *East Estate*, is a social housing estate on the edge of Stoke-on-Trent, with houses built from the 1930s onward by a registered social landlord (RSL) and the local authority: early residents moved into the area from city-centre streets demolished for ‘slum clearance’. Through ‘right to buy’ some of the homes are now privately owned, and some are now under the ownership of a second RSL. At the 2001 census around 7,000 people lived in East Estate, of which almost 99% identified as ‘white’ – almost all White British – with small numbers of people identified as ‘mixed’ (40), ‘Asian’ (18), ‘Black’ (10) and ‘Chinese’ (18). At this time, approximately 60% of the residents were in socio-economic

grades D and E (semi or unskilled workers, or on benefits), and there were proportionally more pensioners and children than the rest of the city.<sup>1</sup> The estate remains a very white working class neighbourhood.

For a long time the estate was a desirable place to live but during the early 1990s a series of racist attacks on Asian residents led to the area being described in the national press as ‘notorious’.<sup>2</sup> One of the perpetrators was accidentally run over and killed as his victims fled in their car, and subsequent tensions led to other Asian families on East Estate being re-housed elsewhere. The estate’s bad reputation meant that some residents who could afford to live elsewhere left leaving empty and undesirable houses that were often chosen by those with little option: the area became a ‘sink estate’. Around the turn of the millennium, the area was used by the National Asylum Support Service but this stopped after one asylum-seeking family had a concrete block thrown through the window, narrowly missing a baby.

At the time of the research (2008-9) these most serious problems were largely in the past. Neighbourhood managers told me of occasions when young people had scrawled ‘BNP’ and swastikas on walls, but this was not considered to be connected to BNP activists, and was removed the day after it appeared. Compared to the 1980s, when the estate suffered burning cars used as barricades, empty houses, and serious racist violence, it was comparably peaceful. However, the BNP vote across the ward containing East Estate – stable at approximately 9% of the electorate from 2003 onwards – has given the impression that BME people are not welcome. On the one hand ‘Labour councillors helped block the black and Asian people taking up council homes’ (Barkham, 2008), and on the other housing associations were unwilling to send BME families to East Estate due to the risk of harassment: ‘there are certain parts of town... [where] the housing providers will not

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<sup>1</sup> Analysis using neighbourhood statistics data for custom area.

<sup>2</sup> Newspaper sources here are not referenced to preserve anonymity.

normally put refugees because they know they will have no peace' (John Walsh of Arch, quoted at B-Arts & Mobedia, 2011). This history of race-based decision making and racist behaviour has made East Estate a 'white estate' and it is in this context that we should evaluate activists' histories of 'contact' with the ethno-religious 'other'.

## **Contact**

As discussed in chapter 2, theories of racialised social conflict posit 'contact' with the ethno-religious 'other' as both the cause and solution to negative racial attitudes. On the one hand, the threat hypothesis proposes that proximity to the other increases fear of competition over resources or changes to ways of life (Blalock, 1967; Blumer, 1958), and on the other hand the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1958) proposes that proximity to the other allows prejudices to be dissolved as people get to know each other, if the conditions are equitable. In essence, these theories suggest that groups will come into conflict if they are finding themselves competing for jobs, houses or government funding, but will work together harmoniously if they have common goals, are operating in conditions of equality, and where stereotypes can be dissolved (Hewstone, 2003, p. 352).

Nevertheless, the 'parallel lives' thesis and the subsequent community cohesion policies did suggest that a lack of contact with ethno-religious others was the cause of prejudice. Hence critics of such policies have pointed to the 'relative de-emphasis of material deprivation and socio-economic marginalization' (McGhee, 2003, p. 376). For Cantle there was 'an urgent need to promote community cohesion, based upon a greater knowledge of, contact between and respect for the various cultures' (Cantle, 2001, p. 10). When, in 2005, the Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, Trevor Phillips, asserted that Britain was 'sleepwalking to segregation' it chimed with ideas of 'white areas' and 'Asian areas'

(Phillips, 2008) and fear of no-go areas (Bagguley & Hussain, 2008, p. 160). The lack of meaningful interaction implied in these descriptions was posited as a cause of hostility to others and BNP support: ‘in places where people have had significant direct contact with migrants, most are not concerned enough by immigration to vote for the BNP’ (IPPR 2010). While this analysis ‘blur[s] the separation between race and immigration policies’ (Kundnani, 2007, p. 32) *and* the separation between racism and anti-immigrant sentiment, it implied that it is those living in ‘white areas’, with no ‘significant contact’ with the ‘other’ were most likely to vote BNP (see also Hewitt, 1996).

However, all four of the BNP activists I interviewed in East Estate did have significant contact with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) people, and for Margie and Albert this was put in positive terms. Only Albert chose to talk about this in interview as a way of distancing himself from racism and what he saw as the ‘national policies’ of the BNP. At the same time, Albert and Margie did share with the others the ‘community change and decline’ (Rhodes, 2010) narrative in which ethno-religious others/ migrants are to blame for the loss of traditional ways of life. This apparent contradiction will be explored in relation to the combination of type of contact and the type of person, demonstrating that for some far-right activists there may be a distinction between the assimilable and non-assimilable other.

Margie, Joe and Albert, the first two being East Estate’s BNP councillors, and Albert standing as a BNP candidate, all had BME members of family by marriage. Neither Margie nor Joe spoke about this in interview, leaving me to find out by other means. Margie, though, did hint at this a number of times: when I asked her about the racism of the BNP in informal conversations prior to our formal interviews she responded ‘you’d be surprised, Gavin’ if I was to see her with her son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter. Only after a number of formal interviews did Margie reveal, again outside the interview process, that

her daughter-in-law was a relatively recent black immigrant. This seemed to be an open secret – I had also seen Margie at a community event with her ‘mixed race’ granddaughter – but Margie was unwilling to make political capital of it, saying that she had kept her private life separate to her political life as both her Labour opposition *and* fellow BNP members could use this information against her.

Albert had no such qualms, at least in my engagement with him. When interviewed he had only recently decided to stand as a BNP candidate in the 2008 local elections, and for this he was being threatened with losing one of his voluntary positions in a sport governing body:

Basically what they’re saying is as I am standing as a BNP councillor I must be racist... they asked me to resign because as I stood for a BNP councillor they ... this is against the policies of the [governing body] which is keeping racism out of sport.

(Albert, Interview 2)

In interview Albert was keen to refute such allegations of racism, talking about his brother-in-law – ‘Margaret’s sister. He ... she is married to a coloured man’ (Interview 2) – and his relationship with his Asian doctor. This latter relationship was contact that was described in positive terms, and also one in which Albert’s anti-racist credentials could be demonstrated. Albert described Jas, a GP of Asian background, as ‘one of [his] best friends’: Albert had introduced Jas to golf and been his golf partner for some years. He also claimed to have ‘taken people to task at [the] Golf Club’ (Interview 2) for behaviour he perceived to be racist.

Karen, who became East Estate’s third BNP councillor in 2009, had not lived on East Estate all her life. Karen’s father, a manager in a local factory, died in an accident when

she was a toddler and this eventually forced a move from a middle-class area of Stoke to Hopton, an area characterised by terraces and now known as an ‘Asian area’:

When we moved there when I was twelve-years-old, there was, well, I suppose you could say... Just say, for instance, there’s forty houses in the street. Out of the forty houses, there’d be ten, um, Asian families or Indian families in each street. Now, within that time of twelve until I came back, er, to Stoke from when I moved to Bristol and Cardiff, actual every single street practically was more Asian and Indian than... than white.

(Karen, Interview 2)

In a previous telling of this change, Karen had also asserted that her terrace had no ‘Asians or coloured living in the street at all’ and that later it was ‘practically all Asians perhaps the odd white family’ and ‘it just totally changed’.

Margie told an almost identical story of the area of Manchester in which she grew up:

[In] the last, say, about eight years, um, my whole... my whole political view changed. I saw the changing face of this country wherever I went, and certainly travelled home through Stockport and Longsight and Levenshulme, I couldn’t believe how much it had changed, and not for the better.

(Margie, Interview 1)

Immigration, how it had changed. The immigration was unbelievable. I mean I travel regularly to mum and dad’s. They live in Manchester and each time I’ve come through, say every three months I go through, it ... it’s a case of .... I mean I do believe in ... in diversity, but now I think we’ve come to the point where we’re bulging at the seams and I think we’re only a small island at the end of the day.

(Margie, Interview 2)

Thus both Karen and Margie talked negatively of particular areas that they have *personal experience* of, even if for Margie it was merely travelling through. This contact did not decrease prejudice but instead contributed to the perception of ethno-religious threat. This contact is not the personal, familial and friendly encounter exemplified by the in-laws and golf partner; neither is it the knowledge or received wisdom of TV and tabloid press. Instead, this is personal observation of places that Karen and Margie had at least some investment in.

These areas (Hopton, Longsight and Levenshulme) are, of course, areas with a relatively high Asian Muslim population, and the most immediately obvious manifestations of this are their retail frontages. As ‘the changing face of [the] country’ seen from the passer-by, these may seem impenetrable and of another world, with the concentration of shops and shoppers giving the impression that Asian Muslims are set apart from wider society, evidence that supports the ‘political discourse that accuses Muslims [and not other Asian people] of self-segregation’ (Werbner, 2005a, p. 484), even if the population behind the shops is actually a mix of Asian Muslims, white working class, students and others. This echoes the observations of Friedrich Engels, when he found an ‘unbroken series of shops... bear[ing] some relation to the districts which lie behind them... they suffice to conceal from the eyes of the wealthy men and women of strong stomachs and weak nerves the misery and grime which form the complement of their wealth’ (Engels, 1969, pp. 79-80).

Margie and Albert, with positive stories of some ethnic others – friends, family, colleagues – were also characterising another ethno-religious grouping as a homogenous threat. For these BNP activists their contact with the ‘other’ seemed to mean that *some* people were assimilable, and the evidence provided in interview is that the friends and family were assimilated. These relationships with assimilated others did not, as posited by contact theory, reduce the capacity to hold a stereotype about another group. Indeed, an ex-Muslim



may be even more anti-Islam than the general population,<sup>3</sup> and there are many assimilated children of migrants who hold strident anti-migrant views: ‘there is a surprisingly degree of hostility among existing ethnic minority communities towards asylum and migration’ (Crawley, 2005, p. 21). For Albert, his anti-racism with regard to an assimilated other was a defence against accusations of racism after he characterised anti-Islamic arguments as not racist:

Like it or lump it the BNP is not racist. They might be sectarian, but they’re not racist because people are saying they hold all this against Muslims. Muslims aren’t a race.... They’re a sect ... a religious sect. They’re not a race. So how can you call it racism?

(Interview 2)

This question of perceived assimilability, whether due to the number of ethno-religious others, their religious and cultural difference, or belief in self-segregation, is consistent with, and goes some way to explain, recent findings in relation to BNP voting patterns. Both Bowyer (2008) and Ford and Goodwin (2010) demonstrate that the co-presence with a large Muslim population is associated with BNP voting. Furthermore, ‘the presence of non-Muslim Asians has no significant effect while BNP support is actually lower in areas with larger black populations. This suggests that the appeal of the modern BNP is more subtle than the crude racism and xenophobia of the old NF, whose support was correlated with the presence of any non-white ethnic group’ (Ford & Goodwin, 2010, p. 16).

Albert and Margie, as BNP activists, were certainly not a throwback to the ‘undiluted racism’ and ‘neo-Nazi shaven-headed thugs’ (Copsey, 2007a, p. 66) of the un-modernised late 1970s and 1980s versions of the National Front and BNP. Furthermore, their ‘cultural

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, an ‘ex-Muslim, a survivor of child genital mutilation, an exile many times over, a former Dutch MP, a black woman whose language would not, in places, look amiss in a BNP pamphlet’ (Brockes, 2008)

racism', directed at particular Asian Muslim others seen to be self-segregating and taking over particular areas, was combined with a degree of anti-racism and a 'belief in diversity' that fits with their own contact with ethno-religious others. Therefore descriptions and explanations of racism and far-right politics that invoke active avoidance, such as 'white flight', or lack of contact ('white estates') sit uneasily with a reality of BNP activists with BME friends, or even BNP activists who are themselves descendents of immigrants (Ryan, 2006).

### ***White Working-Class Violence***

Just as the conventional wisdom makes an almost necessary connection between radical Islamism and terrorism, so it is normal to connect far-right politics and violence. However, and at least in the UK, there is no comparable 'radicalisation' narrative that describes non-violent far-right activists joining groups and becoming violent (see Vertigans, 2007 for the US perspective). Instead, commentators in the UK have made connections between far-right membership and violence, including terrorism (see chapter 2), that not only considers violence as a result of far-right experience, but also considers far-right activism as caused by violent backgrounds. In East Estate, though, it was the mainstream activists who had violence in their pasts, and it was this that motivated them into political and community action.

The association of extremism with deviance has a history back to Aristotle (Haslam & Turner, 1998). While some definitions of extremism and deviance make this association tautological – attitudes that are rare amongst the general population are themselves deviant – there are a number of further reasons given why extremism, and especially far-right extremism, should be associated with deviance and violence in particular. First, as the aims

of extremists are not admissible or lack a popular mandate they will not be realised through normal democratic procedures and activists may therefore need to turn to non-democratic methods (Galeotti, 2002). Second, ‘extremists are prone to error because they are victims of one or many [psychological problems]’ (Haslam & Turner, 1998, p. 437). Finally, there is a self-fulfilling prophecy or path-dependency in any relationship between politics and violence: any reputation for violence will have an impact on who joins or who does not join the group. The latter two reasons, unlike the radicalisation thesis, suggest that the propensity to violence comes prior to becoming an extremist activist: BNP activists are therefore posited as ‘bad uns’ who engaged in deviant behaviour when young.

This theorising of a relationship between crime, violence and extremist politics can also be seen in some anti-BNP campaigning and press reports. BNP activists are regularly exposed as criminal (see Searchlight / Stop The BNP, 2002; Searchlight / Hope Not Hate, 2002) and when the BNP’s membership lists were leaked *The Telegraph* checked the names for previous convictions (van Praagh & Sawyer, 2008). Some of the publicised crimes were committed as part of political activity including Nick Griffin’s conviction for incitement to racial hatred (Back, 2003), and some recent violent incidents occurred as activists were challenged by political opponents: it may be circular to use these as evidence of a relationship between political extremism and other deviance. More relevant to this argument are incidences of political violence, that is ‘racist violence and terrorism’ carried out as part of far-right activism (Human Rights Watch, 1997, p. 15). However, unrelated criminal activity and in particular the connections of far-right activism to football violence - overstated by the media – are also used to justify a stereotype of the far-right ‘racist/hooligan’ that, as well as denying the racism of non-hooligans (Back, Crabbe, & Solomos, 1999), suggests that BNP activists are drawn from the ranks of violent working-class youth.

Many of East Estate's activists did grow up with histories of violence. Two of the four women gave long testimonies of the violence that surrounded them when growing up, perpetrated by parents, grandparents and other carers. Four of the six male interviewees talked about their own behaviour in childhood and early adulthood. However, it was the mainstream activists that talked of violence, and in particular how these life experiences drove them to community and political activities in order to either make amends for their earlier activities or to try and stop the cycles of violence that had held them back.

Fran and Pam were both chairs of their respective residents' associations, at the time of interview. Neither were aligned to any particular political group, although Pam had helped Peter with his election campaign: both were opposed to the BNP. Both began their interviews talking of domestic violence. Fran had been 'farmed out' at the age of ten after her mother died, and was sent to live with her grandmother who she believed was too old 'to cope with young children': 'I could have had her sent to jail, for hitting and what she hit me with' (Interview 1). Pam was similarly sent away from her family when very young, living with an aunt and her grandparents, but returned to live with her parents who she described as 'very cruel'. She 'had no place in the house, other than work' and repeatedly ran away from home, finally leaving to live on the streets and in rented rooms at sixteen. Her first marriage continued this violence:

My first husband went to prison, er, because he was a rogue and he knocked me about something shocking, but because I'd always been hit when I'd been at home it seemed the norm, you know that's how people lived.

(Interview 1)

For both women involvement in community activism was driven by a desire to help those who are going through similar experiences, and with a hope that life on East Estate is not as hard as it was when they were young:

The people that like, have had, er, the boyfriend or what have you, has battered 'em, they've turned up at my door at one o'clock in the morning with no shoes on their feet, and child in arms and wanted somewhere go... Most of what I've done recently, say this last 12 months while I've been in a resident's association is to show them there are things possible for people like, that haven't been born with a lot of money, that you can change things.

(Pam, Interview 1)

Joe, the BNP councillor, certainly conscious of the stereotype of the criminal far-right activist, played down his bad behaviour describing it as 'naughty fun' and 'boy's things' (Interview 2). In contrast, Mark, Paul and Gordon gave a great deal of detail about the disruptive behaviour they engaged in. Gordon, a long-term Labour activist and councillor, talked at length about his youth in the 1950s:

I was in the Mereby group. We called ourselves a crew, I know, we'd seen it on television or something, but er, we were Mereby... we were always at war... I don't know who chose the wars but, you know we were always... We'd have fights with [other crews]. It's a lot better now, these groups are just not organised, but we were more organised then. If you didn't join these you'd got a problem because you didn't go anywhere then, you could go out on the street and not be part of that clique, and you'd be a bit nervous. In it, you'd got some protection... it was a dangerous time really because the fights weren't er, friendly... the battles were in Hanley, between the motorcyclists and the scooterists... We didn't use knives and what have you, we just fought.

(Interview 1)

Mark and Paul had very similar tales of childhood anger that led to a religious conversion. Paul's most violent period was from the age of six to eleven (although he was also on probation for two years in his late teenage years):

I was an uncontrollable child. I'd hold my breath, I'd throw a glass across the room. Whatever I was told to do I'd do the exact opposite. I wouldn't behave, I'd throw things at teachers in the class. The goldfish died, I thought it was teacher's fault, I threw a chair at her, missed, it went through the window. I was always fighting.

(Interview 1)

Mark's described his teenage years in similar terms:

I had a chip on my shoulder against people, against life and against community, against everything, everybody was wrong, it was only me who was right, you know the attitude ... I couldn't seem to stick anything for long and I ended up with 16 jobs in four years so you can see that several times I was sacked for fighting at work.

(Interview 1)

All three of these men gave indications that atoning for this activity was a large motivation for their later community activity. Paul and Mark became religious activists, Paul becoming more involved with the church through a friend, and Mark 'cry[ing] out to God' independently. Gordon told of being threatened with a gun while working as a club doorman, and then realizing that he needed to get out of this life due to his family responsibilities.

For these male mainstream activists, community activity was motivated by a desire to help younger generations avoid the mistakes that they had made when they were younger, and to make up for their own mistakes. Gordon, referring to Mark here, put it thus: 'he saw the

error of his ways and now wants to make up for that. So, that's where I come from [too]' (Interview 1).

