Community Cohesion Discourse in Britain: Managing Ethnic Diversity

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Abstract:

The contemporary discourse of community cohesion in Britain seems to be a new form of assimilationism that prioritizes national cohesion over cultural diversity. It is perceived as a form of denial and replacement of multiculturalism in Britain. The inter-ethnic tension on the one hand and urban violence (2001) on the other propelled the British government to opt for community cohesion discourse as a remedy for perceived or real identity crisis and social fragmentation epitomized by residential segregation and urban disintegration. Five major race-related reports were immediately produced after 2001 riots. Three of them were produced locally; Ouseley Report, Burnley Report and Oldham Report. The other two were national; the Cantle Report and the Denham Report. These five reports, though differed in churning out the causes of the alleged race tensions, seem to be consensual over the need to secure more community cohesion and Britishness as a remedy to inter-ethnic fragmentation and hostilities. The reports try to deal with the issue of ethnic disorder in 21^{stc} Britain. The target of this paper is to decipher and churn out the various policies prescribed in the reports to restore -or more accurately create- an order out of ethnic disorder. By proposing community cohesion strategy as a cure to social fragmentation the reports prioritize the mainstream ideology's reading of ethnic violence, its causes and its remedies. We argue that the then Labour Government strove to nostalgically order the ethnic disorder, generally perceived as the direct outcome of uncontrolled post-war immigration. Paradoxically, the presentation of the problem as one of ethnic minorities' tendencies to self-segregation and the result of excessive immigration is very likely to incite more disorder than order. The article attempts to show how

community cohesion discourse is presented and represented in the above-mentioned reports as a form of power to enforce a certain engineering of social and ethic relations. Along with Foucauldian conception of power, the article stresses that the same discourse of social cohesion can promote a resistant ethnic feedback which advances alternative versions and representations of order.

Key words: Britishness, community cohesion, discourse, order, representation.

After the Bradford, Oldham and Burnley race riots of 2001, race was once again at the centre of politics in Britain. This was perhaps not surprising, since various events occurred even before the riots to draw attention to the shortcomings in the race relations system in Britain. With the publication in 1999 of the *Macpherson Report* that looked into the investigation of the murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence by the London Metropolitan Police, and with the 'discovery' of 'institutional racism' in British institutions, there was a widespread sense that a new start needed to be made. One year later, a new act was passed: the Race Relations (Amendment) Act. It asked for positive action to promote race relations and not only the negative requirement not to discriminate. On October 2000, the Runnymede Trust published *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (widely known as Parekh Report), which envisioned the nation as irreversibly multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural. Lord Bikhu Parekh stated that "Britain confronts a historic choice as to its future direction. Will it try to turn the clock back, digging in, defending old values and ancient hierarchies, relying on a narrow English-dominated, backward-looking definitions of the nation? Or will it seize the opportunity to create a more flexible inclusive, cosmopolitan image of itself? Britain is at a tuning point. But it has not yet turned the corner. It is time to make the move" (Parekh 2000, 14-15). The same enthusiasm was expressed by Jack Straw, the then Home Secretary, when he said that "there is no reason at all for us to be trapped by one view of our past as we look to the

future" (Runnymede's *Quarterly Bulletin*, December, 2000, 3). That could be understood as an official declaration that Britain's future race relations would not be governed by past experience. A new multicultural order seemed to prevail. Britain was celebrated as a "community of communities" in which every culture, language, tradition and ethnicity was to find a comfortable place within the new multicultural rainbow. However, with the eruption of race-related violence in some northern British cities in 2001, the situation changed dramatically. All of a sudden, multiculturalism became the disease that needed urgent solution. Cultural diversity was no longer prioritarian in New Labor political agenda. And community cohesion became the new political technology for the new century. This paper tries to churn out the discourses and programs of this new or rather renewed politics of social cohesion through the analysis the official discourses of the Home Office and a number of race-related reports which were produced to broach such issues of inter-racial disorder. Also, it aims at showing how alternative resistant discourses managed to issue and negotiate rectifications in the subsequent official race-related discourses.

