Faith in Community

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Introduction

As is to be expected, violent disturbances in towns in the north of England in 2001 were accompanied by apocalyptic news bulletins and calls from politicians for action. They were followed by a series of government-led inquiries aimed at identifying the causes of the riots in order to prevent further occurrences. A range of reports were produced, with sometimes differing findings. All were synthesized in the public mind around two easily digested ideas – that people in the affected towns had been living 'parallel lives' divided along ethnic lines; and that this could be remedied through the promotion of 'community cohesion' (Bagguley and Hussain, 2003b). Community cohesion swiftly became an objective to be integrated across government policy, building on an existing Third Way[1] tendency to promote community as a normative goal (Callinicos, 2001), and on a broad brush approach to social capital[2] as the elusive element that would remedy tensions in these neighbourhoods and elsewhere (Kearns, 2003; Roche, 2004). The promotion of 'community' and social capital obscures issues of inequality and conflict, and leaves unquestioned these aspects of social organization which have been the subject of debate in social theory for centuries (McGhee, 2003; Kalra, 2002). 'Community' and 'cohesion' are ill-defined in the policy debates and become an article of faith, a social good which can neither be denied nor defined (Burnett, 2004; Bagguley and Hussain, 2003b).

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[1]   'Third Way' was a term coined by Anthony Giddens (Giddens, 1998), among others, to characterise the tendency of social democratic governments and parties to offer an alternative political framework lying between free market neoliberalism and state socialism – and has been consistently applied to New Labour policies under Tony Blair.
[2]   The British social policy world has relied upon Robert Putnam's (2000) characterisation of social capital as trust relationships between individuals and groups, despite the availability of alternative definitions (see below).

This paper argues that despite the government's professed interest in evidence-based policy (Mulgan and Lee, 2001; Packwood, 2002; David, 2002; Young *et al*., 2002), the theorization used to support the British government policy of community cohesion is not time- or place-specific, but rather uses a generic model of social capital theory applied to a problem imagined within existing understandings and political discourses (Roche, 2004). The understanding of disorder as a 'problem' to be 'solved', and the nature of this problem, are not inevitable but are rooted in existing discourses and associations constructed through public debate (Burnett, 2004). Neither the understanding of the 'problem', nor the proposed 'solution', are fixed or obvious. In this case, a simplistic understanding of social capital has been married with the existing Third Way ideology of government to provide a ready-made solution to disorder, which conveniently obscures questions of inequality and discrimination (Kalra, 2002).

This paper outlines the events which lent impetus to policies of community cohesion; reviews the understandings of these events that shaped and were shaped by public debate; demonstrates how these understandings were linked to existing policy conventions; and suggests how this synthesis has contributed to a re-imagining of community as a normative ideal.

Imagining community cohesion

The treatment of a specific event or set of events as a turning point in national and local discourses is not unique to the 2001 'riots' and the reaction of community cohesion policy. Parallels can be drawn with previous responses to urban unrest in Britain, particularly in the 1980s (Solomos, 1988; Gaffney, 1987), and in the development of 'folk devils' of inner city (black) youth linked to crime (Alexander, 2000; Keith, 1993). These studies have shown the ways that an interpretation of particular 'problems' in society is framed by those in power, to create a set of state

interventions (or non-interventions) which are not inevitable, but shaped by political context (Keith, 1996).

The inquiry reports into the 2001 riots identified inequalities in housing, income, education, and health as underlying factors that led to the unrest. They also identified segregation in residence, leading to segregated schooling. The suggestion was that limited contact between distinct communities led to feelings of resentment and anger.

It is the second aspect of this diagnosis which has received most emphasis in subsequent policy development. Low levels of contact between groups are seen as bad for social capital. The theorization of social capital adopted by government is based most explicitly on the work of Robert Putnam, in particular his Bowling Alone (2000). Putnam's development of social capital theory focuses on civic and social activity as producing greater trust which eases social relations within and between social groups. Ideas of social capital touch on existing debates about state, society and community links (Evers, 2003), and have been seen as a development of Pierre Bourdieu's development of forms of capital as power and resources, and James Coleman's definition of social capital as part of a set of resources within family and community relationships (Kearns, 2003). However, Putnam's thinking appears to have been used in isolation in creating these policies; and has been drawn on not just in the British policy context, but also in Canada (Beauvais and Jenson, 2002) and Australia (Stone *et al*., 2003).

In some sense the conceptualization of the problem as a lack of social capital is reassuring to governments backing away from a strongly economically redistributive state. The problem becomes one of social relations rather than of material distribution. This tendency is developed further by Cantle (2005). Development of social capital in the social policies of other countries has tended to have a greater focus on social cohesion, which Cantle attempts to distinguish from community cohesion;

conceptualising the former as concerned with structural social and economic barriers to cohesion, and the latter as specifically concerned with divisions between ethnic, racial, religious or cultural groups (2005, p.52).