Conventional wisdom suggests a link between violence and other criminality and extremist politics. The argument presented at the beginning of this section – that flawed analysis of the world around them can drive people to extreme politics and extreme actions – feeds into a common sense notion that the violence associated with the far-right, stretching from street fights with anti-fascists to the Holocaust, is appealing to delinquent youth. However, in East Estate an association can be made between delinquency and mainstream political activism: Paul, Mark and Gordon had similar histories of youth disorder which, when it brought them close to police attention, they were shocked into stopping. These histories provided motivation to improve the lives of the next generation, to help them avoid making the same mistakes. In much the same way, being a victim of domestic violence was invoked as an explicit motivation by Pam, and was 'what moulded' Fran into a community activist. Like Maruna's (2001) desisting offenders, both the perpetrators and victims of violence have 'sought to turn their past lives into something positive' with a shameful past used 'as a sort of moral tale to help guide others in the right direction' (p. 11). Being 'bad' when young can be an explanation for doing good when older, as well as an explanation for continuing badness.

Why, then, do activists take the paths that they take? The testimonies above demonstrate that these individuals wanted to change things or make amends, and as I will discuss below this was also true of at least two of the BNP activists, Albert and Margie. A comparison of their activist careers with those of some of the mainstream activists demonstrates that it was not complete disempowerment that pushed Albert and Margie to the BNP. Instead, I argue that their earlier activism was somehow blocked, and the resultant 'citizenship

thwarted', along with a failure of the Labour Party to pick up on this, led them to the far-right party.

### ***Channelling anger and frustration***

A further explanation for racism, anti-immigrant sentiment and far-right politics is that of the disintegration of white working-class community. In this analysis, mass media and mass culture (Hoggart, 1958), a decline in participation in communal activity (Putnam, 2000), the demolishing of traditional terraces and moving people to the new suburbs (Young & Willmott, 1962) contribute to an erosion of the traditional community. The decline of working-class institutions, in particular those with a degree of social control such as churches and unions, leaves individuals anchorless and less likely to conform to community norms (Coleman, 1988). More recently, social policy analysts saw risks of neighbourhoods in which 'low levels of social interaction' and a lack of common norms and social order result in problems of worklessness, drug dependency and so on (Fs & Kearns, 2001, p. 2128). Not only do people in these areas lack the 'bridging social capital' of 'cross-cultural' friendships, but this explanation suggests people are lacking in social capital more generally, are individualised, and thus anomic.

At the same time, members of white working-class communities are said to be disconnected from political and civil society, producing feelings of powerlessness. Thus John Denham, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, argued that people voted BNP in 2009 because 'they felt ignored and excluded', and Nick Clegg, leader of the Liberal Democrats, explained BNP voting by reference to 'the anger, the frustration, [and] the sense of alienation' (both quoted in Chappell, Clifton, Gottfried, & Lawton, 2010, p. 4). Social capital, then, is related to political orientation in at least two



ways; first, ‘interpersonal development of trust and cooperation that derives from regular interaction with fellow citizens on the other’ and second, ‘socio-structural integration that is a function of membership in mid-level institutions’ (Fitzgerald, 2004). Thus, ‘community empowerment’ at a neighbourhood level aims to bolster citizenship by ‘giving real responsibility and support to local citizens’ and ‘building a sense of belonging and interaction in communities’ (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2007a, pp. 11, 32), so undermining the disillusionment that leads to extremism.

This explanation does not apply to the BNP activists in East Estate. Like Goodwin (2010a), I found that East Estate’s BNP ‘activists generally did not appear isolated in their social arenas’ (p. 42), and in fact were involved in largely the same organisations as the mainstream activists. Given the range of activities these BNP activists were involved in, they would certainly have more social capital than others of similar background. Indeed, for three of the four activists it was their involvement in non-familial ‘mid-level institutions’ that led to their BNP activism.

Joe was the first of the four to have joined the BNP. As a child he was into ‘being fashionable and... one of the gang’, getting into football, and ‘the end of the mods and rockers thing and the skinhead thing’ (Interview 1). Marriage and family put paid to this in adulthood, but he did find time to organise children’s football. When he gained more time he became involved in the ‘scooterist’ scene, and meeting BNP activists here led to an involvement in right-wing politics, although he had always ‘had an interest’.

Prior to her involvement in the BNP, Margie had been involved in her local residents’ association (she lived outside East Estate). Furthermore, Margie saw a continuation from this ‘helping people’ to the casework of being a councillor. Albert and Karen both lived on East Estate and became involved in BNP activism through their membership of the committee of the estate’s community centre. Albert was also a long-term volunteer (over

fifty years) in sports organisation, and his involvement with the community centre came after running their indoor bowls events. Karen had joined this committee more recently after finding herself with more time after her children had left home and had began by helping out with the centre's weekly bingo sessions. Although she already had a connection to far-right politics as her husband was a BNP member, she was not an activist. Both Albert and Karen stood as BNP candidates in 2008 after being persuaded by Joe, who at this time was treating the bingo sessions as an opportunity for himself and Margie to meet residents and find out their concerns:

It gives me a chance to pick up any problems that people have got. Um, and then, of course, I get things like if a lady hasn't turned up, it sets the alarm bells ringing. We had one lady, two weeks ago, that had been trapped in the bath for two days and nobody knew.

(Margie, Interview 2)

In East Estate, then, the BNP activists are heavily engaged in community activity, have high levels of social capital, and are involved in building social capital. Even before they became BNP activists they were involved in community activities that included mainstream activities: for these people BNP activism is not a symptom of societal disintegration and disconnection.<sup>4</sup>

This previous community involvement disrupts the conspiracy theory that is levelled against BNP activists by their opponents. Nick Griffin's modernisation of the party included an emphasis on community-based politics: Copsy (2004) details a top-down directive within the BNP, advising activists to copy the neighbourhood problem solving

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<sup>4</sup> Rydgren found that 'not even members of humanitarian aid and human rights organizations are less likely to vote for the radical right; something which clearly questions the universalistic ambitions of Putnam's theory of social capital and its core idea that organizational membership fosters tolerance and civic virtues' (Rydgren, 2009, p. 141)

employed by the Liberal Democrats (p. 106), in order to generate goodwill for political success. In this analysis, the ‘true face’ of extremists – virulent racial hatred – is hidden, and these extremists are *only* doing voluntary community work and becoming councillors in order to build up support for their particular revolution. This, of course, is the cynic’s view of politics of every stripe: Pam, chair of Longhill Residents’ Association, levelled this at both BNP and Labour activists in East Estate:

Political people should take credit for what they do do, and not what they don’t do. It’s not fair. It’s not right. They are supposed to be leading the way for people like meself, and therefore they are in a place where they should set an example and it’s wrong to take credit for what you haven’t done. It’s always been done, we know it’s always been done. But don’t do it around the people who know different... Don’t sit with pensioners and say “what a good girl, what a good boy am I. I sit with the over 50s, or I do this”.

(Interview 1)

Here she refers to the BNP activists who were attending the bingo sessions and doing informal ward surgeries and volunteering by helping with running the bingo at the same time. However, this analysis is extended to mainstream politicians too with the accusation that Gordon’s long-term involvement in a residents’ association was used to generate support for Labour.

### **Political ‘others’**

One further argument for involvement in community activism undermining extremism is that advanced by Cas Sunstein in *Going to Extremes* (2009). His argument has similarities with the contact hypothesis, but it is dialogue with trusted people with a wide variety of

viewpoints that is said to temper ideology, not just contact with ethno-religious others. Extremists, he argues, become extreme because 'when people find themselves in groups of like-minded types, they are especially likely to move to extremes' (Sunstein, 2009, p. 2), hence the most extreme groups are those who isolate themselves from society. Community activity should bring extremists into contact with others who do not share their views, and help rein in extremism, unless groups are composed only of 'like-minded' others.

Indeed, we can examine family background, as well as community bodies, for 'like-mindedness' or difference. Paul, an East Estate community activist without political ties, suggested this when he characterised the estate as 'a racist area'. For Paul, the estate's history of racialised conflict and the more recent BNP wins meant that he worried that racism was rife and would colour all relationships:

We've now got, er... The chip shop's now open. Um, it's a couple of Asian lads. They're British, but they're just deemed to be Asian, um, have taken it on. They've employed local people who are at the front. So, Jim, who used to do the frying before when Dave owned the place, he's there doing the frying now. And a couple of the girls from the community are now working on the counter. A girl across the road said, "Oh, they won't last long. They're Asians."

Her son came in the shop the other Saturday and said to Sarah, "Chippy's open now, isn't it?" Sarah said, "Yeah." And he's then said, "Well, they won't last long here because they're Asians." What's been instilled in the children? It is a racist area.

(Interview 2)

Here we find the worry that some young people are being brought up to be virulently racist, and that this is the source of potential BNP voters and activists. In some circumstances far-right political views can be a family affair: Flemish nationalists being

found to have more often than not grown up in a nationalist household (de Witte, 2006). However, none of the BNP activists in East Estate had a long-term far-right background.

Joe, Margie, Albert and Karen all talked about their families' politics and their politics prior to 'becoming BNP'. Margie talked about her parents' supporting Labour and being members of trade unions, and how they had been let down by the present government: she described herself as a 'Tory' before she became BNP. Karen's father was Labour while her mother was Conservative, and like Margie, Karen considered herself to be a 'Tory' before becoming BNP. Albert described himself as 'Labour until that point all my life'.

Joe was the only one of the four to tell me of talking politics with family members:

Joe: You know, err my dad's always read the *Daily Mirror* which leans towards Labour. I don't think ... he's never really declared politics particularly to me or spoken about them, err but I can remember lecturing them on politics at the age of 16 and 17 as opposed to the other way round. So it must have been something on ... a subconscious ... I subconsciously just picked up and decided I'd got an opinion on at a very early age.

GB: So you ... you haven't talked with your parents about being ... being ...?

Joe: Well they know what I'm doing now and err, you know, it's fully converted them and ... since they've seen what I'm doing and seen some of the stories behind it and some of the day to day stuff, it's fully converted them to be behind what I'm doing.

GB: Okay.

Joe: Although I ... I sometimes wonder if they fully understand it because my dad still reads the *Daily Mirror* and they're the first ones to run smear stories on the BNP and he err cuts them out and posts them to me as if he's ... as if err, you know,

I'm going to be surprised by reading them. So ... he is nearly 80 so, you know, he may be regressing a little bit, I don't know.

(Interview 2)

I did not find out about the political composition of Margie's and Joe's residents' associations, lads 'n' dads football, or scooter club, other than the fact that the latter attracted some BNP activists. Indeed, it could be argued that because of the prevalence of anti-immigrant attitudes across British society (see chapter 2) then these groups would be unlikely to include many people with strong pro-immigration attitudes. However, it is also likely that all these groups included people of a variety of political persuasions.

Albert's previous community activity certainly meant he was working with people who would never consider voting BNP. When he became chair of the estate's community centre (see below), this was along with a group of other 'non-political' community activists that included Fran and Paul, both of whom exhibited an anti-BNP stance when interviewed. As mentioned previously, Albert was also involved in a sport governing body with well-known anti-racist policies, which suspended him when his BNP membership was revealed.

These activities, then, were not ones where BNP supporters and activists, or residents with anti-immigrant or racist attitudes, only talked to others who shared their viewpoint. All four BNP activists had previously been involved in community activities in which they could feel empowered, and where they would encounter a range of political viewpoints. In no way were these activists socially isolated or disengaged from associational life.

### **Becoming political**

It is in the connection between non-party-political activism and political activism that the roots of both the mainstream and BNP political activism can be found. Albert and Margie,

both BNP activists, and Gordon, a Labour activist, gave similar stories of trying to make what they believed to be an important change, and being frustrated at their inability to make things happen. For Margie and Albert, it was perhaps as much the context – the Labour Party in power nationally and thus part of the establishment – as any anti-immigrant or anti-Muslim sentiment, that led them to join the BNP

Gordon's path to political activism began in the late-1980s. His initial involvement in the residents' association included organising those living in the streets around him to oppose the Conservative government's plans to privatise the council housing under the banner of 'stock transfer'. A few years later, while still running the residents' association, he became involved in a campaign to save East Estate's primary school from closure. It was here that he decided the best way to oppose the Conservative led cuts, and also to oppose the local Labour politicians carrying out those cuts, was to join the Labour Party 'to fight from the inside' (Interview 1).

By the time Albert decided to stand as a BNP candidate, however, the Labour party were in power nationally and so joining Labour was no longer a stance of opposition. Indeed, Albert's politicisation seemed to be a story of falling out with the Labour party because of his community activities. He described himself as always being a Labour man. However, in 2002 he became the chair of the estate's community centre in a meeting and vote that changed the committee from one which was dominated by Labour activists. This change was then challenged by the Labour activists and the local authority resulting in a year or so of very acrimonious dispute in which locks were changed and committee members locked out, and equipment was removed. Instead of being pro-BNP – 'I made it plain [to local BNP organisers] that as far as I'm concerned I do not agree with the BNP's national policies' (Interview 1) – it would be fairer to characterize Albert as virulently anti-Labour.

Margie's anger seemed to have more to do with her previous work. She was keen to talk about her career working in the care sector, moving me on from talking about her factory work, which she presumably felt was less important. Here she told me how she felt the standards of care were too low in the private-sector residential homes she had worked in. She eventually left this job after a dispute in which her attempts to improve things led to her getting in trouble herself:

Then I saw an incident that I reported, because we were taught at college whistle blow, and the next thing I knew I'm on a disciplinary and I thought I'm not for this. Fortunately a couple of the staff had heard the phone call and they supported me so the disciplinary didn't go anywhere, but then that was it, I thought, "No, I've just got to come out of care."

(Interview 2)

Both Albert and Margie, then, had challenged what they saw as vested interests, with what they saw as legitimate concerns, and both had found themselves in a conflict. Like the young Muslims described in chapter 4, Albert and Margie found themselves with 'citizenship thwarted' (Young, 2003b): the promises of empowerment in the community or the workplace were found wanting. Albert was encouraged by a local councillor to take the position of chair of the community centre, but when he did the community centre was taken over by the local authority. Margie was advised to be a whistle-blower, but ended up leaving her job.

Gordon had similarly been involved in challenges to authority. However, at the time at which he was challenging authority, and sometimes losing, he was also persuaded to join the Labour party, which he perceived to be a possible vehicle for this anti-authority politics. We do not know whether, if Gordon had first been involved in campaigns in the



time of the Blair government, he may have rejected the Labour party as part of the establishment.

## **Conclusions**

The stereotype of the BNP or other far-right activists is that of the young to middle-aged skinhead, violent or at least prepared to use violence, disengaged from mainstream life except via football hooliganism, and avoiding contact with ethnic others through living in an all-white community, probably through 'white flight'. This image of the far right, based on the street activities of the National Front in the 1970s and 80s, is one which the BNP leadership attempted to change in the 1990s in a drive to gain respectability. The BNP activists interviewed for this study were prepared to join the party as they believed in this change – Joe, with his long interest in far right politics considered the actions of the 1970s' National Front 'too extreme... that's not politics, that's just like thuggery, I suppose' (interview 2) – and were also part of it. These activists appeared to be 'normal people, socially integrated, connected in one way or another to mainstream groups and ideas' (Klandermans & Mayer, 2006a, p. 269).

The BNP activists in East Estate had more substantial connections with ethnic difference than would be usual in an area with few non-white people. Given the familial and team nature of these connections they seem likely to exhibit the common goals and sustained contact that Allport's contact hypothesis requires for diminishing prejudice. They also had histories of mainstream community involvement prior to joining the party, and these experiences did not stop them from 'becoming BNP'. Furthermore, it was the mainstream activists of East Estate that had histories of violence as perpetrators or victims, and this did not mean they remained 'bad uns'.

These BNP activists did not seem unusually concerned with immigration and ethno-religious difference. It is true that all four raised these issues in interview, whereas the others did not. Margie and Karen both talked of rapid change in particular places, reproducing the narrative of Asians ‘taking over’ particular areas. Albert was keen to deny being racist, but insisted that any anti-Muslim attitudes are not racism as Islam ‘is a sect... [so] it’s sectarianism’ (Interview 2). Joe certainly saw the world in terms of ‘racial differences’: ‘I can’t run as fast as an African, Chinese people can’t drink the alcohol... there’s racial differences’ (Interview 1). Both Joe and Albert talked of preferential treatment of other groups. Albert referred to inconsistencies in the treatment of racist language on the football field, claiming that harmless ‘banter’ was treated as racism from white players, but ignored when from black players (see Nayak, 2009) for the same issue in the school playground). Joe talked of government ‘appeasement of Muslims in particular’, echoing common criticisms of multiculturalism and political correctness as allowing minority groups to ignore the law or societal norms (see Kundnani, 2007, p. 26). However, these attitudes are not those of hardcore racists but can be found everywhere, and which are reproduced by ‘right-wing newspaper columnists advocating a new emphasis on assimilation’ (Kundnani, 2007, p. 26).

Why, then, do some support or join the BNP while many more do not? I suggest that one explanation may be found in Jock Young’s idea of ‘citizenship thwarted’. Like the young men described in chapter 4, these BNP activists were, and always have been, integrated into wider community and societal structures: they do not fit any stereotype of the socially excluded. However, two of the four talked of events in which they challenged authority in what they believed to be the proper way, and for which they believed they had just cause, and had been knocked back. I argue that these experiences produced a sense of personal

'political' injustice that fits with wider 'hostility to mainstream political elites', an attitude that is associated with BNP support (Cutts, Ford, & Goodwin, 2011).

## 7: 'There's nothing British about the BNP': politics and anti-politics on East Estate

### *Introduction*

This chapter moves the discussion on from the backgrounds of the individual activists in East Estate to how they engaged with each other across an assumed ideological chasm. At the level of national politics and national public debate, mainstream and 'extremist' politicians assert there is a clear divide between 'normal' political parties and the British National Party. In the past the BNP and other far-right groups have been characterised as neo-Nazi or fascist. Whereas the former can be seen in the use of the symbols of the Third Reich, fascism is more difficult to define and so more difficult to use as a label (see Paxton, 2005; Griffin, 1991; Eatwell, 1995; Lacqueur, 1996). At the very least, fascism departs from normal politics in its revolutionary nature: it 'abandons democratic liberties and pursues [goals] with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints' (Paxton, 2005, p. 218). However, the 'modernisation' of the BNP has made these accusations more problematic. Even though there have been exposés of individuals with fascist sympathies and academic commentators still find a fascist ideology (see Copsey, 2007b), the lack of revolutionary rhetoric in BNP campaigning, and the move away from marches to electioneering means that the label of fascist is harder to justify. At the time of this research, the idea of a divide remains, but it is now conceived as between the liberal and tolerant and those who 'oppose tolerance and diversity' (Kelly, 2007, p. 1). These two alternatives are posited as visions of 'Britishness' with an associated notion of 'British values'. Where there is a *clear* divide there is the suggestion of a 'culture war', a term used in the USA in the 1990s and more recently the UK, in which there is one section of society

committed to a liberal multicultural society, and another that is firmly in opposition to this vision of Britain, proposing an alternative that harks back to an imagined homogenous nation in which values and identities are shared.