Immediately in the aftermath of the events of 2001, five major reports were produced in an attempt to restore order. They are two national ones: The Cantle Report (2001) and the Denham Report (2002) and three local ones: the Ouseley Report of Bradford (2001), Ritchie Report of Oldham (2001) and finally the Clarke Report of Burnley (2002). Although differed in emphasis, all those reports assumed that race relations represent a serious problem in Britain; that excessive cultural diversity is a hindrance to inter-racial harmony, and that community cohesion is the best solution. The focus will be on the way the Government discourses and the reports read and represented the situation of race thesis in contemporary Britain. The themes of ethnic residential patterns, language and cultural values are highlighted. They are constructed in the

reports as problematic and pathological. Ethnic residential patterns are represented as a matter of minorities' tendency to self-segregate. The use of another language than English is considered as an obstacle to inter-racial communication. And cultural practices and values such as arranged marriages among South Asian community are seen as a breach of the "norms of acceptability" to use David Blunkett's expression.

The issue of ethnic segregation has been represented as the maker and the marker of British ethnic dilemma. John Denham concluded that "Cantle, Clarke, Ritchie and Ouseley have all identified segregation along racial lines as a growing problem, and a significant contributory factor to the disturbances" (Denham 2002, Introduction). Various types of segregation were presented in the reports such as Clarke's focus on economic and employment segregation. Yet residential segregation was foregrounded in all the reports. It was topicalized and projected as an evil bringing about other evils in an endless vicious circle. Residential segregation was taken for granted and constructed as the antithesis of community cohesion. Ted Cantle affirmed that "the high levels of residential segregation found in many English towns would make it difficult to achieve community cohesion" (Cantle, 2001:7). He even spoke about "parallel lives" (Cantle 2001, 9) which residents of cities like Bradford were leading. Herman Ouseley in his report did not make the exception. He stated that residential segregation was increasing in Bradford which rendered any inter-ethnic contact difficult and risky. However, Ouseley considered that residential segregation represented a kind of "comfort zones" for local Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities in Bradford. He even questioned the causes that might make residential segregation a comfort. It implies that what seemed to be an ethnic residential choice might be an obligation. Nevertheless, such reading though presented was backgrounded. What was stressed in Ouseley Report and the other ones was that residential segregation was problematic

and dangerous. Thus residential segregation was represented as the disorder that must be ordered though establishing bridges of communication between different ethnic minorities and the host majority. Yet it should be mentioned that though residential segregation has been pivotal to the community cohesion discourse, there were no serious empirical attempts to measure it. No statistical evidence was presented by the reports to back their claims of increasing residential segregation. Ethnic residential patterns were over-simplified, and the assumptions upon which all the reports built their new order were largely concluded from popular perceptions and apprehensions. On the other hand, some political writers such as Arun Kundnani (2001a) spoke of a forced segregation in which the ethnic minority suffered from increasingly aggressive discrimination and institutional racism. The anti-ethnic segregation discourse seemed to prove that residential segregation in towns like Bradford was a myth; thus, local political analyst Paul Simpson said that "[C]ontrary to the popular perception that South Asians, especially in places like Bradford (Bradford Race Review 2001), prefer to self-segregate, we found evidence of the desire for more mixing on the part of all ethnic/religious groups" (Simpson 2003, 10). A more balanced view was presented by Massey and Denton who showed that residential patterns of South Asians, whether chosen or imposed, were the outcome of a "complex interplay of many different social and economic processes" (Massey and Denton 1998, 25).

Closely related to residential segregation was the issue of language. The use of Urdu, for instance, was represented by Ritchie Report as a threat to Oldham identity. Ritchie wrote: "'when people do not speak the English language, this has acted as a barrier to integration. [It] undermines [the] deep feeling that "English is the language of this town"'. (Ritchie 2001, 9).