The theme of community has been evident in the brand of Third Way politics promoted by the Blair government from the start (Callinicos, 2001; Schofield, 2002). This thinking identifies a decline in civic values as leading to a breakdown of cooperation in society. Promotion of volunteering and associational activity, alongside a strengthening of duty and responsibility, is prescribed as the remedy which will increase levels of trust and neighbourliness in society. Social capital is seen as a good which oils the wheels of society through informal cooperation. Cohesion within groups (bonding capital) and between groups (bridging capital) are separately identified; too much bonding capital without bridging capital can result in discord (Putnam, 2000).

What this take on social capital represents is a ready-made prescription for the tensions which came to the surface in 2001. The government response bent existing schemes intended to address some of the underlying inequalities, and re-badged them as part of a community cohesion agenda (an approach seen more recently in the promotion of the government's related *Respect Action Plan* (Respect Task Force, 2006)). This continuity is highlighted in the Denham report (Denham, 2001). The tackling of inequality was then envisaged as the basis for the promotion of community cohesion; it could be harnessed for the goal of preventing disorder and promoting harmony.

This policy discourse demonstrates a blurring of distinction between community and communities – where separate 'communities' may be considered as an embodiment of Tönnies' (1887, trans. 2001) *Gemeinschaft* while the 'community' as a whole equates to (national) society, or *Gesellschaft*. Though fleeting reference is made in this discourse to overlapping identities and network theories of community (as described for

example by Castells, 2003), there is a neglect of the current debates around globalized networks of identity (e.g. Keith, 2005) and 'new ethnicities' related to interactions of ethnicity, history and neighbourhood (Back, 1996) which could allow a more sophisticated understanding of lived experience to inform interactions with the people who are the objects of these policies. The tendency is to return to reified notions of exclusive (ethnic) communities whose differences are reinforced (harmfully) by particular practices (such as living in specific areas, attending particular schools). There is little criticism of the 'unreflexive use of the concept of community as the privileged container of cultural difference' (Alleyne, 2002), or of the conception of communities as fixed entities. Likewise, there is a tension resulting from ideas of multiculturalism which have been influential in approaches to what are deemed 'race issues' since the 1970s and which, though contested (Delanty, 2003), favour the development of separate cultures with tolerance for one another – indeed, some have hailed the disturbances and the emergence of community cohesion as a discourse as 'the death of multiculturalism' (Kundnani, 2002).

Disturbances

The putative origins of efforts to improve community cohesion were the 'riots' that occurred in areas of northern England in the summer of 2001. There were scattered episodes of disorder in a number of locations at that time, but the three locations which were identified by politicians, media and police as witnessing the most significant incidents were Oldham, Burnley and Bradford. The following very brief account gives an idea of what occurred in those towns; as with any historical narrative it is partial. This account has been constructed from the official histories in the reports of the government-sponsored inquiries that followed the riots, and some newspaper coverage. As such it is reliant on those sources which will be critiqued later in the paper; however, this is not necessarily a disadvantage

as this article seeks to examine the way that memories of events have been constructed to form a particular problem, for which specific interventions are being developed.

In Oldham at the end of May, 2001, a number of separate violent incidents occurred, mainly between groups of white youths and groups of Asian youths. These followed smaller apparently racist incidents, and a number of attempts by the National Front and British National Party to develop activities in the town. The police were involved in controlling the most serious disorder between 26th and 29th May, with some skirmishes occurring after this time (Ritchie, 2001).

The main violence in Burnley occurred between 23rd and 25th June. It appears to have been more organized, and a reaction to a number of violent incidents between groups of Asian and white youths. The inquiry into events in Burnley (Clarke, 2001) attributes these initial clashes to criminal elements; and suggests that the tensions were then capitalized on by white racists, some from outside the town. There was much damage to property, often towards properties associated with either white or Asian owners (Clarke, 2001).

In Bradford, rumours of National Front activities in the city led to violence on 7th July. An Anti-Nazi League protest ended in chaos after rumours of violence in another part of the city spread, resulting in clashes between police and anti-fascist protesters (Bagguley and Hussain, 2003a; [n.a.], 2001a; [n.a.], 2001b). The following days brought attacks on businesses associated with either white or Asian owners, and clashes between white youths and the police (Lewis, 2001; Kendell, 2001; [n.a.], 2001c). Between 400 and 500 people were thought to have been involved this time, with 326 police and 14 members of the public sustaining injuries (Denham, 2001).