A number of policy responses also build on this analysis. In the arena of parliaments and chambers we find the concept of *cordon sanitaire* – isolating BNP politicians – and in daily life we find the ‘civil challenge’ – Home Secretary Jacqui Smith’s plan to ensure that those who ‘undermine our belief in this country, in democracy, in human rights, in tolerance, and free speech’ will face moderates arguing back (Percival, 2009). Both imply that extremist politics and politicians can be identified and separated from mainstream politics and politicians, at national and local levels.

In the local context, however, any divide is less clear cut and the proposed policy response cannot hold. Drawing on ethnographic and interview data, I will show how the everyday political action of citizens can and does cover ground that pertains to the alternative visions of Britishness, and so there is a discursive space in which the ‘culture war’ or ‘incompatible worldviews’ could be exhibited. For a number of reasons, though, battles in the ‘culture war’ are not fought at neighbourhood level: differences of opinion are not as great as assumed and intolerance is not an either/or; personality and effort count for more than ideology; anti-establishment attitudes are held by mainstream as well as BNP activists. It is not, therefore, clear that in this context the BNP activists are extremist.

### ***A culture war? Liberal (modern) tolerance versus illiberal (backward) intolerance***

Like the rhetoric of the ‘clash of civilizations’ that hangs over the politics of Islamism (chapter 5), the concept of ‘culture wars’ (Hunter & Wolfe, 2006; Hunter, 1991) divides

society into two separate blocs, the socially liberal and illiberal, blue and red states. In the context of 1990s United States, Hunter argues that the divide encompasses attitudes to gay rights, abortion, drug use, gun law and other issues, and has its roots in a divide between the religious, moral and culturally “orthodox” and the secular, amoral and culturally “progressive”. A key part of this divide is the approach to (ethnic) difference: on the progressive or liberal side we find a multiculturalism that insists attention be paid to cultural particularities and cannot find any universals; on the orthodox or illiberal side we find a universalism that claims to be in the interests of all citizens, and will not brook particularities (Gitlin, 1995).<sup>1</sup> The two sides accuse each other of different forms of extremism, with the liberal characterised as unAmerican and ‘politically correct’, and the illiberal characterised as populist and xenophobic (Singh, 1998). And because this political divide has a stronger than usual moral component, ‘culture wars are often extraordinarily passionate and strident’, with ‘uncompromising clashes... potential for violence’ and ‘compromise, coalition formation and other elements of normal politics’ are difficult (Sharp, 1999, p. 3).

While the position of this divide relative to political parties moves due to changes in ideologies and practices – as I write the US ‘Tea Party’ movement<sup>2</sup> is allowing the replaying of the 1990s culture wars with the Tea Party on one side of the divide and ‘mainstream’ politicians on the other – there remains the idea that ‘incompatible worldviews’ (Hunter, 1991) make normal political engagement impossible. In the UK, the divide is constructed as between the ‘good democrats’ and ‘evil extreme-right’ (Mouffe, 2005, p. 57), with the latter including the British National Party and the English Defence

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<sup>1</sup> Gitlin finds a failure in the left to retain any universalism post 1960s.

<sup>2</sup> The Tea Party is a supposed grassroots or populist movement of the American right, with a core aim of smaller government and lower taxes but also socially conservative (including being anti-abortion). Furthermore, ‘behind the “take our country back” slogans of the Tea Party lies an assertive nationalism fed in part by a reaction to a sharp increase in immigration in recent decades and a mistrust of Islam’ and the policies of multiculturalism (Dionne & Galston, 2010, p. 15)

League. While the language of ‘culture war’ is yet to fully enter the British discussion,<sup>3</sup> the themes of incompatibility with ‘common values’ and vast difference suggest a divide along the lines of cultural war.

Prior to the modernisation of the BNP this divide could be made with reference to fascism. The party’s rhetoric of revolutionary nationalism, campaigning through marching, and the belief that ‘Rights for Whites’ need to be backed up with ‘well-directed boots and fists’ (Copsey, 2004, p. 71) provide ample justification for seeing the BNP as beyond the pale and at least potentially fascist. During the 1990s, however, the party softened both its actions and its words, following the Liberal Democrats into community politics (Copsey, 2004, p. 106) and taking ‘a more moderate approach to issues of race and immigration’ (Goodwin, 2010b, p. 177). Nick Griffin, the author of the ‘boots and fists’ quote, was persuaded to modernise by the potential for electoral success, although the party struggled to hold onto hard-line members as they softened to attract less hard-line members (Goodwin, 2010b).

After this, accusations of fascism are more difficult to make. Even the anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight* has noted that labelling the BNP as fascist is now less effective in areas where the party has had success in establishing itself (Eatwell, 2010, p. 226). At least publicly, the BNP have disowned fascism, and at least some of the time are responding to issues of race, immigration and cohesion that are regarded as real across the political spectrum (Eatwell, 2010, p. 226), as opposed to myth-making. ‘Nick Griffin has identified a number of true... things to say’ (Melanchthon, 2009). The BNP cannot be always dismissed as Nazis with a worldview based entirely on conspiracy theories.

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<sup>3</sup> A notable exception was John Cruddas’ discussion of the Tea Party, right-wing populism across Europe and the English Defence League, noting them as one side in a ‘wider political and cultural war’ which stands against ‘secular liberalism, which they blame for allowing Islam in through the back door’ (Cruddas, 2010)

Mainstream opponents of the BNP have therefore moved towards the language of ‘incompatible values’ and, in particular, values that are claimed to be associated with ‘Britishness’. At the same time the BNP has also used the language of values so that both the party and their opponents claim to be ‘defending British values’. The Conservative backed campaign ‘There’s Nothing British about the BNP’ described British values as ‘fairness, decency and standing up for the little guy’ (Nothing British, 2010b) while Gordon Brown talked of the ‘core values of Britishness... liberty, tolerance and fair play’ (Brown, 2004). When Nick Griffin appeared on the BBC’s Question Time in October 2009, Jack Straw said:

What is common about every other political party, regardless of their differences, is that they each have a recognizable moral compass based on longstanding cultural, philosophical, and religious values of Western society.

(quoted in Malik, 2009a)

Of course, these abstract values are themselves both open to argument and are ‘motherhood and apple pie’ values that everyone claims to stand for. The BNP claims to stand for the ‘values of traditional Western Christianity’ (British National Party, 2010b, p. 45) and to stand up for ‘ordinary British people’ against ‘increasing totalitarianism’ (British National Party, 2010a). However, these references to tradition and Christian heritage do point to differences that can be articulated as a British version of the ‘culture wars’: on one side there is an assertive ethno-nationalism that takes white, British, and Christian to be an identity that needs defending; on the other we find a more laissez-faire approach, with the main political parties asserting that ethno-religious others can be full members of the community if they integrate enough.

At the national level mainstream and BNP politicians tell a story of a deep divide and incompatibility, both through what they stand for and what the other stands for. From the



mainstream perspective, Britain is ‘a pluralist, healthy democracy with tolerance, decency and respect at its heart, without space for political or religious extremism’ (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008a, p. 140), while the far right wants to undermine democracy and is illiberal and intolerant. From the BNP perspective, Britain should be ‘free, sovereign and independent’ and this has been undermined by ‘multiculturalism, political correctness, [and the] country flooded with foreigners and our own people made into second-class citizens’ (N. Griffin, 2010). Thus the politics of the BNP are taken to be incompatible with modern life, or more specifically, the balance of tolerance and integration that comprises the British version of multiculturalism supported by mainstream politicians.

Those responses to the far right that directly refer to and address the BNP have also emphasised the difference between normal politics and the BNP, describing them as ‘not like any other party’ (Dear, 2009). Members of the BNP are not allowed to be police or prison officers, and similar bans have been proposed for nurses, teachers, school governors and other groups (Eatwell, 2010, p. 214), with the then Schools Secretary, Ed Balls, saying ‘I have always believed that membership of any organisation that espouses racist views is fundamentally incompatible with the values and ethos of the teaching profession’ (BBC, 2009b).

And like the American ‘culture war’, the UK’s division between the moderates and the extremists is characterised as that of two incompatible ‘worldviews’. The first vision is that of an ‘overwhelmingly positive story of migration, integration and diversity’ (Blunkett, 2004, p. 2). The second vision is that of ‘a former superpower, subsumed by supranational forces and losing touch with its rural English soul’ (Andrews & Marinetto, 2010, p. 1) that sees the European Union, immigration, and Islam, all encouraged by secular liberalism, as

gradually destroying the national fabric. Indeed, the English Defence League's link to the Tea Party movement is founded on a shared belief that Islamism of the kind I discuss in chapters 4 and 5 is the inevitable result of immigration and multiculturalism (Elgot & Lipman, 2010).

### ***East Estate's 'community politics'***

At the level of the nation and the city council the ideas of a deep divide or fundamental incompatibility of values translate into a *cordon sanitaire* approach to the problem of the BNP. The culture war analysis creates an extreme-right that can 'be considered as a sort of moral disease which needs to be condemned morally, not fought politically' (Mouffe, 2005, p. 57), and therefore isolated as opposed to engaged. To these ends national government has reacted as though fearing the presence of the BNP would infect the body politic. When the BNP gained two seats in the European Parliament, MPs voted to withdraw the rights to a Westminster pass from all 72 MEPs (Index on Censorship, 2009), and similar angst was shown over the invitation of BNP MEPs to a Buckingham Palace garden party.

In Stoke-on-Trent mainstream politicians have used similar tactics. When the BNP won its first council seat in the city in 2003, the Labour councillors turned their backs or left the room when the new councillor made his acceptance speech. In 2004 Labour councillors proposed reversing a 2002 decision to have 'political balance' in the allocation of positions on the various council committees, in order to deny BNP councillors these places (Coligan, 2004), and the lack of a majority party has also forced the main groups into coalitions that have included almost all but the BNP (Robinson, 2010).

The *cordon sanitaire* also extended to contact outside the formal engagement of the council chamber. Margie reported feeling surprised by the ‘vindictiveness’ and ‘aggression’ of the Labour councillors:

It was just the fact that you felt like when you walked in that you were scum... You were racist, you were everything except what you really was because nobody'd give you a chance and nobody asked.

(Interview 1)

Margie also felt that some of the response to BNP councillors was ‘tantamount to bullying’, and described some electioneering as ‘horrendous’: ‘leaflets [were] put out about me that I sat and made *Zyklon*<sup>4</sup> at home, and I thought how, you know... how childish’ (Interview 1).

This approach of isolating and condemning was not universal, but was to some extent policed by mainstream politicians. Peter, who was East Estate’s Conservative councillor said:

It doesn’t mean you’re selling your soul... because you talk to [Margie]. There’s a lot of attitude down there that, you know, “I can’t talk to them. I’ll never talk to them.” You know, “You’re mixing with the enemy,” as somebody said to me once just because I was talking to one of them in the corridor.

(Interview 1)

### **The neighbourhood polity and the ‘cordon sanitaire’**

At the neighbourhood level – in this instance, the approximately 7,000 homes covered by East Estate – the *cordon sanitaire* approach would have been incredibly difficult. As my

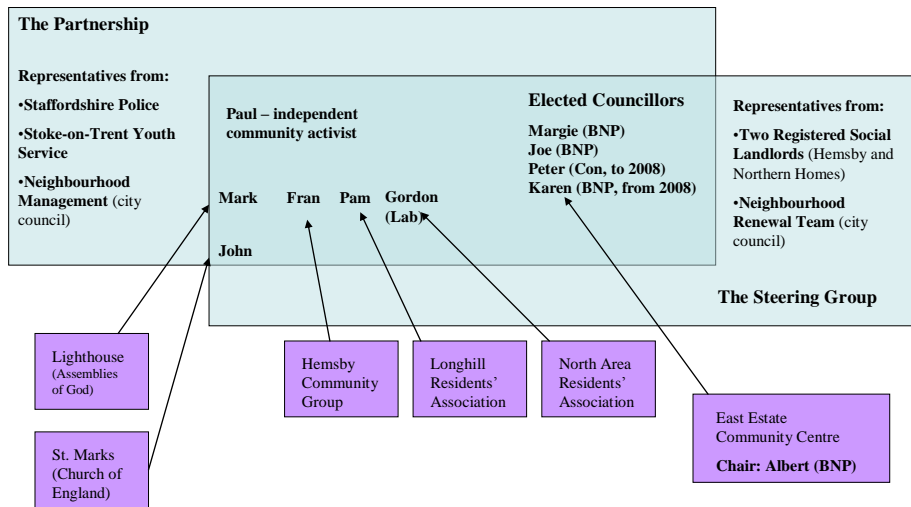
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<sup>4</sup> A reference to Zyklon B, the chemical used in the Nazi’s gas chambers.

research progressed two and then all three of the ward's councillors were part of the BNP group. Each won their seat with approximately 9% of the electorate voting for them, and if proportionate across the ward then this would mean 450 of East Estate's 5200 adults voted BNP. As a result of this success the three BNP activists joined the estate's 'neighbourhood polity', an overlapping set of committees and groups that provide the context for 'community politics'. Albert, who was chair of the East Estate Community Centre committee, was also briefly a member of the BNP.

These people joined a number of other 'active citizens' – those running residents' associations and other community groups, representatives from local charities, and church leaders – and employees of the local authority, police and youth service, in attending regular meetings. Meetings of the 'Steering group' took place around ten times a year under the auspices of Renew, the city's Housing Renewal body, as part of the 'community involvement' that accompanies such regeneration work (see Raco, 2003). A monthly meeting, with a very similar attendance, aimed to produce a 'Partnership' between the various 'third' and state sector organisations working on the estate, with leadership from the 'community'. Steering Group and Partnership discussions also prompted other meetings including those of a newly formed 'community gardens' group, and police consultation on local crime and disorder (see figure 1, below).

**Figure 1: East Estate's neighbourhood polity, 2008**



In some contexts there were attempts to construct barriers to BNP participation that reflect the *cordon sanitaire*. When Karen attempted to post an advert for Joe's monthly surgery at the Hemsby Community House, Fran refused to let her place it, saying that she only allowed adverts for events at the house itself. This included Peter's weekly surgery, and the Labour MP's monthly surgery, leading Karen to ask whether the Hemsby Community Group is a 'Labour place', despite Peter being a member of the council's Conservative and Independent group. BNP councillors approached both the Hemsby and North Area groups, hoping to do surgeries in their venues, but failed to come to an agreement with either group. Instead, Joe conducted his surgery in the community centre, and all three councillors were available weekly at an evening bingo session in the community centre.

Gordon's North Area Residents' Association also kept the BNP councillors at a distance to begin with. Even though Gordon was building a relationship with Joe and Margie, he and the NARA committee did not want to have them attend their meetings. When the Council advised the group to engage with the BNP, Gordon then had to convince others that they should do so:

I was advised by the Council that I should invite a councillor along to the Residents' Association. I accept that. And I've got away with it for ages, like with not inviting them along. I didn't like Peter but I invited him to every meeting, I invited him to come to every meeting. Now I did more than that for them because the committee didn't want them there, so I'd got to fight the committee, if you know what I mean, I tried to, went down to change their mind.

(Gordon, Interview 1)

John, the vicar of St Marks, and Mark, community pastor at the Lighthouse had similar concerns. Indeed, because the BNP 'promote[d] itself as a guardian of 'British Christian heritage' against an increasing 'islamification' of British society and the leadership of the mainstream churches' (Mission and Public Affairs Division, 2010, p. 1), the Church of England felt it necessary to provide guidance for churches to reject the 'evil' of racism. This included advice on whether BNP candidates should be invited to hustings in church halls, how to avoid engaging with BNP councillors, and recognising that 'council staff and other public employees will have no choice about whom they work with... [and] may need pastoral support and need your prayers' (Mission and Public Affairs Division, 2010, p. 5). In East Estate, however, meeting rooms at the two churches were used as the venues for the Partnership and Steering Group meetings, and John and Mark were key figures at the meetings, acting as secretary and treasurer. Thus, these two church leaders *were* working with BNP councillors closely. Furthermore, when Margie, the BNP councillor who was most heavily involved in community activities, set up a 'gardens group' the initial meeting was held in the nave of St Marks' church.

In the context of the Partnership and Steering Group meetings, then, the BNP councillors were not isolated or kept behind a *cordon sanitaire*. Of the ten people attending both sets of meetings, and the spin-off groups too, three were the BNP councillors. Furthermore, most meetings had a regular attendance of ten to twelve people, and meetings were informal: in this context BNP councillors worked together with other active citizens in a form of participative democracy.

Despite the denials of those present, these meetings and bodies *are* political. These meetings are described by participants and official guidance as ‘non-political bodies that represent all residents in an area’ (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, 2008, p. 13) and individuals are not supposed to be representing sectional interests, whether party political or their particular organisation. However, those attending do so because of their backgrounds and particular constituencies.<sup>5</sup> As the assumed difference between the extremists and everyone else is predicated on the binaries of intolerance/tolerance, and nostalgic/modern Britishness, I will now discuss instances of neighbourhood politics where these issues come to the fore.

## **Racism and intolerance**

Despite a recent history of academic deconstruction of ‘monolithic racism’ into multiple historically and socially constituted ‘racisms’ (Goldberg, 1990), and research showing that ‘racist stereotypes are embedded in all our imaginations’ (Myers, 2005, p. 4) there remains the idea that racism is a ‘thing’ that some have, but most do not: there are ‘racists’ and then everyone else. Thus Kundnani (2007) argues that the integrationist discourse of

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<sup>5</sup> Despite an open invitation, the vast majority of those attending were noted as representatives of particular groups. This representation, though, was not particularly deep: two of the three residents’ association were engaging with between 20 and 30 people each, and the other was moribund, while St Marks had contact with around 50 people from the estate.

mainstream politics ‘tend[s] to equate racism solely with support for the extreme-Right British National Party’ (p. 37). Preston and Feinstein (2004) find ‘a *clearly defined* group of individuals with ‘extremist’ racist-authoritarian attitudes’ who are the problem, and others for whom education will help avoid them becoming part of this group (p. iv). The ‘folk theory’ or common sense view is that ‘a racist is a person who believes that people of color are biologically inferior to whites [and] racism is what this kind of white supremacist thinks and does... such people are anachronisms’ (Hill, 2008, p. 6). In this formulation, racism fits neatly with the culture war hypothesis.

As discussed in chapter 2, in the context of community cohesion policy in the UK the language of race and racism has been replaced by that of ‘intolerance’ (Cantle, 2001, p. 40). This broader concept is useful first because old racisms can be reconfigured in religious or cultural terms, with defenders arguing that these attitudes are *not* racist. Second, the concept brings in other intolerances such as homophobia and misogyny which are further barriers to cohesion. However, like the previous dichotomy of the racist and non-racist, this reformulation divides society up into the tolerant and the intolerant. Here, then, I examine the exhibited intolerances in East Estate.