English language was represented as so prerequisite to citizenship rights that Denham demanded that those seeking

"naturalization" have to show "recognition of and adherence to fundamental rights and duties and to English as our shared language" (Denham 2002, 20). Thus, language became a defining element of what it means to be a British and a citizen. Also, the inability to speak English fluently was presented as having detrimental impacts on ethnic minorities. English has become a mechanism of both inclusion and exclusion. Non-English based cultures are consequently alienated and marginalized. Paul Bagguley and Yasmin Hussain (2003) stated that English language was constructed in all the reports as reflective and constitutive of British identity and citizenship. Also, English was depicted as the major component of British white identity and nationhood. South Asian languages, thus, were represented as a threat to national identity and social cohesion. Bagguley and Hussain affirmed that "For all the worthy claims to multiculturalism, non-English cultures are excluded from the identity of the 'British'. Cohesive communities would be those that are 'English' speaking, and other languages would be marginalised and de-valued." (2003). Integrative use of English was equated with success in socio-economic integration. For example, in Oldham Report, Ritchie showed how African-Caribbean community through its adoption of English as first language managed to successfully integrate compared to other South Asian communities that relegated English to a second position. What emerges from the discourses of the reports is a multi-ethnic Britain but mono-lingual. The language of the community cohesion agenda is English. English is represented as the signifier of Britishness. Thus, English is the language of the new order of community cohesion paradigm and non-English languages are the semiotic debris of the already abandoned multicultural old order.

Culturally speaking, minorities' culture was largely and systematically approached from a culture of poverty thesis. The thesis proposes that certain groups and individuals tend to persist in a state of poverty and marginality because they have

distinct beliefs, values and ways of behaving that are incompatible with economic successful performance. Such a claim was implied in the community cohesion discourse when dealing with the issue of South Asian cultural patterns. Pakistani and Bangladeshi cultures were pathologised and depicted as suffering from internal deficiencies. Such dysfunctional cultural patterns were proved according to the before-mentioned reports as inhibiting to ethnic groups' potentialities and, consequently, they hinder their integration and communication with each other and the mainstream white majority.

Interviewed by the Independent, David Blunkett, the ex-Home Secretary, affirmed: "We need to say that we will not tolerate what we would not accept ourselves under the guise of accepting a different cultural difference. We have norms of acceptability and those who come into our home- for that is what it is- should accept those norms just as we would have to do if we went elsewhere" (Blunkett 2001). He spoke about the need to develop a sense of belonging to Britain within both the new immigrants and the established minorities. The requirement that minorities should feel British and respect norms of acceptability while adopting English as first language entails a refusal of South Asian cultural practices. What Blunkett and the reports refer to as forced marriages within mainly the Muslim South Asian community can be considered by the latter as arranged marriages. Such type of arranged marriages is a well-founded tradition within South Asian communities. It is a means to consolidate the biraderi clan system and reinforce cultural values and social ties within the extended family tradition. Thus, to feel British means forsaking such cultural identity. It means also lessening contact as much as possible with South Asia. The mother country is no longer India, Pakistan or Bangladesh, it is Great Britain. Setting the framework for the reports, Blunkett highlighted the weaknesses of British citizenship that failed to forge national

unity. He redefined the meaning of citizenship when he announced that: "Citizenship means finding a common place for diverse cultures and beliefs, consistent with the core values ***we uphold***" (emphasis is mine) (Blunkett 2001). The expression "we uphold", reveals the true nature of the newly celebrated cultural diversity. It is a cultural diversity that does not violate the British-centred value system; a diversity in form not in substance.

The discourse of community cohesion represented South Asians as suffering from various crises; generational gap, problem of internal governance and identity insecurity. Commenting on such represented situation Denham affirmed: "Cantle, Clarke, Ouseley and Ritchie all draw attention to the extent which young people's voices have been largely ignored by decision-makers in the areas where there were disturbances. Some young people complained that the older community and religious leaders who claimed to represent them failed to articulate the experiences of the young" (Denham 2002, 14).

Claire Worley (2005) referred to the fact that though the reports tried to deracialize the discourse of community cohesion by using the concept of community rather than that of race, they fail to do so many times. For instance, in the previously-stated quotation of John Denham the focus on generation gap coupled with reference to religious leaders clearly reveals that what is meant is not the white majority (though generational conflicts also exists in white communities), but rather ethnic minorities and mainly South Asian communities and more particularly Muslim South Asian communities. The same idea was articulated by Derek McGhee. He wrote: "the focus on ethnic and minority communities (especially young Muslims) within this discursive formation belies a barely repressed risk consciousness that informs the wider rhetoric of building community cohesion in twenty-first century Britain." (2005). Muslim cultural values are represented as the antithesis of the acceptable norm. South Asian Muslim cultures are thus the