All three areas are former mill towns, with majority white population, the largest ethnic minority group being Asian or Asian British[3]. The inquiry reports found that there were widening economic inequalities in the towns, attempts to tackle them being mainly through area-based regeneration schemes. They found that as a legacy of housing policy and housing choice, white and Asian populations were living in identifiably different areas in each town, and that this increased suspicion and competition between these 'communities'. These latent tensions were then sparked by particular incidents involving organized racist groups from outside the area.

Imagining riots

The newspaper coverage of the events and their aftermath included headlines such as:

> 'Bradford under siege after day of race riots'
> 'The heat of the night: Police ready for summer of hate as race riots set streets ablaze again'
> 'White youths take to streets in 'revenge' riots'
> (Harris, 2001; Mitchell, 2001; Kendell, 2001)

These headlines immediately brand Burnley, Oldham and Bradford as 'riot towns'. They were accompanied with dramatic images of burning buildings, overturned cars, apparently 'out of control' crowds of people, and police in riot uniform on the streets; and comparable footage was shown on television news both nationally and internationally (Interview with local government official, May 2002). These evocative images not only sell newspapers, but provoke fear from the public and reactions from politicians.

The power of such images is not only in the scenes they depict directly, but in the associations they have in the public consciousness with apparently similar events in different times and places (Wren-Lewis,

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[3]The Asian or Asian British groups formed 19% of the population in Bradford, 7% in Burnley and 12% in Oldham in the 2001 census.

1981/2). These connections are usually made explicitly in the accompanying text in media coverage. Most common associations are to riots in 1980s Britain, specifically in Brixton, Toxteth and Handsworth; and to disorder in inner cities of the USA. Both sets of associations strengthen the emphasis on the salience of race, poverty and ghettoization in the understanding of such events (Rowe, 1994b; Rowe, 1994a; Rowe, 1995). They also make powerful reference to a threat of disturbance to the usual order; to fear, violence and the unpredictable 'other' on the rampage on Britain's streets (Murdock, 1984; Rodrigues, 1981; Wren-Lewis, 1981/2).

These parallels have not only been drawn with the 2001 riots. The following two quotes illustrate the point. One is from an infamous speech made by Enoch Powell, an intervention in the immigration debate in 1968. The other is from a speech made in 2005 by Trevor Phillips, Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality.

> As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, I seem to see 'the River Tiber foaming with much blood'. The tragic and intractable phenomenon which we watch with horror on the other side of the Atlantic, but which there is interwoven with the history and existence of the States itself, is coming upon us here by our own volition and our own neglect. (The Observer, 21st April 1968, quoted in Solomos, 2003, p.61)

> If we allow this to continue, we could end up in 2048, a hundred years on from the Windrush, living in a New Orleans-style Britain of passively co-existing ethnic and religious communities, eyeing each other uneasily over the fences of our differences… even if there is no calamity, these marooned communities will steadily drift away from the rest of us, evolving their own lifestyles, playing by their own rules and increasingly regarding the codes of behaviour, loyalty and respect that the rest of us take for granted as outdated behaviour that no longer applies to them. We know what follows then: crime, no-go areas and chronic conflict. (Phillips, 2005)

Powell stood for strict control of immigration and repatriation of immigrants settled in Britain. Phillips is calling for greater integration through 'equality, participation and interaction'. Neither provides any evidence that the processes at work in Britain are the same as those in the USA; in fact, they both highlight the different histories of the two societies. Yet they use the same transatlantic apocalyptic imagery to promote their platform. They speak nearly forty years apart; yet the power of these images, and the fear of the US situation, remains powerful. Powell's suggested remedy was implementation of what many would brand racist, exclusionary policies; at other times and from other quarters, the advocated solution has been addressing issues of inequality, on class and racial lines; the pursuit of 'community' is the latest proposal for action that will avoid this anticipated apocalypse. The following sections will explore the mechanisms that helped to bring community to the fore as a policy solution.

Imagining interventions

The immediate state reaction to the disturbances of 2001 was a law and order intervention, attempting to end the violence and arrest those involved as quickly as possible (Bagguley and Hussain, 2003b). Immediately following this, a number of inquiries were set up to investigate the causes of the riots, with the intention of using this understanding to prevent further disorder. There are five major reports which emerged at this time and were used to develop the initial concept of 'community cohesion policy'. Each had slightly different provenance, had a different scope of interest, and came to slightly different conclusions (Bagguley and Hussain, 2003b). Given these differences, it is striking how the findings of the reports have been synthesized into a single policy response.

A quick summary of the different reports will demonstrate some of the differences in how their task was approached:

- In Bradford, an investigation into local community tensions had already been completed by a team led by the former Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, Lord Herman Ouseley (Ouseley, 2001). This was about to be published when the riots took place and was used as the basis for understanding the situation in Bradford.