As East Estate is a very white working-class neighbourhood, there is little opportunity for overtly racialised politics. All those attending the Steering Group and Partnership meetings were white, and the vast majority of those living on the estate, and so being on the receiving end of the groups’ activities, were also white. However, the organising of community events where groups and people were brought in from outside did provide for some engagement with issues of race and racism.

One example arose when the group were discussing the estate’s annual carnival – of which more later – and in particular who to invite to cut the ribbon and declare the event open. Gordon, suggested Garth Crooks, a former Stoke City footballer, while Margie suggested



Robbie Williams, the Stoke-born pop star, or Charlie Dimmock, the presenter of gardening programmes. Gordon pushed for Garth Crooks in order to test the BNP councillors, and perhaps to prove an anti-racist stance. By presenting the option of a Stoke born-and-bred 'black' Briton with a connection to the estate, BNP councillors could be forced to either take a position that appeared racist or hypocritical. However, opposition came from others, not the BNP councillors, with the claim that Crooks was 'past it' despite being on TV at least once a week.

One event that did raise fears of racialised politics was the World Food Day, organised by volunteers from the Hemsby group, after Fran proposed it, and the Lighthouse church. Each year, free food was provided at stalls labelled Staffordshire, Scotland, Wales, Jewish, Poland, Israel, Ghana, Pakistan, France, Greece, the Caribbean, China and USA and with the exception of the Caribbean stall, was staffed by individuals claiming the labelled heritage. Entertainment was provided by a number of groups: a Morris dancing 'side' and a female a capella group singing folk songs from around the world with some shared membership; bhangra dancers; two men playing dhols;<sup>6</sup> and between this a local youngster DJ'd.

From the beginning, this event was designed to address issues of community cohesion: Fran and Pam, organising the first event in 2007 talked of 'integration' and getting the involvement of 'new members of the community'. In 2008 and 2009 Partnership meetings provided a context for further involvement and organisation: the local police organised for the road outside the gardens to be closed for the day, and the youth services representative saw how he could tick a 'cultural event' box if he was able to get young people involved. The 2008 event was also combined with the opening of a community garden, funded by

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<sup>6</sup> Drum originating on the Indian subcontinent.

Renew and to be managed by the Hemsby Group.<sup>7</sup> Mark from the Lighthouse church recognised that an area with three BNP councillors, and a high BNP vote, could be viewed as having a racist and potentially intolerant population: ‘I was waiting for something to hit the fan...I did that on purpose, brought them in... [but] everyone said how great it was to see black people or Asian people’ (Mark, Interview 2).

The event had all the elements – ‘samosas, saris, and steel drums’ (Lammy, 2002, p. 36) – of state-sponsored multiculturalism and the association of this approach with anti-racism could make it anathema to BNP politicians, in particular as events such as this are emblematic of funding being used to ‘degrade British culture’ (British National Party, 2010b, p. 7; see also Hewitt, 2005). However, Margie and Joe, the two BNP councillors attended the event and Margie spoke positively of the experience:

That was a really good day and we got some really good feedback from that... it was a success.

(Margie, Interview 3)

A bit of diversity is good... world food day worked wonderfully well.

(Margie, Interview 1)

I found out after the fact that Joe had spent some time chatting to those manning the Jewish stall, without revealing that he was the local BNP councillor. After Jake, one of those manning the Jewish stall, had been told that Joe was the BNP councillor, he brought the issue up with Joe later in the day:

He came back, so we asked are you BNP? He expressed surprise that this might be an issue. Sort of saying why should a BNP councillor not speak and be friendly with

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<sup>7</sup> The community garden was inspired by Fran’s conversation with a primary school age neighbour who mistook a tomato on its plant for an apple.

those on the Jewish stall. He also talked to those on a gay and lesbian stall and Afro Caribbean stall.

(Jake, telephone interview)

Although their participation could be seen as a cynical attempt to deny racism, the BNP councillors' attendance could also alienate their most racist supporters. On a small scale this mirrors the 'modernization' issues discussed above. At the 2009 event, Margie attended with her grand-daughter, of mixed 'white-British' and black heritage, making a further statement of denial of racism. Indeed, when a proportion of BNP voters are concerned about immigration, but against racism, a BNP candidate needs to avoid appearing extreme: 'where a party started getting very big on the back of racist or violent sort of views, through the extremism, then they'd be dropped like a hot potato by most people' (BNP voter in Burnley quoted in Rhodes, 2009, p. 150)

Indeed, Joe was also invited, as a city councillor, to attend two events as part of the visit of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Pele to the city:

We went to the Tutu evening. I think Desmond Tutu ... I mean I have nothing against him personally, but he's like the King's new clothes. Everybody's saying, "Oh how inspiring, how fantastic," and err honestly I observed him and listened to what he said and he didn't say anything inspiring or anything fantastic. He was just trying to play the fool and err sound like some American cartoon character, you know, one of the Simpsons or something like that. I didn't find him inspiring. I heard him speak twice, Friday and ... I heard him speak on the Friday evening and the Saturday evening at the Banks/ Pele Gala Dinner.

(Interview 2)

At the same time Joe was open about his belief in racial categorisation and the long term appeal of far-right politics:

[The National Front] sort of interested me that they were challenging the fact that the establishment were trying to tell you that basically immigration or whatever was the right thing for the country, and I could plainly see that it wasn't. And I've always been able to see that, I mean, racially aware may be a phrase, I've always been very racially aware, everybody should be. If people choose to accept the multiculturalism, the argument for multiculturalism, that's up to them, but it doesn't stop them being racially aware, because there is racial differences, I don't care what anybody says, I can't run as fast as an African, Chinese people can't drink the alcohol, they get drunk very good, but there's racial differences. I mean looking at me, you'll probably realise I perhaps come across with the Vikings somewhere [laugh].

(Joe, Interview 1)

Indeed, the version of multiculturalism demonstrated by World Food Day is entirely compatible with Joe's 'folk racism'. Both are predicated on fixed and separable categorisations of people into 'ethnicities', denying hybrid or syncretic 'new ethnicities' (Back, 1996), and falling back on tried and tested stereotypes, the sari, the samosas, and the steel drum.<sup>8</sup> As noted by Malik (2003), the BNP nationally have appropriated the language of multiculturalism as they ask for recognition of English ethnic identities and English traditions.

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<sup>8</sup> I personally offered to cook for the 2008 World Food Day, mentioning my south Indian dishes, and in particular a hybrid 'oatcake dosa', using the Stoke-on-Trent oatcake with the masala filling of dosas from Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Despite my independent invention of this dish, I have since discovered an earlier version by Steve Dixon (1985). I felt the response from the World Food Day organiser was one of blank incomprehension.

As well as the various 'British' foodstuffs the event included Morris dancing that could be characterised as a 'performance' of national identity (Edensor, 2002). Interestingly, on this occasion the side was performing in 'black face', a form of Morris dancing that has found itself rejected from multicultural events in the past due to its racist connotations (Herbert, 2000). While a simplistic racist/non-racist analysis would suggest that this activity could be promoted by BNP sympathisers in defiance of 'political correctness gone mad', and opposed by mainstream activists, this was certainly not the case. In this instance, the Morris dancing was organised and led by a member of the Hemsby group, who was also involved in feminist and anti-racist campaigning.

Just as in Back's (2003) description of his meeting with Nick Griffin, Joe and Margie were not uncomfortable in the presence of people of different backgrounds. They do not fit the stereotype of the Nazi boot boy who could not attend a multicultural event. 'The association, of the BNP and its members and supporters with neo-Nazism appears to be an over-simplistic characterization of what remains a more complex constituency' (Rhodes, 2009, p. 159), and this complexity was recognised by Joe himself in his discussion of homophobia and homosexuality.

At the national level the BNP are openly homophobic, although they claim to be more 'gay friendly' (see Pink News, 2010). Nick Griffin's appearance on BBC's Question Time included him saying:

I said that a lot of people find the sight of two grown men kissing in public really creepy. I understand that homosexuals don't understand that but that's how a lot of us feel, Christians feel that way, Muslims, all sorts of people.

(BBC, 2009c)

Within Stoke-on-Trent's political scene homophobia was, for a time, a much more obvious question because the city had openly gay leadership in Mike Wolfe<sup>9</sup> and Mark Meredith, the city's two elected mayors (Grew, 2008). Joe pointed out that some of his group of BNP councillors were homophobic, but this was not limited to the BNP councillors:

I mean within every group at that council, you know, on this mayoral issue, err there's ... there's homophobic people because the last two mayors we've had are openly gay. You know, you know that. I mean I ... I don't count myself to be homophobic and Margie isn't, but certainly within our group there is and err ... but the people asking us to get involved in this campaign behind the scenes are ... you know, gay, openly homosexual.

(Joe, Interview 2)

In fact, of those I interviewed and spent time with it was Gordon who exhibited the most memorable intolerant reaction. While walking the streets with Gordon and another Labour activist as they delivered election leaflets the conversation turned to the outgoing Labour mayor, Mark Meredith, and Gordon responded with a shouted 'bloody poof'. This fitted with the description of Gordon given to me by a council officer before I had met him – 'old Labour but with right-wing views, like a lot of people round here' – and with the testimony of Mike Wolfe who said 'he suffered homophobic insults from the Labour establishment and would hear local politicians casually refer to "darkies"' (Barkham, 2008). And although Gordon said that 'it's difficult to work with that ilk, with racist bigots' he then went on to describe his position as 'it's a good idea to stop all these immigrants coming in, like, but we don't want them [the BNP] doing it' (Interview 2): he admitted that his viewpoint was very similar to that of the BNP councillors. Peter, the councillor who lost his seat to the BNP's Karen had a similar formulation: 'I agree with some of the things that

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<sup>9</sup> The voting pattern in Mike Wolfe's election included at least some people who voted BNP as their first choice and an openly gay civil rights activist as their second choice.

[the BNP] say. There are problems which we all know, but it's the way you deal with them' (Peter, Interview 1).

## **Nationalisms and Britishness**

While intimately related to issues of race, racism, and multiculturalism, the nationalisms of the British National Party and mainstream actors deserve separate treatment, particularly with reference to nostalgia for mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Britain, especially World War Two and a lost 'British way of life'. Debates over 'Britishness' in the 1990s and 2000s asked what kind of nation Britain is or should be, what symbols should Britons rally around, and how should Britons, newcomers and non-newcomers alike, think and behave: 'national identities reflect fantasies about the kind of society in which citizens 'ought' to live' (Andrews & Marinetto, 2010, p. 1). This is a wider debate than that on attitudes to migrants with other skin tones, as it takes in the place of Britain in the world, the end of empire, the countryside and the city.

The beginning of the New Labour era was accompanied by the promotion of 'Cool Britannia', an attempt to renew British identity, both for internal and external audiences (see Leonard, 1997). Contrasts were made between the 'Britishness as being outward-looking, open and internationalist' (Brown, 1998) and an inward and backward-looking closed nationalism. While it is clear that the government's promotion of this version of Britishness is itself a form of nationalism which seeks to emphasise the nation's superiority and is a 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1995), it is important to note that it is also defined against older forms of nationalism and national identity. Again we find two competing visions that are deeply divided and incompatible:

The [old] nationalist view serves reactionary elements from the Daily Telegraph to the BNP. The multicultural image of Britishness seems to serve, more than anything else, the interests of the liberal elite.

(Andrews & Marinetto, 2010, p. 15).

Furthermore, as Andrews and Marinetto (2010) point out, this new ‘vision [has] at least some empirical validity’ (p. 5): not only is Britain ethnically diverse, but it is a willing member of supranational organisations, and is increasingly urban and globally connected. Visions of Britain (and England) that hark back to ‘Two World Wars and one World Cup’, the Empire, or the rural life exemplified by *The Archers* are easily consigned as nostalgic and backwards (see Gilroy, 2004).

At East Estate’s annual carnival, again organised by the Partnership, the BNP councillors did trade on this nostalgia for ‘traditional British... culture’ (British National Party, 2010b, p. 45). At the 2008 carnival the BNP councillors organised a stall for the carnival. Like others in the Partnership, they brought an idea to the table, and when it was approved they went off to organise it.<sup>10</sup> Two of the councillors knew of Farmer Bill, who was brought into the carnival to provide ‘traditional village fete’ style games, which he ran wearing a bright green hat, red waistcoat and union flag bow tie. The councillors had met him through the BNP itself as Farmer Bill had done his stall at the BNP’s ‘Red, White and Blue’ festival earlier that year, as well as at church fetes. On the day, both Joe and two other BNP councillors from other wards helped Farmer Bill to man the stall, taking money from youngsters and setting up the games. Most of the takings were given to the Partnership, contributing £40 to the funds for running the event.

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<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Gordon wanted to have a farm animal display and knew of an organisation that would be prepared to attend for a small fee.



More politically charged, however, was a similarly nostalgic theme for the 2008 carnival. This event was started in 2007 by Pam, chair of the Longhill Residents' Association, and was run with assistance from the other groups in the Partnership. Pam felt a degree of ownership, but as the event became bigger in subsequent years, the Partnership became the site of its organisation, and so the community and public sector representatives worked together to create the subsequent events. All those in the Partnership could contribute, and if those ideas were agreed upon by the group, then the individual making the proposals would then work to bring them about.

At the May meeting of the Partnership, Margie suggested that the Carnival take a World War Two theme. She argued first that the carnival was a few days before Battle of Britain day, and second that the community garden projects that were being developed at the time could hark back to the *Dig for Victory* campaign and the Women's Land Army. This decision, at the time, was concrete and Karen, just elected as the third BNP councillor was charged with contacting the local Armed Forces Careers office and a World War Two re-enactment group, in order to provide substance for the idea. Together the BNP councillors were taking ownership of the theme, at the very least.

Others present disliked the BNP councillors' use of World War Two nostalgia due to their party's history of fascism and holocaust denial. After the meeting Peter told me:

[I] had to hold my tongue... they don't believe in any of it... how can a party of that standing be talking about war veterans and, you know, having a themed carnival on war veterans and on the war and, you know, it just doesn't ring true to me. It just doesn't fit.

(Interview 1).

Margie, though, strenuously denied being a holocaust denier and had reacted with incredulity at some of the anti-BNP campaigning:

Yes we've been accused in council of ... they've ... they've said that um ... the elected mayor has said that he's looked on our site and we're nothing but a bunch of fascist, racist thugs, that we're dressed in suits, but we've got a lot to hide. Now I took great offence to that ... great offence.

(Interview 2)

Even without the historical connection of the BNP to fascism, and the continuing connections of some BNP members to overtly fascist organisations,<sup>11</sup> the World War Two theme could have provided a further irony. The theme certainly fitted with the campaigning of the BNP, for example the 2009 'Battle For Britain'<sup>12</sup> and the CDs featuring Vera Lynn. At the time, however, the BNP nationally was priding itself on being the only political party to be calling for an immediate withdrawal from the war in Afghanistan. Thus, Karen's task – 'like yesterday, I was up careers office in Hanley, the army careers, to try and get them to set up a stall on the carnival day, you know, for recruiting young uns' (Interview 1) – did fit with the militaristic nationalism or pride in the armed forces associated with BNP rhetoric, but ends up with recruiting young soldiers to fight in a war the party is against.

Gordon was also very keen on World War Two remembrance, being heavily involved in a campaign to build a new, second, war memorial nearby, and also involved in the organising of the Remembrance Sunday events at the current memorial. Gordon and Margie put forward different reasons for their involvement. Margie's justification for the

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<sup>11</sup> In May 2010 a photo of one Stoke-on-Trent BNP councillor standing with National Front activists doing Nazi salutes was leaked to the press (Nothing British, 2010a)

<sup>12</sup> The BNP's 'Battle for Britain' theme used imagery of World War Two to suggest that Britain's future as a sovereign (white) nation was under threat from increasing numbers of non-white people, and Muslims in particular, and the transfer of power to the European Union. The use of this theme was criticised by, among others, the family of Winston Churchill and former leaders of the British military (BBC, 2009a)

war theme was based on the residents that she spent time with at the bingo, many of whom were elderly women:

I've put lots of suggestions forward for this year's carnival, um, and we thought we'd celebrate World War Two, um, seen as it's the Battle of Britain two days later. But the response I got down here from a lot of residents that had husbands in the armed forces, they were just... So, you know, that is their choice.

(Interview 1)

In contrast, Gordon, who was old enough to have childhood memories of the war, talked of 'wagons full of dead bodies' and 'mass graves', and attending Remembrance services as a child. However, he began attending more regularly as he gained a public face:

I started going down when I started getting involved in local politics, I think, I started going down thirty something years ago. But I think it's our duty to. I think we should show some respect.

(Interview 2)

Unlike other areas in the city, discussions about Remembrance Day and Memorial monuments and spaces were *not* racialised, despite the BNP presence. During my fieldwork in the 'Islamic site', I attended a number of meetings in an area that has a mix of older white and younger Asian residents, and here any problem of a lack of 'respect' for the local war memorial was blamed on Asian teenage boys. In East Estate, lack of interest in attending Remembrance events was put down to young people in general not being interested, and without a significant BME youth presence race was not raised as an issue.

Attitudes to the nation and nationalism, then, are more complex than a simple divide between two idealised visions of Britishness: on the one hand a 'a tolerant liberal society, which is able to accommodate and even celebrate growing ethnic and cultural diversity',

and on the other a nationalist rump with ‘nostalgia for empire, continued greatness in the world and the rural idyll of the English countryside’ (Andrews & Marinetto, 2010, p. 2). While this may characterise the divide between the leadership of the BNP and the ‘liberal elite’, it does not fit with the ‘grassroots’ reality of BNP activists who are comfortable with some diversity *and* nationalistic, and local ‘establishment’ figures who have very similar views.

### ***Anti-establishment attitudes***

For the final section of this chapter, I further explore this relationship to the ‘liberal establishment’. The BNP, and many other similar groups, present themselves as ‘anti-establishment’, and this is usually framed in terms of opposition to the main political parties, the ‘political classes’ (the types of people who are successful in the main parties), and the political correctness that these groups embody. Although the American Tea Party movement is composed largely of self-defined Republicans, dissatisfaction with mainstream Republican party figures was almost as important to activists as opposition to the Democratic party (Washington Post, 2010). The BNP describes itself as an ‘anti-establishment group’ (British National Party, 2011), showing that the idea of them and us is not all one-way traffic of mainstream politicians describing the BNP as extremist: the party ‘asserts that there exists a fundamental divide between the political establishment and the people’ (Abedi, 2004, p. 12). For those with anti-establishment sentiments, the three main parties are one and the same, under the banner ‘LibLabCon’, and political correctness means that real politics has been removed, not allowing ordinary people a voice. I will demonstrate that this attitude was not limited to the BNP activists: mainstream activists and paid council employees voiced similar concerns. This was particularly pertinent when

those involved in the neighbourhood polity considered whether their activities matched up to the national rhetoric of 'empowered communities'.