disorder that should be problematized via a hegemonic process of representation and then re-ordered according to norms of acceptability. Cohesion discourse is rather a risk management strategy that reflected increasing insecurity in British identity. The reports through their lack of empirical evidence turn out to be no more than a version of arm-chair sociology which indulged the political at the expense of the technical. Community cohesion strategy is an attempt to problematize and redefine British citizenship. Such project seems to tailor minorities' cultures to suit the majoritarian "norms of acceptability". Ultimately, the reports and the Home Office problematized and represented disorder in order to create order. It is a process of normalization through problematization. Community cohesion discourses attempt to create unity in diversity which we believe is a utopian unpractical sociological enterprise that ends into prioritizing unity over diversity as a practical manageable political goal. It would create a situation in which English-dominated culture becomes the norm against which alternative versions are appraised and then avoided after being de-voided of their substance.

The cohesion agenda retrieved the failed integration hypothesis to market its assumptions. The old order of multiculturalism was under attack and accused of retrogressiveness, past-orientedness and fostering divisive particularities. The alternative new order was community cohesion to set up an inclusive sense of common citizenship. The identity politics of multiculturalism was to be replaced by the citizenship politics of community cohesion.

I argue that the official discourses of community cohesion attempt to orchestrate a hegemonic British-centred version of race order in Britain. By demanding that South Asian communities have to change to cope with mainstream society, the official discourses construct a cultural leadership paradigm in which Anglo-Saxon culture is the norm and the

other is the deviance. A process of consent manufacturing was undertaken by the New Labour government to project cohesion politics as common-sensical and socio-economically rewarding.

However, the community cohesion hegemony was not hegemonic enough. Alternative readings of the race thesis emerged to create a balance vis-à-vis the mainstream dominant interpretations of the situation. Along with Foucauldian conception of power, the paper stresses that the same discourse of social cohesion can promote a resistant feedback which advances alternative versions and representations of order. Michel Foucault -who decentralizes power-, believes that it is not hierarchical and unitary. He believes that power resides in discourse and the latter is not the constant monopoly of any social group. According to Foucault power

> must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization…. Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application (Foucault 1980, 98).

This means that the official discourse of community cohesion can insist while alternative discourse of cultural diversity can resist. As shown above, the discourses of residential segregation were counter-posed by a desegregation discourse, and claims of ethnic minorities' cultural dysfunctionality were vehemently criticized by academics like Bagguley, Hussain, Worley and McGhee. Foucault shows how "discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy (quoted in Bristow 1997, 187). For example, Kundnani, being a political analyst from an ethnic minority, represented such "opposing strategy" when he highlighted an alternative explanation of racial tension in Britain. He wrote: "Iinstead of asking how society excludes

Muslims and migrants….the questions asked are about Muslims refusing to integrate…..Muslims having to become more British. It is thus their "alien" values that are the problem rather than our racist values" (2005).

The alternative discourse managed to initiate a relative shift of focus in the official discourse of community cohesion. While the 2001 reports concentrated greatly on the cultural aspects of the problem, employing the traditional "failed integration thesis", the subsequent reports *Strength IN Diversity* (2004) and *Improving Opportunities, Strengthening Society* (2005) emphasized the wider issues of discrimination, racism and socio-economic exclusion. The government recognized that no social cohesion can be attained without fighting more concrete issues of economic deprivation and forging more tangible socio-economic equality.

Thus, community cohesion discourses were bridled by more balanced official discourses of ethnic diversity and empowerment. Such rectification was first the outcome of the unpracticality and totalitarianism of the community cohesion agenda and also a response to increasing criticism and resistance of alternative versions of race relations' order. To conclude the race-related reports of 2001 and the subsequent reports of 2004 and 2005 reveal a sense of insecurity within British identity and an attempt to manage a real or perceived risk. The transnational forces of globalization, large scale immigration and war on terrorism rendered the unifying concept of Britishness fragile. The above-mentioned official reports are indicative of governmental plans to create an order within local and global contexts that seem to refuse the logic of any pre-established order.

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