- The investigation with the most local involvement was in Burnley, where a review team consisting entirely of local people, aside from the Chair, Lord Anthony Clarke, developed an inquiry supported by the local authority (Clarke, 2001).

- The Home Secretary visited Oldham on 14th June, and urged that locals set up an Independent Review into the riots and their causes. A local expert inquiry was administrated by the Government Office for the North West, and led by David Ritchie, a former civil servant (Ritchie, 2001).

- The Home Office established an Independent Review Team, led by Ted Cantle, a former senior local government officer. This reported on the 2001 disturbances across the country as a whole (Cantle, 2001).

- The Home Office also established a Ministerial Group, led by the then Minister for Police, Courts and Drugs, John Denham; this group produced the Government response to the findings of each of the other inquiries (Denham, 2001).

All of the inquiry reports present themselves as impartial, truth-seeking interventions. Production of such official histories can enable communities to come to terms with traumatic events and reach consensus on a way forward. They can also close down alternative interpretations or experiences of these events (Gaffney, 1987).

The Denham Report is the one which fixed the way that the 'problem' represented by these episodes of disorder was to be understood and responded to by the state. It coined the term 'community cohesion' (as did the closely associated Cantle report), and stated how this was to become a specific goal of government policy. It also set this in context as a continuation and evolution of existing policies, rather than a change in direction. As a result of these reports' findings, the 2001 disturbances are remembered in national public discourse as representing the problems caused by ethnic segregation in inner cities (Kalra, 2002). This is taken, with varying emphases, to be a result of racism (overt or institutional) and choices made by minority ethnic communities. The interventions that are suggested are strengthening of bonds between divided (Asian on one hand and white on the other) communities.

Re-imagining community

Subsequent policy documents have taken a broad view of how these distinct communities might be defined, for example:

> 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 is 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 and circumstances in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods. (Local Government Association, 2004, p.7)[4]

The concept of community has more contested and complex sociological roots than explicitly acknowledged in much of the policy

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[4]   People 'from different backgrounds' can refer to ethnic, racial or religious differences; or differences in lifestyle, behaviour, age, sexuality, disability et cetera.

discourse around community cohesion, which treats the definition of community as self-explanatory, and the boundaries around ethnic groups as unproblematic (Alexander, 2004). The political and social context of actors can lead to slippages in the concepts and terms used to define the 'problem' (conflict in urban areas) and its identified solution (promotion of community cohesion). Slippages occur in reference to: the relations between all ethnic groups; between specific minority groups and the (white) ethnic majority; between members of ethnic minorities born in Britain and immigrants.

Another strand of community cohesion policies has been the links to be made with identity, both local and national. David Blunkett has been a prominent advocate of this policy (Blunkett, 2002; Burnett, 2004), including through the publication of the immigration White Paper, *Secure Borders, Safe Haven* (Home Office, 2002), for which one rationale was the perceived problems of divided communities in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford (Kalra, 2002; Home Office, 2002).This is an example of how the policies given impetus by the riots were not tailored to the specifics of the problem. The people rioting were not immigrants but British citizens, born in this country. The slippage between British citizens and immigrants is a common one in race relations discourse (Solomos, 2003), and one which illustrates the intrusion of existing discourses on the analysis; those involved in the disturbances of 2001 were all British-born. It is unclear how this community cohesion policy will in any way increase their sense of shared belonging.

The prevention of conflict between groups in itself is presented as straightforward, but the experience of these so-called 'riot towns' show it is not. The presence of extremists, both white racists and Islamic fundamentalists, challenges these attempts at consensus. The fact that the activities of extremists were identified in the local inquiries as contributing to the eruption of violence has not led to their challenge to cohesion being considered in any detail. In Burnley, the approach has been to give everyone

a chance to participate. The difficulties of doing so are evident when this gives a platform to those undermining the values of consensus these policies are supposed to promote.

Conclusion

The argument of this paper is that this process of making sense of the riots is important because it informs future policy interventions. Despite the common rhetoric on the importance of evidence-based policy, the understanding of the events was based less on an assessment of the immediate situation, than on existing discourses which draw parallels between these events and other violent eruptions at different times and in different places; and on the dominant understanding of social interactions which at the time of these riots was an emphasis on social capital and social cohesion.

Out of these existing discourses and an interpretation of specific events, emerged a new normative goal – community cohesion, an attractive concept to those of all political persuasions (or those 'of different backgrounds' to use the jargon) – not least because of its ability to mean all things to all people. All local authorities are now required to have regard to community cohesion and encouraged to measure its presence or absence. The lack of a coherent and detailed understanding of 'community' to underpin these efforts result in the appearance that government is putting its faith in a concept which we will never know we have achieved.

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