As discussed earlier, divisive political issues were rarely raised and decisions were made on consensual lines in the neighbourhood polity. The discussions of the Partnership and Steering Group were predicated on a form of politics in which 'getting things done' is more important than discussion aimed at finding points of agreement and disagreement (Weltman & Billig, 2001). Even though the individuals attending represented different groups, were members of different political parties, or otherwise had different worldviews and priorities, meetings were more like a workplace discussion than a debating chamber. From the participants' perspective this was necessary for a successful group:

We are not there to be political, we are there to do the best things for this area and if you start bringing political things into it, then you've got your belief, their belief, my belief. Where does the meeting go then? It all goes on a political vein, stop the meeting, forget it.

(Pam, interview 1)

As part of the belief that the activists should get on with doing good, and be non-political, some participants have a strong opposition to politicking and heated debate. Non-aligned participants, Pam, Paul and Mark all mentioned Gordon, the Labour activist, as a particularly difficult person to work with because of his approach:

Yeah, Gordon is very, very militant and everything in his approach is militant. He's always looking for a way to, um, put something there to pull you up on. It's like he doesn't accept things at face value, you know, um, and people get fed up of that. You can't go... You can't go to a meeting without him trying to score points off someone. He always has to have the last word, you know.

(Paul, Interview 1)

The BNP councillors, however, were praised as being easy to get on with and for being hard working:

Politics aside, if you look at the individual, the individuals doing the work in the community, and if people see them doing the work, they will come to them. I do not like the BNP, but I think Joe and Margie do a lot of good work in East Estate.

(Paul, Interview 2)

Here, then, the participants were against the antagonistic politics of parliament or the council chamber, seeing political debate as a barrier to the business of making life on East Estate better. In this dominant view of community empowerment ‘the citizen [is an] apolitical volunteer engaged in service... the predominant language of civic engagement itself is service, not politics’ (Boyte, 2002, pp. 2-3).

This is not to say that politics was a topic to be completely avoided. Instead of actually doing politics, participants spent time and energy on expressing ‘why we hate politics’ (Hay, 2007). This included anger at the New Labour and Conservative consensus on limiting the role of the public sector and the ‘normalization of neoliberalism’ (Hay, 2007, p. 122). For Weltman and Billig (2001) the political climate of the “Third Way” is one in which ‘good governance... [assumes that] social and economic problems are to be tackled by adopting a technocratic managerialist approach that denies itself to be a particular political choice’ (p. 380). This ‘technocratic’ approach has included the moving of power away from elected politicians through privatisation and promotion of expert knowledge. Participants in the neighbourhood polity attended meetings where they felt frustrated by their lack of real influence, saying that power was held by senior council officers, consultants and the companies that were taking over sections of the local government. Here

both the mainstream activists (Peter, Gordon and Paul) and the BNP activists (Joe and Margie) were all railing against the status quo for similar same reasons:

They say they want empowerment, but they don't mean it.

(Peter, fieldwork notes)

Most of the meetings you get today are fixed... They've said it's up to people to make decisions, but where are the people, who have they invited, who comes along to that meeting? Mostly officers. Who makes the decisions? Officers do, although they make out it's us.

(Gordon, Interview 2)

I do believe it's officer led. I think the councillors are just scapegoats... I actually believe that before any issue hits either the elected members board or full council it is a foregone conclusion and it's already been talked, dictated which way the overriding party want it to go and there's no two ways about that Gavin. I'm absolutely certain in my heart of hearts that is the hidden agenda.

(Margie, Interview 2)

The government just plays lip service to community engagement.

(Joe, fieldwork notes)

You can't say to people we're giving people the voice that when they've got the voice you take it away from them, which is what they've done on two separate occasions with the community facilitation service and also with the Community Empowerment Network.

(Paul, Interview 2)

This dissatisfaction extended to the council officers that attended meetings. Gavin, a neighbourhood officer in East Estate complained of the rocketing maintenance problems since the service had been privatised:

They tried [privatisation] in the early nineties too, and it nearly bankrupted the council... a load of new managers come in, want to appoint new managers, their mates, from elsewhere.

(Fieldwork notes)

There appears to be an irony in the fact that citizens, and not just those deemed extremist, are politically disaffected because national debate has been depoliticised through privatisation and market fundamentalism (see Hay, 2007), yet at the local level have accepted a version of such depoliticisation as the condition for presenting a community voice in regeneration bodies. However, any contradiction dissolves with the prevalent anti-establishment attitudes. From the perspective of East Estate's activists it is the national versions of the two (or perhaps three) main political parties that are playing at politics, arguing for the sake of argument, and ignoring the issues that are important to those in East Estate. East Estates' activists could put aside their political differences precisely because they were united against the political elite.



## **Conclusions**

Believe me, if you ever meet any working-class people, you'll find many of them are just as liberal as you and I. The idea that if you have dirty fingernails you don't want to see homosexual law reform, seems to me to be a terrible middle-class heresy. Liberalism isn't Hampstead at its worst. The assumption that only middle-classes have these decent views - that's Hampstead at its worst. Let's take gay rights. I think the campaign for gay rights probably was what we'll call for the sake of shorthand a Hampstead issue. But the interest, people who had an interest in gay rights spread across the entire social spectrum. I don't think they were all confined to Hampstead. I think you'll find a lot of them in the working-classes. It's a mistake to distinguish between the working class, on one hand, and the liberal - let me use the word which is on the tip of your tongue - the liberal elite on the other hand.

(Roy Hattersley in Grady, 2011)

At the level of national political debate, both sides of the extremist/moderate divide make claims of a deep divide, 'clear blue water', between their ideologies and policies. Even without the accusation of fascism, the BNP are described as reactionary and anti-democratic, anti-semitic and racist, xenophobic and ultra-nationalist, with a modernisation that hides their true nature. From the other side, the main parties are seen as committed to the destruction of the United Kingdom as a nation state through giving sovereignty away, deliberately engineering a multicultural society in which whites are in a minority, and pandering to radical Islamists in the name of political correctness. Reflecting the US's 'culture wars', these two opposing views create 'incommensurable difference' (Farrar, 2008), and debate cannot progress. Policy responses to the far right – including bans on

BNP members being in certain public professions and the *cordon sanitaire* – are predicated on this idea of a fundamental difference between them and us.

Neither the practices of institutions, nor the attitudes and actions of British citizens suggest that we live in a fully liberal multicultural society with a small number of backwards ‘little Englanders’ as the fly in the ointment. The ‘culture war’ thesis mistakes an elite conversation for the reality of wider society (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2006), in which individuals’ attitudes are sometimes messy, incoherent, and contradictory, and not polarised into two camps. In East Estate even those activists nominally allied to political parties, are not easily separated into the liberal and illiberal: Gordon, the Labour activist provided the most obvious example of intolerance while Margie and Joe, the two BNP councillors in post as my research was conducted, were comfortable being part of a multicultural event and disavowed racism and anti-semitism. Although nationalist sentiments do change over time, a generation born around the time of the Second World War are still attached to a ‘traditional story of British identity’ (Leonard, 1997, p. 26). Both BNP and mainstream activists are against elite politicians, and the current establishment consensus. Thus, on questions of race and immigration, nationalism, and attitudes to politics, these BNP activists – not in any way the party’s lunatic fringe – are not extremist in the East Estate context.

Furthermore, the comparator to these supposed illiberal working classes – the ‘liberal elite’, liberal multiculturalism, or right-thinking middle-classes – is itself an imagined ideal. Senior politicians of both main parties have attempted to appear ‘tough’ on issues of race and immigration, despite warnings that their rhetoric could harm ‘community relations’ (see Jasper, 2011). They have also tried to present themselves as against the

‘liberal elite’.<sup>13</sup> William Hague as Conservative leader blamed ‘a “condescending liberal elite” for creating an atmosphere of political correctness which has allowed crime to flourish’ (BBC, 2000), while Jack Straw as Labour’s Home Secretary talked of ‘Hampstead liberals’ opposing his plans to reduce the right to trial by jury (White, 2000). Neither the middle-classes nor the establishment are fully committed to the stereotyped liberal multiculturalism: 61% of all British voters agree that ‘all further immigration to the UK should be halted’ (YouGov, 2009). ‘A majority of British people now support the policies of the BNP [but] their level of enthusiasm falls markedly when they are made aware that the policies they favour... originate with the ultra-right’ (Gilroy, 2006, p. 33).

I am not arguing here that East Estate’s BNP activists and mainstream activists (and the wider population) share their racisms and nationalisms exactly: I am merely demonstrating that these attitudes do not exhibit a great divide. The ‘banal nationalism’ of flags and World War Two remembrance is all pervasive and part of what it means to be a nation state (Billig, 1995). The banal forms of racism and intolerance (Rhodes, 2009) are shared by both BNP councillors, other politicians and other citizens. A black Londoner relocating to Stoke described the local population as ‘not racist, but some people here still use the word ‘coloured’. They’re just not used to black people. You can feel it.’ (Prasad, 2001)

On East Estate, after never coming to the attention of the national media, the election of BNP councillors meant visits from two BBC film crews and *Guardian* journalists. One resident told me, ‘they make you feel like you are racist, no matter what you say’. In order to avoid the conclusion that ‘ordinary’ racism, intolerance and nationalism is prevalent across society, perhaps exhibited by everyone, the dominant ‘folk theory’ of racism is one in which people ascribe racism to some virulently racist other (the BNP or white working

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<sup>13</sup> A liberal elite that is then posited as residing in the teaching or social work professions, or in the BBC.

classes), while they stick to their own racial stereotypes and fear of what Margaret Thatcher *and* David Blunkett described as ‘swamping’ (BBC, 2002).

## **8: ‘Cumulative extremism’ and the state as a third actor**

We need a perfect symmetry in our response to crime and violent extremism. Bigots are bigots, whatever the colour of their skin. Criminals are criminals, whatever their political beliefs. Terrorists are terrorists, whatever their religion.

(Clegg, 2011)

### ***Introduction***

This penultimate chapter departs from the themes of the previous four by examining citizens’ responses to the government discourse of extremism itself, and also departs structurally by considering the two research sites side-by-side. I take Roger Eatwell’s (2006) concept of ‘cumulative extremism’ as my starting point, working with his idea that government is ‘try[ing] to reconcile two or more extremes... where an attempt to appease one can antagonise the other’ (p. 215). I argue that the government rhetoric against extremism can increase fear, through the use of the emotive word ‘extremist’ to describe non-violent activists. This rhetoric also increases perceptions of unfairness, as people feel that particular groups are singled out for judgment as extremists.

I begin by briefly considering the logic of ‘cumulative extremism’, by considering how people know about extremist political activism. I show that, at the time of the research, moderate and extremist activists’ had very little contact with and knowledge of the opposing extremism. Instead, I argue that the prevalence of more generalised assumptions that ‘society is racist’ or ‘Muslims want to take over’ are part of what drives this accumulation. I then explore the range of responses to the dominant portrayal of extremism

and government action against extremism. As expected, activists allied to extremist groups decried their being categorised as extremists. More importantly, I focus on two of the non-extremist Muslim activists, one of whom took a conservative approach of wanting bans for all, and another who took a liberal approach, with both seeing inconsistencies in government anti-extremist policies. In East Estate, participants (bar Joe, the BNP councillor) said nothing about radical Islamism: however, I focus on the response of Mark, the Christian minister, who was positive about the BNP activists' involvement. I also draw on some comments made by public figures, including the police, at the time that Islam4UK and al-Muhajiroun were banned.

I argue that because justifications for categorising groups as extreme are made in simple ideological terms, as opposed to a consideration of the effects of activism, and because groups, not particular actions, are targeted, government policy is widely seen as unfair, undermining community cohesion in the name of strengthening it. I reiterate the finding that those allied to the two extremist groups are not always unusually intolerant to ethno-religious others, and nor are most of their activities beyond democratic norms. Extremist activists are also socially integrated into communities and society. They are not outcasts, radically separated from everyone else. Nor do they all have a racist or otherwise intolerant mindset that is 'all-encompassing, absolute and immutable'. Rather, they are 'contradictory racist subjects' (Gadd & Dixon, 2011, p. 219). To some of those who know them, these activists are *not* extremists. The government response to extremism then becomes a further case to justify arguments that multiculturalism favours one group over another, hence Nick Clegg's comment above being made shortly after Prime Minister David Cameron proclaimed the end of state multiculturalism (Cameron, 2011).

To conclude I argue that the labelling of such individuals or groups as extremist is antithetical to any attempts to take the heightened emotion out of discussions of race,

immigration, integration and community cohesion. By conflating loud-mouthed and publicity-seeking Islamists with terrorism, or anti-immigration attitudes and BNP membership with racist violence, the threat appears to be much more diffuse. Furthermore, those who do know of these extremists see this mis-labelling as further evidence of injustice perpetrated by the elite. Thus ‘cool’ identities are discouraged, and hot and defensive identities are created or reinforced (see McGhee, 2005b). Extremism becomes cumulative through the antagonistic relationship between the state and the extremists, as well as that between the far right and the Islamists

### ***Knowing Extremists***

Given that the British National Party has only around 12,000 members (Booth, 2009) of which the majority will not be activists, and al-Muhajiroun has a few hundred ‘followers’ (Wiktorowicz, 2005, p. 10) who take an active role, British people are very unlikely to have any contact with extremist activists bar what they see on television or seek out on the internet. Even in a city or neighbourhood where the activism takes place, the majority of people will have no personal contact with it. Media accounts of extremist actions are by far the most likely source of knowledge about what extremists do, and these accounts concentrate on demonstrations, marches, and clashes between groups or with the authorities.

These demonstrations, of course, are one scene for the playing out of Eatwell’s cumulative extremism: ‘the NF [National Front] announced it would be holding a march to Finsbury Park Mosque, which would stop Abu Hamsa preaching outside in the road’ (Eatwell, 2006, p. 214). More recently, and as mentioned previously, it was a demonstration by the Luton al-Muhajiroun group that prompted the formation of the United People of Luton in 2009,

later becoming the English Defence League. While this group has carried out a number of demonstrations in places that appear to be chosen for the likelihood of support (Stoke, Newcastle-upon-Tyne), or the presence of large Muslim populations (Bradford, Luton), they have also organised counter-demonstrations against al-Muhajiroun demonstrations (see BBC, 2011). Thus, one form of cumulative extremism could be the ratcheting up of actions by these two groups: shouts of abuse progress to fights progress to riot, or anger within either side prompts violence against third parties or even terrorism.

In addition to these set-piece confrontations there are potentially other versions of cumulative extremism. 'Bradford in 2001 serves as a good example of how the extreme right helped to provoke tensions among ethnic minorities, which were already producing new forms of radical identity politics... For some time before the troubles broke out, both the BNP and NF had been active in the area' (Eatwell, 2006, p. 213). Here, Eatwell points out that many more people than the extremists were drawn into the conflict. Furthermore, we may also ask if the presence of extremists in a particular city, or the existence of extremists per se, motivates people to join the supposedly opposing extremist groups or remain with them, providing sustenance for a continuation or accumulation of extremism.

In this research, however, I found little knowledge of or concern with each extremism from its assumed enemy. No-one in East Estate talked of extremist Muslims, except for Joe, the BNP councillor, who mentioned the Channel 4 Dispatches documentaries about extremism in mosques (see below). Some in Hilltop and Beyond did mention the BNP in passing, with Councillor Khan briefly describing their role in the 2001 disturbances and Iftikhar, the spiritual leader of one of the main mosques, mentioning the party in comparison to the radical Islamists. Of the Islamists themselves, only Nasir talked about the BNP, describing a discussion he had with some people he believed to be BNP members while he was manning the al-Muhajiroun stall:



There was a bit of trouble that we had with the BNP... It was abuse that they were shouting... You know, we're down for debate with the BNP, a discussion, the only thing is, the reason why we don't have a debate with the BNP is because we might end up sort of, in violence with each other because they might ... they might say something which is insulting to us ... because obviously I mean you might get the intellectuals there, but then you're going to get some people who are very, very ... you know, sort of aggressive and do ... rather do violence.

(Interview 1)

However, when Nasir learned that I had previously done interviews with BNP activists he asked me 'Do they know we are around?' Nasir then became defensive when I replied that they had not been mentioned, asserting that the BNP must know about them, because they had been mentioned in the local media after the 2008 terrorism raids. Nasir and the other al-Muhajiroun activists made more of normal societal racism, as described in chapter 4.

It was Munir, the social entrepreneur, who talked the most about the BNP. He had been involved in much of the campaigning against the BNP, working on the Love Music, Hate Racism events in the city. He had also attended meetings with BNP councillors. Indeed, Munir was the only person to talk about actions that come close to Home Secretary Jacqui Smith's 'civil challenge', being somewhat cheeky to both the al-Muhajiroun and BNP activists. As detailed in chapter 5, he 'blasted' his music while driving past the Islamists, asking if they wanted to go clubbing, and also wore a 'Bangladesh National Party' (BNP) t-shirt in a meeting with the BNP to try to get a reaction (Interview 1).

Indeed, it was the lack of any reaction that makes the ‘civil challenge’ impossible. Munir said of the BNP councillors he met:

I’d make sure when I’m walking past them I’ve got the biggest smirk on my face. You know, I know that... that probably gets to them. And, you know, I’d make sure when I see them I make myself look really important and proud, you know? That winds them up seeing an Asian guy walking around thinking he’s the man, yeah, but that’s my way of challenging some of them guys. So they’ve never actually said anything that was, um, you know, something... Because I’d love... I’d love them to, I would absolutely love them to, but they haven’t, so... Maybe if I wasn’t there they probably would have said a load of stuff, but when I’ve been there they haven’t. Which was a shame, do you know what I mean?

(Interview 2)

Here Munir is assuming that the BNP activists are racist enough to want to be abusive, but they are not, and he assumes them to be hiding their true feelings. The challenge that he would like to make towards their racism cannot happen because the racism is not exhibited. There is a disparity between Munir’s expectations of racism, which he has experienced in wider society and expects from the BNP activists, and what he actually experienced in meeting them.

For both extremist and non-extremist Muslim activists, then, the important issue is not the BNP itself but racism, of which the success of the BNP is emblematic. The lack of mention of radical Islamists also suggests that this issue is not a separate concern of extremist or non-extremist white activists. Instead, the existence and activism of radical Islamists is emblematic of the idea that immigration is ‘swamping’ and multiculturalism is marginalising white people:

I am sick of the lot of them [Muslims] and their demands, all take, take, take. They take the piss out of us, bringing in hundreds of them over through arranged marriages and that, looking after one another and fucking us over.

(EDL march participant quoted in Garland & Treadwell, 2010, pp. 29-30)

In this instance the cumulative extremism has arisen not because of personal experience of radical Islamists, but because television footage of radical Islamists demonstrating against British soldiers is seen as one more straw on the camel's back, alongside immigration and arranged marriages, and other perceived threats. Similarly, BNP success can be seen as one more piece of evidence to show that Britain is a racist society that will never accept Muslims as full citizens.

### ***State responses to extremism and further perceptions of injustice***

In this section I explore how participants view the government's responses to the two different forms of extremism, particularly focusing on mainstream activists' impressions of counter-extremism rhetoric and policy. I propose that asymmetric knowledge of extremism – personal or closer knowledge of some extremist activists, and particular activities, combined with a stereotyped view of another extremist movement – means that government policy is easily interpreted as biased against one group or another. Furthermore, as each group is seen as intimately connected to a particular population – BNP to the white working class, al-Muhajiroun to Asian Muslims – the policy is judged to be part of wider establishment anti-Muslim or anti-white-working-class activity.

First, and as would be expected, BNP and al-Muhajiroun activists see the government as picking them out as extremist and unjustly marginalising their politics:

Well you've seen the governance report. You want to have a read of it, it's an establishment set up, how to regain the popularity of the Labour party, with perhaps token Conservatives and Lib Dems, and how to exclude the BNP.

(Joe, Interview 1)

The government say, 'if you disagree with what's happening in Iraq and Afghanistan and Palestine, you're an extremist'. That's what they'd class as an extremist.

(Yasir, Interview 1)

Of course, the government did not define extremism as Islamists' opposition to the war in Iraq, and nor did it define far-right extremism as BNP participation in local councils. However, within this caricature there is a kernel of truth in which very simple singular attributes, that is the membership of al-Muhajiroun or the BNP, come to stand for far more, contradicting the far more diverse nature of both the groups and individual activists.

If we were to take the dominant media images of the two groups, with al-Muhajiroun on a demonstration carrying slogans such as 'Behead those who insult Islam' (Dodd, 2006), and a BNP council candidate getting into a physical confrontation with Asian youngsters (BBC, 2010), then we are looking at extreme and possibly illegal actions. However, just as Sen (2007) argues that 'civilizational' identity does not determine all, or even much, of a person's self, nor does membership or alliance to a particular group. The BNP has attracted, through modernisation of policy and appearance, a 'diverse constituency' (Rhodes, 2010), and within the al-Muhajiroun group some seemed to me to be more extreme than others.

Although some of the BNP activists in East Estate were involved in a divisive demonstration that called for 'Justice for Keith Brown', a BNP activist killed by his

Muslim neighbour (McInnes, 2008), the rest of the time their work was exactly the same as that of mainstream activists. If an observer was to attend an East Estate Partnership meeting, he or she would not know which were extremist activists, and which were not. Similarly, some of the al-Muhajiroun activists did attend the organisation's national demonstrations, and even appeared on television. However, as I described earlier when I first met them in the street, before the fieldwork began, I did not recognise them as extremist activists: they were friendly and engaging and showed no signs of intolerance. While I disagreed with the leaflets' arguments, I saw nothing offensive or threatening. As Gadd and Dixon (2010) find when talking of racism, this extremism was not 'all-encompassing, absolute and immutable' (p. 219), and much of the time was not exhibited at all.

However, as I argue in chapter 2, the activities of each group are considered a threat to community cohesion, and a precursor to violent extremism. Hence Iftikhar, a Sufi imam in one of the main mosques, seemed to be arguing that both sets of groups and activities should be subject to much greater restriction:

We need to revisit the Human Rights Bill. We need to revisit the freedom to speak and freedom to practice whatever you believe in bill... They [the al-Muhajiroun activists] must have been doing something for them to get raided. So they need to go and practice what the rest are practising. There's no smoke without fire, sort of thing... Look, racism is illegal. Let's not beat about the bush. The BNP policy, the ideology and theology of Enoch Powell. Although the NF doesn't exist, it's reflected. Now they're trying to frilly it up to become more political, but the true agenda still exists... on one hand we're saying we've got the Equality Act, we've got the Race Relations Act. On one hand we know what they stand for and then we've got an act allowing them to have the freedom of this as well.

(Interview 2)

Here he is using a conservative argument that liberal human rights discourse and law allows people to act in a way that goes beyond what he considers acceptable, and what he interprets to be mandatory due to equality laws. From the mainstream Muslim perspective the radical Islamist groups should be restricted because they bring trouble to Muslims in the form of retaliation by white racists who attack individuals and mosques –in Stoke an attempt was made to blow up the new central mosque in December 2010 (Robinson & King, 2010) – and the far-right should be restricted because ‘racism is illegal’.

In contrast, Munir, much younger and much less conservative in attitude, argued that the Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) policies were ‘demonising Muslim communities’ (Interview 1), and in his involvement in PVE Pathfinder had challenged its Muslim-only focus. He argued that ‘the BNP's a bigger threat than probably any Muslim community’ as they are ‘racist thugs hiding behind suits’, and then asked why the Soho nail bomber, David Copeland, was not described as a Christian terrorist to parallel the phrase ‘Muslim terrorist’ (Interview 1). He also did not view the al-Muhajiroun group as extremists or terrorists:

These guys, they're not terrorists. What they are, they're idiots. And what they are is, they.... they're the kind of guys in a year's time, leave them be, they'll move onto something else. Yeah? And what people have done, and it's given them the attention they need. Come on, a group of 16 and 17 year old lads, you've just put them on national media for God's sake. You just put them on *The Sentinel* front page doing a news report.... you know, a big news report. I mean they've been on the daily Independent and all that kind of stuff, they are loving it, yeah. When I spoke to them on the streets, they didn't give a shit about the fact that they got bloody raided; they were look at us on the front page.

(Interview 1)

There's nothing, nothing offensive about [the leaflets]. There's nothing... there's... that's telling anybody to do criminal acts. A lot of them's based around I think the stuff that's happening in Iran and America, and it's stuff that's engaged governments rather than people. So, you know, the stuff about what the Bush administration did or whatever, it's not about the American people.

(Interview 2)

Munir felt that the raids on the group's homes were to prove to the public that the terror threat was real, and that the lack of charges showed that there was no threat. However, he felt that this police action could increase support for the BNP, allowing them to '[go] out visiting people in the community, and [ask] "Did you know there's been terrorism raids in Hilltop?"' (Interview 2).

Despite his activism against the BNP he was not in support of any ban for them either, arguing that groups can just change their names, and also talking about the possibility of individual change:

Do I really think the BN... every member of the BNP is racist? No, I don't. You know, one of my members of staff, her dad was a BNP member. We didn't know this she told us sort of like, um, very late on. But he would turn up to a lot of our projects and he's now cancelled his membership. Not because he's... he's felt bad or anything, he actually... You know, some of the stuff he thought he was emotionally attached to, he actually saw these kids and people working... You know, he saw his daughter working with them, he saw... You know, so the stuff that he might have read or heard about, or said about, or whatever, he's actually

realised from a positive experience that, you know... um, and now he's cancelled his membership.

(Interview 2)

Similar attitudes could be found in East Estate. Gordon, with a long-term involvement in party politics, was quick to condemn the BNP activists as fascists:

I've got a problem with fascism. And we've got two BNP councillors who claim they are not fascists, but their preachings are if you know what I mean, even if they aren't.

(Interview 1)

It's difficult to work with that ilk, with racist bigots, I find it impossible to be honest with you.

(Interview 2)

At the same time, however, Gordon said of Joe, 'I find him to be a reasonable chappie to speak to, but his politics I abhor' (Interview 1) and noted that:

They came across alright, to be honest with you... They were just talking, like me and you are talking now. They didn't come across political and say 'Oh nasty niggers' ... They didn't come across like that.

(Interview 2).

Peter, admitting that he was not part of previous political battles but with a few years' experience as a councillor, felt that the earlier approach of isolating the BNP – a local *cordon sanitaire* – had not been productive:

I might disagree with you, it doesn't mean I don't have to speak to you. I mean you meet people daily in your life that you don't agree with, but just to simply ignore



him and treat him as though he's ... you know, a complete outcast, well I'm sorry you can't do that... and at the end of the day [I believe] you are also driving people to vote BNP because... if a member of the public was following me in there and they saw that, they would think that exactly. "There you go again, the old guard, you know, them bloody Labour lads again," you know, "Real, nasty old guard,". I think it puts people off politics. It puts me off politics.

(Interview 1)

Mark, the church minister, also was unwilling to avoid engagement with extremists. Furthermore, he saw the presence of some extremism as being part of useful debate, echoing arguments that electoral competition is necessary for the health of democracy:

What we desperately need is a variety of opinion. And with that, you're going to have excesses one way or the other way. It's like a pendulum. It'll swing to one extent to the other extent... And you need that diversity of thought. Now, that doesn't mean it's always easy to get on with. It doesn't always mean it's easy to get an agreement with. But what it does mean is that you've got people, er, who are expressing their views. And extremism, sometimes, is very necessary. Very necessary to see because you find a middle line out of all that, a compatible way of working forward.

(Interview 2)

This is not to say that he would accept the expression of any views: 'If they started to become racist or become inflammatory then I'd step in then and take a different line on it. Because that's not what we're about as a community.' (Interview 1). However, Mark felt that, beyond her membership of the party, Margie did not have beliefs or act as an extremist:

She's got a heart for people. Now, take the tab off the label, put that on one side, and see the person, then you've got a great, generous person. A hearty person who's passionate about people, who cares about the needs of people and, er, anybody who... the underclass. And people who have, um, issues of uncomfortableness, she gets involved and gets stuck in there and she gets her hands dirty.

(Interview 2)

Neither Mark nor Munir saw the BNP and al-Muhajiroun activists, respectively, they know personally, as extremist individuals. This, then, has potential to de-legitimise state action against those they call extremists, or media labelling of groups or individuals as extremist. Dixon and Gadd (2006) argue, in the context of racially motivated crime, that the law conflates those 'whose principal offence may not be any extraordinary commitment to racism, but an inability to control their language in moments of stress and/or when under the influence of alcohol [and those who]... 'commit acts of violence and harassment of minorities out of a deliberate and conscious hatred', and that this undermines support for the state's actions (p. 324). In the same way, grouping anyone associated with the BNP or al-Muhajiroun with terrorists – as Nick Clegg does in the quote above when he connects the *acts* of crime and violent extremism with a description of *people* as bigots – obscures the range of Islamist and far right activities spanning the legal and illegal and puts them all in the category of extremist.

Therefore, for those who are susceptible to fear the problem of extremism is hugely magnified. If al-Muhajiroun as a group is designated terrorist – as it was when banned – then society is given the message that there are hundreds of terrorists walking the streets regularly doing demonstrations. Likewise, if the BNP as a group is deemed fascist or violent, then East Estate, with a few hundred BNP voters and three BNP councillors should

be a place to be feared: writing of Bradford's citizens voting BNP, Carling (2008) says that the 'results will have broadcast a message about the unsavoury character of a substantial section of Bradford society' (p. 575). On the other hand, those who see the distinction between political extremism and political or extremist violence as important may see the state's attempts to conflate the two as part of a strategy of disciplining certain sections of society, or encouraging or coercing assimilation in the realm of values.

Furthermore, both those who are conservative and would like to see this assimilation, *and* those who are liberal and against this approach, see the community cohesion / PVE focus on extremist groups as failing to be even handed. Iftikhar would have liked to see far-right groups banned alongside al-Muhajiroun, whereas Munir felt that banning any group was wrong and that the focus on Islamists and not the far-right was evidence of institutional racism:

I just felt the government was demonising Muslim communities, you know, you're setting up a project just to challenge um, what to call it, extremism in the Muslim community. The BNP's a bigger threat than probably any Muslim community, you know, in the country. So we challenged that quite heavily, err to the point where we said to the... city council, this is a list of BME groups. Um and I'm talking not just Muslims, I'm talking most of them, they're non-Muslim groups um that turned around and said we will not engage with your services until you challenge with us.

(Interview 1)

On the other hand, when far-right groups have been subject to heightened censure, some have felt that this was unfair. Margie, the BNP councillor, and Peter, the Labour activist, both said that when the first BNP councillors were elected, many of the other councillors treated them badly. In particular, Peter described a senior Labour councillor talking about the BNP activists:

He went into a rant of, you know, “Can’t even talk to them, I wouldn’t even spit on them,” and all this sort of business and I thought, “Well how immature”.

(Interview 1)

These arguments then end up replicating other arguments over the multicultural state. Those closest to the far-right activists blame political correctness for allowing Islamists, including those that are argued to be inciting violence, to have free rein while the BNP leadership are prosecuted for similar speech. This, of course, echoes the criticisms of earlier anti-racist work:

Here, white working class communities were often implicitly portrayed as racist and ignorant, with cultures weaker and inferior to the ethnic minority religions and cultures ‘celebrated’ by multiculturalist and anti-racist policies. This led to feelings of ‘unfairness’ amongst white working class young people, fuelled by the perception that their attitudes and behaviour were judged more harshly than similar behaviour by other ethnic communities.

(Thomas, 2009, p. 287)

Those closest to the Islamist activists see institutional racism in the disparity between the attempted ban of Hizb ut-Tahrir and the actual ban of al-Muhajiroun, when their leaders have made statements vowing non-violence, and the lack of any discussion of a ban for far-right groups that publicly promote violence. Indeed, Superintendent Andrew Pratt of the Lancashire Constabulary publically argued against the ban of al-Muhajiroun on the grounds of open dialogue and even-handedness:

A lot of policing is about dialogue, and now we’ve lost that... If you ban one group, they will resurface under another name, whereas I think it’s better to say ‘let’s start talking to you’... Let’s have the rule of law and justice applicable to any

group...When it's just al-Muhajiroun, people say 'they're picking on Muslims again', when others [Redwatch and the England First Party] are purporting violence.

(quoted in Improvement & Development Agency, 2010)

In Stoke-on-Trent a similar argument was made by a former chair of the North Staffordshire Campaign Against Racism and Fascism: speaking of al-Muhajiroun's proposed Wootton Bassett demonstration that led to the group's proscription, Jim Cessford said 'if it is right for the English Defence League to protest, then it is right for these people to protest' (Knapper, 2010).

These arguments can then be added to all the other discourses of racism and multiculturalism. Where local or central government gives localised funding to poor Muslims or poor whites this is seen as favouritism or, when the BNP or Islamists are present, as a reward for extremism. Dr. Indarjit Singh of the Network of Sikh Organisations responded to a government review of PVE that Muslims get 'a sort of favoured status as a result of radicalisation' (Communities and Local Government Committee, 2010, p. 99), as mosques received funds for projects aimed at stopping the disaffection that can lead to extremism. Likewise, the Connecting Communities programme was targeted at white estates with a BNP vote, thus providing extra funds for particular wards because of the extremist activism. The Communities Secretary at the time, John Denham, felt the need to counter accusations of unfairness when launching this fund:

Denham said it was necessary to make clear that the government was committed to making sure that every community in every corner of the country knew it was on their side. "No favours. No privileges. No special interest groups. Just fairness."

(Travis, 2009)

Both the sticks – banning groups or actions, labelling groups and ideas as extremist – and the carrots – funding for cohesion projects – can therefore be seen as contributing to the unfairness of ethno-religiously based policies. On a wider scale, various interest groups have decried state multiculturalism and institutional racism as creating further unfairness: even the Church of England recently accused ‘the Government of giving preferential treatment to the Muslim community because of “political correctness” ’ (Wynne-Jones, 2009). These ideas of favouritism and unfairness are present in a mainstream analysis in which accusations of bias in responses to extremism can easily be accommodated.

### ***Hot emotions and cool cosmopolitanism***

Putting aside the difficulty of achieving ‘perfect symmetry’ in order to foster perceptions of even-handedness, there remains the question of whether the response to radical Islamist and far-right activism is fair and effective. I argue that the limits of tolerance have been drawn not in a climate of calm consideration, but as a kneejerk response to events including the 2001 riots and the July 2005 bombs and media coverage of Islamists and the far-right that have exaggerated their potential as social problems. For this reason, I find an irony in government’s desire to take the heightened emotion out of ethno-religious divides as this will not be achieved by shrill opposition to extremists.

Drawing on the work of Bryan Turner on cosmopolitanism, McGhee (2005b) argues that the goal of the community cohesion project is to create ‘cool’ cosmopolitan identities, with flexible loyalties and not the ‘strong emotions, defensive impulses and 'thick' patterns of solidarity’ that lead to conflict. Diversity will be respected or difference will be tolerated in the sphere of an active citizenship, in which the attribute of civility is key to successful participation. Thus when Kalra and Kapoor (2009) argue that it is the ‘transparent,

normative mode of White middle-class values which are ever-present but not articulated become firmly established as that which is being segregated from and needs to be integrated into' (p. 1404), these are not only substantive values but also procedural values. The problem with those in extremist groups, or perhaps even the populations from which they are stereotyped as being drawn, is not that they are racist or homophobic, but that they cannot control their emotions.

As I demonstrated in earlier chapters, the backgrounds and attitudes of those who are allied to the BNP and al-Muhajiroun are not wholly a radical departure from others in society. Indeed, many of the single attributes that are cited as evidence of extremism, such as believing homosexual acts to be sinful, or that white Britons should be treated better than recent migrants, are not limited to members or supporters of radical groups. One of the problems with mainstream politicians' denouncing of extremism is an inconsistency whereby a statement is associated with extremism when one person says it, but not if others say it. Thus, Stoke's BNP school governors were described by a teaching union activist as 'raising BNP views' when they argued that a school was biased in its reporting of racist incidents (Mansell, 2010), yet Phil Woolas, Labour's Minister for Community Cohesion, had previously argued that 'political correctness' was stopping racism against white people from being condemned' (Barnett, 2006). The Contest 2 definition of extremism was originally to include the particular attitude of belief that 'homosexuality... is a sin against Allah' (Dodd, 2009), which is one shared in some form by, as mentioned previously, by nearly half of all Britons.

This problem can be seen most obviously in the Conservative party's 2005 election slogan 'it's not racist to impose limits on immigration', which raises the problem of racism in order to get its denial in before the accusation, in the manner of someone who begins 'I'm not racist but...' (see Goodman, 2010). In another version of this line, Michael Howard

said 'it's not racist to talk about immigration': however because of the association between the white working class and the BNP, this can become 'it's not racist to talk about immigration unless you live on East Estate', as the media flocked to the area after the BNP councillors were elected in order to find out just how racist the residents are. Ordinary and racist Conservative and Labour voters can then distance themselves from 'real racism', because that is what is found in places like East Estate, where they have BNP councillors:

The possibility that the saliency of this narrative in political discourse might itself normalise new forms of racism is ignored by the integrationists. They tend to equate racism solely with support for the extreme-Right British National Party (BNP) and believe that racism is combated by offering potential BNP voters an alternative, even if that alternative shares the same New Right assumptions about national identity and therefore serves to legitimise an anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant political culture.

(Kundnani, 2007, p. 37)

While the television images of demonstrations suggest intransigence and anger that does fit the idea of hot identities, most of the time the activists are not like this, and act fully as though they are citizens in a democracy. Despite calling for a sharia state, al-Muhajiroun activists can still respond to those angrily abusing them with 'you're entitled to your views' (Tostevin, 2011). Similarly, Joe, the BNP councillor with the longest interest in far right politics, said 'I've always been very racially aware, everybody should be. If people choose to accept the multiculturalism, the argument for multiculturalism, that's up to them' (Interview 1). As long as this position is held, and remembering that none of the al-Muhajiroun or BNP activists are in a position of real power, it is those who are attempting to attack or silence the extremist activists who are behaving with the most intolerance.



This is not to argue that the extremist behaviour is not intolerant. Nehushtan (2007) argues that tolerance is the avoidance of doing harm, and ‘harm can be emotional, mental, physical, or economic, and can be caused by condemning the other, insulting him, making him feel uncomfortable, avoiding his presence, discriminating against him’ (p. 232). This definition goes further than many would like, as causing offence or discomfort do not in themselves deny the autonomy of the those offended (Peonidis, 1998) but such discomfort can be used to justify devaluing a group in response (see Skeggs, 2005). This range and scale of harms and responses demonstrates that Nehushtan (2007) is right when he argues ‘that the question is not just whether one is tolerant or not but, also what kind and amount of intolerance justifies a specific kind and amount of intolerant response’ (p. 248).

The ad hoc prosecutions of individual activists for specific incidents make sense in this framework, as did allowing al-Muhajiroun and BNP activists to go about their business, subject to their being monitored for potential transgression of the law. Furthermore, the fear of cumulative extremism, or a repeat of previous riots requires a public order response that can also remain proportionate:

Caught in the middle of all this [the al-Muhajiroun and EDL standoffs] are the council and police, who are clearly keen to curb the activities of the Islamist militants while being keenly aware that there is nothing illegal about standing on a pavement handing out leaflets. The contents of these are regularly checked by police and the Crown Prosecution Service, but the men are seemingly well aware what they can or cannot say within the law.

(Walker, 2010)

However, these kinds of responses are accompanied by a more blanket labelling of groups and individuals as extremist, culminating in the proscription of al-Muhajiroun as a terrorist group in January 2010. Membership of the group may now be punishable by a prison

sentence of up to ten years (Doward, 2010). This ban came after a public outcry over the group's plan to do a march through Wootton Bassett, the town through which British soldiers killed overseas are brought through, carrying coffins to symbolise dead Afghan civilians. This, I believe, is evidence of the state's unwillingness to present the complicated arguments of the balance between freedom in speech and belief, the right to protest and offend and the freedom not to be harmed by others' actions. It is also evidence of an unwillingness to do the hard work of challenging racism, homophobia and other intolerances, wherever they may be found, as opposed to the simple message of attacking extremism. Instead of the cool response, which would pick out the intolerance that requires a response but allow everything else, the government made the 'hot' and emotional response of banning the group. The combination of designating legal activism as extremist and particular sections of society as problematic may '[harden] a defensive and antagonistic 'Muslim' [or white] identity amongst those involved in response to a perception that their whole identity and community lifestyle is being implicitly criticised and scrutinised' (Thomas, 2009, p. 287).

A recent Demos paper suggests an alternative approach. It argues that 'radicalisation into terrorism is far more unpredictable and complicated' than 'moving up the pyramid' from non-violent radical to tacit supporter of violence to terrorist, and thus a broad focus on radical ideas and non-violent extremists is misplaced (Bartlett & Birdwell, 2010, pp. 8-9).

Rather than vague notions of tackling extremism, we propose a liberal republican solution. This means that intolerance must be allowed a platform, but the onus falls on us to demolish it in argument. It also means intervening when certain types of extremism stop others leading a life of their own choosing... Being radical or extreme is allowed in the UK, but turning to violence or trying to hinder the democratic rights of others is not... Extremist and terrorist ideology is contradictory

and vacuous. Exposing them as such will be more effective than banning them and providing undeserved publicity and feeding the ‘taboo’ appeal.

(Bartlett & Birdwell, 2010, pp. 3-4)

This approach means we avoid catch-all responses that categorise anyone associated with al-Muhajiroun or the BNP as an enemy within. Particular speech and acts can be challenged and prosecuted and ‘myths’ can be disproved. However, we continue to recognise the common humanity these people have with the rest of us, leaving the door open for their return to ‘normal’ behaviours. A label like extremist or racist carries its own stigma, and one which is hard to shake off, but people do change: Ed Husain argues for the banning of Hizb ut-Tahrir as it leads to closed minds that cannot be won over, yet he himself left the organisation to work against it (Husain, 2007b, 2007a).<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the actions of the extremist activists after my research may be instructive. By 2010, three of the four BNP activists who had been fully included in East Estate’s neighbourhood polity were no longer members of the party. The Islamists, however, were no longer visibly active as the group had been banned and the police had charged at least one person associated with the group with a terrorism offence.

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<sup>1</sup> It is also worth noting that other extremists have been fully incorporated into mainstream political life. Most obviously this includes ex-paramilitaries in Northern Ireland, but during the period of the research the ‘national adviser to councils on equality and cohesion’ had also previously been tried and acquitted of a terrorism offence.

## **Conclusions**

Perhaps the debate with regard to strategies such as these needs to move beyond accusations from the liberal left that considering the disadvantaged White reaction to policies dedicated to alleviating race inequality is ‘pandering to racists’ which are mirrored by the far-right’s description of such policies as ‘pandering to minority groups’. What should be at the centre of such strategies is a well-balanced strategy that ‘panders’ to all disadvantaged groups at the frontline of integration. By focusing on one source of future risk (that is, the potential for disorder amongst younger ethnic and religious minority groups) the Government could inadvertently feed the political extremism taking root in many disadvantaged White communities. (McGhee, 2005b)

While I agree with Nick Clegg’s description of ‘extremist Muslim groups giving birth to extremist white hate groups, and vice versa... [having] a symbiotic relationship with each other, maintained by the media’, I also argue that the government plays a key role in this relationship. The problem of extremism was ‘talked up’ to the extent that groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and al-Muhajiroun were purveyors of terrorism, yet the groups were legal, creating the impression that government was unwilling to act, and was appeasing Muslims. Likewise, when the government banned al-Muhajiroun but allowed the English Defence League to continue its protests, it can be accused of appeasing white racism.

The impression of unfairness, I argue, is sustained by the asymmetric knowledge of those deemed extremist, and the totalising, and kneejerk reaction, of naming groups and individuals, as opposed to speech and actions, as extremist. Those who were socially close enough to BNP and al-Muhajiroun activists to see past the stereotypes of skinhead boot-boys and wild-eyed fanatical suicide bombers can see the extremist tag as unwarranted,

even if they vehemently disagree with their outlook. By arguing the case for such labelling through analysis of ideology – racism, homophobia, and an allegiance to a religion over the nation – government fails to show why some groups’ acts should be censured on the grounds that they are a threat to public order or cause harm through the group having the power to be intolerant and restrict others. Given that equivalent ideas are also common amongst groups and individuals who have a great deal more power to enact their intolerances (for example homophobic churches and the racist middle-classes), the government’s singling out of particular groups as extremist is ‘unfair’ on their own terms. As the definition of Britishness follows ‘tolerance’ with ‘fair play’ (Brown, 2004), PVE and community cohesion approaches to extremism can be seen as a hypocritical departure from this ideal.

## 9: Conclusions

The more we lump terrorist groups together and draw the battle lines as a simple binary struggle between moderates and extremists or good and evil, the more we play into the hands of those seeking to unify groups with little in common.

(David Miliband quoted in Borger, 2009)

In the years since 2001 Britain has seen almost continual debate, and arguments for ‘honest and robust debate’ (Cantle, 2001, p. 9; Home Office, 2004, p. 1) on race relations. The ‘northern riots’ in the summer of that year sparked a ‘retreat of multiculturalism’ (Joppke, 2004) as previous policies characterised by opponents as being too laissez faire had allowed ‘communities’ to exist and develop in radical separation. The Cantle Review argued that ‘communities operate on the basis of a series of parallel lives [that] do not seem to touch at any point, let alone overlap and promote any meaningful interchanges’ (Cantle, 2001, p. 9). In this analysis the riots happened because of a lack of community cohesion or integration, which allowed ‘extremists’, both far-right and Islamist, to thrive and encourage conflict. The terrorist attacks in London in July 2005 were a further impetus for policies of ‘integrationism’ (Kundnani, 2007). ‘A significant reason why the bombers had attacked London, the suggestion seemed to be, was because they were ‘inadequately integrated’’ (Brighton, 2007, p. 2).

The Community Cohesion and Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) policies have as their object two supposedly opposing populations, the white working class and Asian Muslims. Both are posited as unintegrated/socially excluded through social isolation and a lack of engagement with civil society and the political process, and likely to be lacking the ‘shared values’ of tolerance, fair play and adherence to the rule of law. On this fertile bed of

isolation, discontent and a problematic culture, ‘extremist groups’ grow easily such that al-Muhajiroun is the logical endpoint of unintegrated ‘Asian areas’ and the BNP is the logical endpoint of socially excluded ‘white estates’. In the community cohesion narrative the existence of such extremism is a barrier to engagement across the divide and causes violent conflict including racist assaults and riots, while in the PVE narrative the existence of such extremism provides the tacit support for terrorism and other political violence, including the aforementioned assaults and riots. Members of the two extremist groups are characterised as ‘deranged fanatics’ (McGhee, 2008a, p. 51), being radicalised and radicalising others to violence, and being the most isolated and unengaged, except with each other (see Sunstein, 2009). They are the ‘them’, contrasted with a right thinking, integrated ‘us’. Although the PVE and community cohesion policies acknowledge that it is within the realm of ideas and actions where lines must be drawn, the problem is referred to as that of ‘political and religious extremists’ (Home Office, 2004, p. 11), and so suggests ‘problematic individuals’.

Much of the associated literature takes this communitarian approach for granted. The visions of all-encompassing conflict described as the ‘clash of civilisations’ (Huntington, 1996) and ‘the culture wars’ (Hunter, 1991) have been recast into a local conflict between white and Asian Muslim blocs. This is complicated by the fact that the drawing of such lines produces the inconsistency of white working class and Asian Muslims both being on the illiberal side against a liberal elite or liberal establishment, represented by national politicians. This inconsistency is, of course, connected to the invisibility of the white middle class and other categories in such models. More important here, though, is the idea that social networks, values, and deeds and words, correlate with one another, with ethnic or ethno-religious identity as the independent variable. Thus the multicultural society is one in which the state is balancing the conflicting values of different ethno-religious

groups, with other identities being secondary (see, for example, Modood, 2007). Those at the porous edge of the group, in ‘contact’ with ethno-religious others are more integrated, less likely to have values in conflict with wider society, and less likely to be extremist: ‘fanaticism requires exclusionary group practices for its maintenance because it requires the isolation that allows spurious beliefs to escape challenge’ (Hardin, 2002, p. 13). The model suggested is that of billiard balls with hard centres, bouncing off each other, upsetting a tidy equilibrium. Television footage of extremists on marches or demonstrations, and their own rhetoric of separation, supports this image of the extremist as radical outsider, at the furthest reaches of a separate community in which they converse, work, shop and live. The ‘secretive nature’ (Goodwin, 2008, p. 35) of extremist groups means that they are often studied through proxies including their literatures, court reports or surveys of the communities in which they are believed to reside (see Mirza, Senthilkumaran, & Ja’far, 2007).

In this study I have taken a different approach. In both an ‘Islamic site’ and a ‘white site’, I have spent a number of months observing the day-to-day activism of al-Muhajiroun and BNP members, focusing on their engagements with others. These sites differed – the BNP councillors in neighbourhood meetings, the al-Muhajiroun activists at their street stall or outside the mosque – and as such the content of the observed conversations differed. All sites were places where the threat of extremism could be registered by others, and where these others could challenge this threat. I also conducted biographical interviews with activists, both extremist affiliated and not, in which they talked of their lives so far: in essence, the topic was ‘how did you end up doing this?’ Eight Muslims, five from all al-Muhajiroun plus ten white people, four of whom were BNP activists talked to me about their life histories, what motivated them in their community activism, and how they felt about engagement across any divides.



Of course, this small sample, albeit studied in depth, could hardly be representative of the wider community of al-Muhajiroun/Asian Muslim and BNP/white activists and populations. Descriptions of Bradford and Oldham do give the impression of a greater degree of 'ghettoisation' than Stoke, and the lack of public housing is likely to be a bigger driver of BNP activism in London than the West Midlands (see Dench, Gavron, & Young, 2006). Stoke is, however, a key site of both forms of extremism, and thus a potential site for cumulative extremism (Eatwell, 2006). The study also only focused on the ordinary public activism of the extremists, and not the set-piece demonstrations where emotions run higher. It is also likely that private conversations are more likely to reveal more depth to individuals' attitudes, as all actors may moderate their acts for a public audience. However, this research is concerned with public political activism that can be both perceived as a threat and subject to challenge.

The policy emphasis on inter-ethnic contact, legal extremist groups and the civil challenge makes this approach important. When quantitative studies use neighbourhoods as the unit of analysis we do not know if the correlations between isolation and extremist ideas arise because people often exhibit both, or that they happen to be coterminous for geography but not for individuals. Furthermore, surveys showing how many people in a population hold such ideas do not necessarily tell us if these people would be extremist in the government definition:

Extremism is 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.

(Secretary of State for the Home Department, 2011, p. 107)

Precisely because the problem is defined as the active promotion of such ideas,<sup>1</sup> posited as both radicalising to violence and instilling fear, these small numbers of activists – fewer than ten in Stoke-on-Trent’s al-Muhajiroun group, and around 20 active BNP members – should be studied closely. In addition, through studying both extremisms deemed a threat to democracy or community cohesion in this way, I gained some information about how the two are compared, thus extending Eatwell’s (2006) ‘cumulative extremism’ argument. This approach produced three main findings.

First, this study found that social exclusion (whites) or a lack of integration (Asian Muslims) was not a key part of the background of extremists. Like Klandermans and Mayer (2006a), I found that the BNP activists were not isolated and marginalised but were ‘socially integrated, connected in one way or another to mainstream groups and ideas’ (p. 269). Three of the four BNP activists also talked positively about contact with ethno-religious others who were friends or family. The al-Muhajiroun activists were similarly integrated, having attended mainstream schools, getting normal jobs outside any ethnic or enclave economy, and in some cases were involved in mainstream civic activity prior to their extremist activism.

Instead, I argue that it is within this integration or involvement that one cause of extremism is to be found. At various points in their lives the al-Muhajiroun and BNP activists had challenged the authority of teachers, lecturers, employers and council officials and had seen their demands rejected, often at a great personal cost. The feeling of ‘citizenship thwarted’ (Young, 2003b), I believe, may engender a set of attitudes that can be described as ‘anti-establishment’, ‘anti-elite’, or ‘anti-political’ (see Dye & Ziegler, 1975). These kinds of attitudes have been identified as a key driver, alongside racism, of BNP support (Cutts, Ford, & Goodwin, 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> In each iteration of the PVE and community cohesion policies government has attempted to avoid being seen to either limit free speech or label *all* those holding particular ideas as extremist.

Secondly, I found a degree of cross-over in the words and deeds of extremist and non-extremist activists, due to a combination of similar attitudes and also because often some such attitudes may remain unexpressed. Like those studied by Goodwin (2008), the BNP activists I encountered were not motivated by anti-semitism, Nazism, or white supremacy but instead ‘talked of the perceived unfair distribution of local resources’ (p. 36). Two were involved in the estate’s multicultural festival, an unlikely act for hardcore racists. Although al-Muhajiroun activists did talk of Islam and sharia law as the solution to societal problems, most conversations with the public focused on societal problems. Their opposition to drugs, promiscuity, and homosexuality did not place them outside the mainstream of British thought and their opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were similarly shared by the wider public. Their friendly approach while proselytising to Muslims and non-Muslims alike stood in contrast to their rhetoric of Muslims versus the unbelievers.

In addition, differences in expressed attitudes between moderates and extremists were often left unexplored. Moderate participants assumed that the main difference would be in the realm of the solutions to societal problems as opposed to the recognition of such problems, articulated as ‘I agree with what some of the things say... but it’s the way you deal with them’ (Peter, Interview 1). In East Estate, however, meetings between BNP and other activists were not the time and place for exploring these divides. In Hilltop and Beyond, the al-Muhajiroun activists were largely ignored by mainstream politicians and religious leaders who would have been unsympathetic to their ideology. A lack of sympathy may have been revealed had conversations with members of the public ever got as theological or political as this: but they rarely did. Former Home Secretary Jacqui Smith’s idea of the ‘civil challenge’ (Smith, 2008) suggests that debate will progress to the

point that such divides will be discussed in an atmosphere of civility. Outside the debating chamber, however, most people were keener to avoid sensitive political and religious issues in the name of ‘getting along’.

Third, and following from the previous points, I have argued that the label of extremist does not have salience where people’s knowledge of BNP and al-Muhajiroun activists undermines the wild-eyed, obsessive and violent stereotypes. For many, the outward attitudes of these groups are ‘radicalised versions of ideas often found in the mainstream’ (Goodwin, 2008, p. 37) as opposed to being completely alien. Consequently, they do not warrant a designation as an existential threat. Individual activists were polite and engaging, and were not trying to force anyone to accept their viewpoint. They willingly accepted that others are entitled to their opinions, as they argued they were entitled to their own.

At the same time, however, the conflation of terrorism, racist violence, and political activism as extremism, magnifies any threat, especially when fuelled by media prurience. For each population (white working class and Asian Muslim), therefore, media exaggeration of and government rhetoric about ‘their’ extremism can be seen as an attack on their group, while the continued existence of the ‘other’ extremism shows that their fears are being ignored. In the context of mistrust of government ‘race relations’ policy, those fearing radical Islamism can compare the regular TV presence of al-Muhajiroun’s Anjem Choudary with the furore following the appearance of Nick Griffin on *Question Time*. Those fearing the far-right compare the ban of al-Muhajiroun to the continued electoral presence of the BNP. As Roger Eatwell (2006) puts it, ‘an attempt to appease one can antagonise the other’ (p. 215). It is therefore not only the actions of the extremist ‘other’ that fuel cumulative extremism, but also government acts – bans, arrests, and labelling as extremist – that are perceived as unfair. When government posits non-violent extremism as both a major threat in its role in a terrorist continuum, yet defends its legality

as part of freedom of speech, it undermines both anti-violent extremism policy and civil liberties.

The world is full of people believing and saying idiotic, outrageous, hateful and offensive things. If we locked them all up, half of humankind would be guarding the other half. What matters is what leads to violence. To stop the descent to violence, we need many different sorts of action, some apparently soft, some obviously hard. When such actions do not erode liberty, and have some prospect of success, there is no harm in trying them. When they do erode liberty, however, like a ban on a political organisation or a restriction on free speech, then you need to have compelling evidence that they will bring a real gain in security – and I don't mean security for one political party against electoral attack from another.

(Garton Ash, 2010)

This research suggests three related sets of implications and questions I argue are worthy of further study. The first two address the sets of ideas associated with extremism or possibly 'illiberalism' on the one hand, and liberal democracy or 'moderation' on the other: in essence what 'we', the mainstream British, are for and what 'we' are against. The third addresses the status of individuals, and perhaps groups, as extremist and therefore embodying extremism without the possibility of redemption.

First, there remains the question of the harm done by the intolerant acts of individuals (and government and media), and how best to reduce this. As Gidley (2011) argues, 'the issue that matters... is racist deeds and words, not racist people'. While the non-violent words and deeds of al-Muhajiroun and the BNP can do harm in the form of fear amongst anyone

who feels they may be a target of their actions, the constant government and media focus on the acts of a few hundred activists increases this fear. The listing of particular extremist but legal actions may even inspire those who wish to rebel against the government.<sup>2</sup> The state's targeting of 'visible and vocal inciters of extremism' (McGhee, 2008a, p. 45) both misses the larger body of invisible intolerances committed by non-extremists *and* can incite further intolerant acts, as sections of the population fear Muslims, the white working class, or both. Opinion polls and attitudes surveys ought therefore to examine the prevalence of intolerant words and deeds across people all social categories and in media coverage. This, then, may help us know where, when and how such acts can be challenged effectively, while not fuelling further conflict.

Secondly, and related, we should examine the extent of consensus in the 'fundamental British values' (Secretary of State for the Home Department, 2011, p. 107) or 'British mainstream values' (Townsend & Olivennes, 2011). I suggest that they may be less consensual than is presumed, especially as abstract values are translated into practice. The latest version of the PVE policy, in which 'funding would be removed from organisations that "do not support the values of democracy, human rights, equality before the law, participation in society" ' (Home Secretary Theresa May quoted in Press Association, 2011a), seems likely to disenfranchise Muslims, as even bodies set up by the government are to be tarred with this brush. One such organisation is the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board that on the one hand was being criticised by the Lancashire Council of Mosques after calling for greater involvement of women in mosque governance and prayers in English (BBC, 2011) and on the other hand had government funding withdrawn due to its links with the 'hardline Muslim Association of Britain' (Townsend & Olivennes,

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<sup>2</sup> When I encountered women associated with al-Muhajiroun they were wearing non-face covering hijab styles, but after talk of a 'burqa ban' (see ) it seemed that all of the women at al-Muhajiroun were now wearing face-covering burqas.

2011). This also sends out a message that many more Muslims are not part of the British consensus. At the same time, other groups not connected with Muslims or the far-right do not have their racism, treatment of women or homophobia scrutinised. Indeed, the 'honest and robust debate' could include discussion of what these fundamental British values are, and how they should be applied in practice.

My final points concern the future for the conflict between the state and extremist groups and ideas and the individuals caught up in it. I have argued that those affiliated to extremist groups are not outsiders, born and brought up to be extremists. Indeed, the government's narrative of radicalisation implicitly accepts that the extremists did not always hold extreme ideas, and that their extremist words and deeds are not inevitable. I have also argued that an anti-government attitude is part of their background, and this can be reinforced by state and civil society actions against extremism. If de-radicalisation is possible it requires the breaking of this cycle in order to bring the activists into more productive relationships with society and state. Timothy Garton Ash noted at the time of al-Muhajiroun's ban:

The trouble is that nobody knows which of the many other alienated young Muslim men out there will become so radicalised that he will turn into a bomber or axeman, and which of them, given the right conditions, will gravitate into the mainstream of society. Perhaps in 20 years' time, one of the young Islam4UK activists I rubbed shoulders with in that back room at the Atrium will be dining in the main restaurant, as a spin doctor for the Tories. Or perhaps in 20 months' time he'll be trying to detonate a bomb.

(Garton Ash, 2010)

I suggest that biographical interviews with ex-members of these extremist groups, akin to those carried out by Horgan (2009) with individuals disengaging with terrorism, could be a fruitful avenue of research. Instead of thinking about integration as a binary of the fully incorporated and the excluded, it may be useful to ask how and whether such people are included in mainstream society.

I end on a note of pessimism, however. After Prime Minister David Cameron's February 2011 speech in which he alluded to the idea that, as part of PVE and community cohesion practice, government had funded Muslim groups that are themselves extremist:<sup>3</sup> 'this is like turning to a right-wing fascist party to fight a violent white supremacist movement' (Cameron, 2011). In this analysis, Cameron conflates a whole range of groups and the individuals allied to them: government, local or national, does not give funds to al-Muhajiroun or Hizb ut-Tahrir just as it does not fund the BNP or any other political party. However, as I found in East Estate, BNP members may also be members of committees that use public funds. Furthermore, the 2011 Review's definition of extremism casts the net ever wider and so can be used to justify cutting ties or funding to ever more groups and individuals.

It is difficult to see, with the state's relationship to Islam being primarily articulated in a security paradigm, how any government could row back. Once an idea, group, or individual has been deemed an existential threat to the future of the nation, after being caught in ever increasing standards that are not applied to other ethno-religious groups, it will take a brave or perhaps foolhardy government to say that, actually, some of these ideas or groups are not fully liberal but also not part of terrorism, or that a particular group or

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<sup>3</sup> The 2011 Prevent Review found 'evidence that some Prevent funding from central Government and local authorities had reached a small number of organisations who had expressed (or employed people who had expressed) extremist views' (Secretary of State for the Home Department, 2011, p. 35)



individual has changed and is no longer a threat. As with the idea that universities are a key site of radicalisation, despite the 2011 review's figures suggesting exactly the opposite,<sup>4</sup> the logic of the anti-extremism policies is such they cannot be deemed a success until every last radical group, individual and idea has gone. This is an impossible task.

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<sup>4</sup> As part of the reporting of the 2011 Review, newspapers noted that 30% of convicted Islamist terrorists had attended university with the Home Secretary Theresa May describing universities as complacent (Press Association, 2011b). However, given that 54% of the 'Pakistani' Muslim men will have participated in higher education by the time they are 30 (Connor, Tyers, Modood, & Hillage, 2004), my own analysis suggests that attending university significantly reduces the likelihood of a terrorist conviction.

## Appendix 1: Research sites and individuals

In the 'white site' I was present for the following events:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Format</i>	<i>Description</i>
'The Partnership'	Meeting	This monthly meeting included church leaders, police officers, youth workers, councillors, council officers and representatives from residents' associations and other community groups. It aimed to co-ordinate community activities across the estate, raise money through a community shop, and organise estate-wide community events.
'The Steering Group'	Meeting	This six-weekly meeting consulted stakeholders on the ongoing regeneration work across the estate. Councillors, council officers, regeneration officers, church leaders and residents attended.
Community shop	Fundraising	This was a weekly sale of second-hand donated goods, ran by members of the partnership.
World Food Day	Event	Organised by the partnership, this event aimed to bring together people of different cultures through food. It included stalls labelled as Pakistani, Jewish, Polish, Welsh, Caribbean etc.
Carnival	Event	An autumn carnival with contributions from a wide range of organisations. Again organised by the partnership

Christmas events	Event	These included switching on the Christmas tree lights, a carol service and a Santa's grotto. Again, nominally organised by the partnership but led by the two churches.
Respect Week	Event	This was a council led week of events that included street cleaning, youth sports activities. A mobile police station was used as an outreach post for council officers, and police and fire services.
Bingo	Social	Weekly bingo sessions, one in the afternoon and one in the evening. Both were used by the BNP councillors as informal surgeries.
ASB consultation	Meeting	A one-off public meeting on the 'anti-social behaviour' problems on the estate
'Cyber café', 'coffee morning'	Social	Twice weekly social events run by one of the residents' associations
Councillors' surgeries	Meeting	Monthly surgeries in which councillors would be available to be informed of constituents' problems.
Election leafleting	Campaigning	I spent a few hours with both the BNP and Labour activists as they leafleted the estate (April 2009).
Election count	Administrative	The May 2009 local election count.
Playground tidy-up	Day-long volunteering event	Organised by the Lighthouse church on the edge of East Estate.

In the ‘Islamic site’ I was present for the following events:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Format</i>	<i>Description</i>
‘The delivery group’	Meeting	This monthly meeting included council officers, councillors, police officers, fire service, and representatives from residents’ associations and other community groups.
Residents’ associations	Meeting	I attended two meetings each of two residents’ associations.
Friday prayers / Thursday evening sermons	Religious event	I attended Friday prayers at one of the bigger mosques in the city, led by a ‘Spiritual Director’ who was described to me as ‘too overtly Sufi’ to have wide appeal. Here, the imam did some of the service in English so I gained some understanding of the religious practice. More importantly it was the place where I was sure to find Islamic community activists and councillors, and where I would be leafleted by al-Muhajiroun and Hizb ut-Tahrir.
Milad	Religious event	I attended two Milad events in the bigger mosques in the city. Again I was able to meet community activists.
Al-Muhajiroun stall	Street proselytising	The al-Muhajiroun activists were supposed to do a street stall five times per week. A trestle table was used to display leaflets and CDs that were given away to passers by, and the activists would shout their message. They would also spend time talking to anyone who expressed an interest.

Al-Muhajiroun public meetings	Meeting	Two public meetings advertised by leaflets handed out outside the bigger mosques in the city.
Councillors' surgeries	Meeting	Monthly surgeries in which councillors would be available to be informed of constituents' problems.
Mela	Event	Day long city-wide multicultural festival
Hilltop PACT (Police and Community Together)	Meeting	Evening meeting, where members of the community come along to tell police of latest concerns. This was also attended by Hilltop's councillors.
Respect Week	Event	This was a council led week of events that included street cleaning, youth sports activities. A mobile police station was used as an outreach post for council officers, and police and fire services.

### Biographical Interviews: 'white site'

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age at interview</b>	<b>Community activities at interview</b>	<b>Group affiliations</b>
Fran	65	Chair of residents' association. Regular attendee of steering group and partnership meetings and co-organiser of community shop.	None revealed
Gordon	69	Chair of moribund residents' association. Regular attendee of steering group and partnership meetings.	Labour member
Pam	54	Chair of residents' association. Regular attendee of steering group and partnership meetings and co-organiser of community shop.	Acted as agent for Peter
Albert	75	Chair of community centre committee.	BNP candidate
Paul	48	Regular attendee of steering group and partnership meetings.	None revealed
Joe	50	Regular attendee of steering group and partnership meetings.	BNP councillor
Karen	45	On the community centre committee, and helps out at bingo. Regular attendee of steering group and partnership meetings.	BNP candidate then councillor
Peter	35	Regular attendee of steering group and partnership meetings.	Labour councillor
Mark	63	Chair of steering group, and secretary of partnership committee	Lighthouse church
Margie	53	Regular attendee of steering group	BNP councillor

and partnership meetings.  
 Organiser of East Estate gardening  
 group.

**Biographical Interviews: ‘Islamic site’**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age at interview</b>	<b>Community activities at interview</b>	<b>Affiliations</b>
Nasir	23	Regular attendance at al-Muhajiroun stalls.	Al-Muhajiroun
Cllr Khan	42	Councillor for Hilltop and involvement in residents’ association and Muslim Welfare Group.	Labour councillor
Yasir	23	Regular attendance at al-Muhajiroun stalls.	Al-Muhajiroun
Haseen	25	Regular attendance at al-Muhajiroun stalls.	Al-Muhajiroun
Asif	32	Occasional attendance at al-Muhajiroun stalls.	Al-Muhajiroun
Munir	24	Social entrepreneur involved in community arts projects	None
Iftikhar	41	Spiritual leader and organiser of school visits and inter-faith events.	Sufi mosque
Abu Q	18	Regular attendance at al-Muhajiroun stalls.	Al-Muhajiroun

## Appendix 2: Interview materials

The following pages contain the materials used for the biographical interviews. Interviewees and potential interviewees could retain the *Information for Interviewees* and *Consent Form*.

### Information for Interviewees

This sheet provides information for respondents who may become involved in the research project about community-based organisations and activism. The research is being undertaken by Gavin Bailey, a research student at Keele University. If you have any questions or concerns about this research you should feel free to contact me. I can be contacted in writing (Gavin Bailey, ILPJ, Keele University, Staffs, ST5 5BG or [g.bailey@ilpj.keele.ac.uk](mailto:g.bailey@ilpj.keele.ac.uk)) or by telephone (07738 590 812 or 01782 583934).

#### *What is the research about?*

This research looks at neighbourhood and community-based organisations, and those participating, volunteering and working in them. The research will explore what these activities mean to people and what are their reasons for getting involved. How does this involvement relate to feelings of belonging and community and how they want to change or improve the community? How do these ideas connect to individuals' experiences of living in the neighbourhood and elsewhere?

#### *What is being asked of me?*

In order to explore these relationships and experiences the research will adopt a 'life history' or 'narrative' approach. This means that if you decide to get involved in the research you will be encouraged to talk about your life in your own words. The interviewer will help you identify which things you most want to talk about. The interviewer will be interested in hearing which things you think have been most important to your life. The interviews will require you to spend about ninety minutes with the interviewer on two separate occasions. Sometimes, when people discover they have a lot to talk about, the interviews last longer than this – but that is always up to the interviewee. When and where the interviews take place is up to you. The interviewer could meet you at his own private



office at Keele University, or at a different place of your choosing. Transport can be arranged if you require it. The interviewer will need to record the interview so that he has an accurate record of what has been said. This ensures that what you say is not misrepresented. The interviewer will also show you how to turn off the recorder during the interview so that you retain control over the process.

*What can I expect from the research?*

The research is an opportunity for you to tell your story. It will help others understand what your life has been like, and why you have become involved in the things you have. You will be offered £10 to compensate you for your time and also will be reimbursed for any travelling costs you have incurred. This money will be paid to you in cash (or as a postal order) at the end of each interview. You can expect your responses to be kept confidential. The interviewer will explain to you how he will ensure the transcript of your interview is (a) fully anonymised and thus made very difficult to trace back to you (b) kept in a very secure place (c) does not incriminate you. The only time the interviewer cannot guarantee to keep responses confidential is when interviewees explicitly indicate that they intend to harm themselves or someone else at some time in the future. If you wish to have a copy of what you have said during the interviews the interviewer can arrange this for you. Equally, if you do not want the interviewer to anonymise your responses do let him know.

*What if I am unsure about getting involved in the research?*

Before committing yourself to becoming involved in the research you should feel free to ask the interviewer to address your worries or concerns. During the research you will not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. If you change your mind about being involved in the research once the interview is underway you can terminate the interview at any time. You will be free to withdraw from the research without having to explain your reasons for doing so, even after the interview has been completed.

*What will happen to the research data once the interviews are over?*

Once the interviews are over the researcher will begin studying the various responses they have received from people. The researcher will want to use anonymised extracts from these responses to write academic books and articles. These books and articles will help practitioners, policymakers and other academics to better understand the issues the research addresses. Anonymised extracts of what you have said may be archived so that other academics can study them. However, the interviewer will not make arrangements for this to happen without securing your expressed your permission to do so (at the end of the interview).

## **First Interview**

### *Preamble:*

Thanks for agreeing to take part. As you know, I'm a research student at Keele looking at community-based organisations such as residents' associations / youth groups / this, and participants' feelings of belonging and community, and including how you came to be involved. I'd also like to understand your role in the context of your whole life story. Did you read the information sheet and have any questions about what we are going to do? Like it says, you can withdraw your consent at any time during or after the interview. I will stop the recording at anytime if you want or you can stop the recording by pressing this stop button...[give time for them to check recorder].

Any questions? OK, I'll start recording and we can start...

[Go through first part of consent form]

## Background data:

Interviewee code:

Age:

Place of birth:

Religion / religious:

Nationality:

Occupation:

Highest educational background:

Other activities:

Marital status:

Current living arrangements:

Single

Living on own

Married

Living with partner/spouse

Attached but not married

Living with children

Separated/divorced

Living with friends

Widowed

Living with parents

Other

Income:

Yearly

Weekly

Less than £5000

Less than £100

£5-10,000

£100-200

£10-15,000

£100-300

£15-20,000

£300-400

More

How long have you lived in Stoke-on-Trent?

Where else have you lived?

While you've lived in Stoke, have you always lived on this estate?

- 1. OK. Can you tell me the story of your life, starting wherever you like. All of the things that have happened that you think are important, and I'll just take notes.**

[If ask, 'where start?', wherever you want]

[If they stop somewhere, ask them to bring it up to the present.]

[If we haven't covered this persons 'activist' life]

- 2. Can you tell me the story of how you got involved in this group?**
- 3. Have you done anything else for the community?**

[When I think it's run its course/come to a natural end]

**Shall we wrap it up there for this time? Can I just make sure that you are happy with this interview being used in the research?**

- a) Providing I strictly preserve your anonymity, that means changing your name, making sure you are not identified from what you've said, do you give permission for extracts of this interview to be used in my research project that includes academic publications and so on?**
- b) Do you give your permission for extracts from your interviews to be stored in a secure academic data archive, again with you being anonymous?**

**Is there anything else you want to ask me or tell me before we turn off the recorder?**

**Last thing... we need to organise a date for another meeting...**

## Consent form

Project: Community-based organisations and community activism

*Before interview:*

1. I have read and had explained to me by Gavin Bailey the Information Sheet relating to this project.
2. I have had explained to me the purposes of the project and what will be required of me, and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to the arrangements described in the Information Sheet in so far as they relate to my participation.
3. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw from the project at any time.
4. I understand that the interview will be recorded, and know that I can ask to stop the recorder and know how to stop the recorder myself.
5. I understand that the interview will be a biographical interview about myself, and give permission for extracts of my account to be used in a doctoral thesis and publications on *community and politics* when appropriately anonymised.
6. I have received a copy of this consent form and of the accompanying information sheet.

Name:

Signed:.....Date.....

*After interview:*

1. I give permission for this interview being used in the research
2. Providing I have anonymity, so I can not be identified from what I have said, I give permission for extracts of this interview to be used in the research project and other academic publications.
3. I give permission for extracts from the interview to be stored in a secure academic data archive, again with anonymity.
4. If there are any parts of the account I do not want to be used in the research, or do not want to be used as quotes, I have informed the researcher of this.

Name:

Signed:.....Date.....

## **Debriefing checklist (verbal debrief)**

1. Thanking the participant for taking part
2. Offering my contact details at Keele so they can get in touch
3. Reminding participant that they can withdraw consent at any time
4. Asking if they have any questions
5. When I expect to have 'results' – offer to let them know about it / send summary
6. If any issues requiring outside agencies (participant upset, need info. about government orgs etc.)

## Appendix 3: Ethical approval

Ethical approval for the research process was sought in January 2008. After some amendments to the interview materials and process, the research project was approved by the Faculty Ethics Committee on 6 February 2008. A copy of the confirmation email is below:

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Gavin

thanks for the revised interview materials. I can confirm that your study has now been approved by the Ethics Committee for the Faculty of the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Good luck with your research.

Roger

\*\*\*\*\*

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