

'Race and Community Cohesion'

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The concept of 'community cohesion' was conceived 5 years ago in response to the 'race' riots in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham. But what does it mean – and how useful is it when thinking about communities in Britain today?

After the riots in parts of British cities in 2001, it was suggested that 'parallel lives' were being lived by different ethnic communities in Britain (Cattle, 2001). It was argued that there should be a national programme aimed at establishing more cohesion between different communities in Britain. Since 2001 this has become a part of the community strategy of most local authorities and it is now central to the British Government's approach to race and community relations (see Cattle, 2005).

The importance of the community cohesion agenda has become even more apparent over the last 12 months or so, following the London bombings on July 7th 2005 and the small scale 'riots' in a number of towns and cities, including Birmingham. The heightened international tension over 'terrorism' has also ensured that 'race' and diversity have moved up the international political agenda.

Defining 'Community Cohesion'

Across the world, the various models of '*multiculturalism*' are now being questioned. It is not surprising that the British Government has recently announced the setting up of a new *Commission for Integration and Cohesion* to consider, once again, what further action needs to be taken to integrate different groups of people in their communities.

One of the main tasks of the new Commission will be to develop a consensus over the meaning of 'integration', something which has proved elusive to date. However, the following definition of community cohesion (see Box 1) has now been adopted by the principal government departments, local government and many other agencies since 2002. Most of these bodies have now established locally-co-ordinated community cohesion strategies and programmes.

Box 1: A formal definition of community cohesion

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;
- strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods.

This definition emphasises that the more 'traditional' approaches, of tackling discrimination and promoting equal opportunities, are still very much part of the agenda and that community cohesion is building upon them. But it is also aimed at trying to break down the barriers between communities. It encourages people to come to terms with diversity and difference by promoting an overarching identity and sense of belonging.

Multiculturalism and difference

Most western democracies have been described as 'multicultural' for some 50 years or more, if only in numerical terms. A raft of supportive equal opportunities programmes and anti-discrimination legislation has been developed to try to ensure some acceptance of the new multicultural realities.

What multiculturalism means in practice, however, varies from country to country. For example, the French model has been widely interpreted as '*assimilationist*' – all 'new' cultures must be absorbed into the mainstream - whereas the UK model has tended to emphasise *difference and separateness* – or a 'community of communities'.

The UK model provided a very useful framework for emphasising that 'difference' should be respected and celebrated. After all, Britain is no longer white and mono-cultural. However, the UK model has also tended to value *all* differences – economic, political, social, cultural, physical - on an equal basis. Thus it has failed to develop a focus on the *commonalities* which cut across all communities, binding them together and providing a meaningful social solidarity.

Inequalities have also remained, with many minorities amongst the most disadvantaged sections of our community and still experiencing prejudice and discrimination. We are also encountering a rise in inter-ethnic conflict in Britain and the development of increasingly separate identities, often reinforced by trans-national links or ties of heritage. All this means that the gradual integration and growing cohesion of communities, which was expected to take place over time, has not developed. Instead there are

renewed questions about the value of diversity, particularly in terms of civic and social solidarity.

Multiculturalism and the search for identity

'Identity' has come to be regarded as important by those who defend difference, as well as those who oppose it. If 'Britishness' is often presented today as something homogenous – in which everyone should look and act in the same way - so too are notions such as a 'black culture' or a 'Muslim culture'. In reality, all these notions encompass a wide spectrum of values, beliefs and lifestyles.

We have even come to see cultures as 'pure'. This is illustrated by the way in which we often fail to conceptualise people of 'mixed race' in a positive way; they tend not to feature at all in the identity stakes. There is an assumption that people of mixed heritage somehow have no culture. By the same token, marriage to someone from another ethnic or cultural group is often frowned upon.

In reality, there are many different conceptions of both majority and minority cultures and as much variation within 'cultures' as there is between them. Some of these may even lack the coherence to be called a 'culture.' And what do we mean by 'culture' anyway?

But when identity is made instrumental – something that can be used as a resource or a benefit - or when it is under threat, either for majority or minority groups, we do tend to fall back on an exaggerated, almost stereotypical, view of ourselves. We inevitably emphasise what makes us *different* (and therefore special) from other groups rather than what we have in common.

It has taken many decades to defeat the idea that humanity is made up of separate 'races'. We now know that people are not made up of genetically defined groups. In the same way the ethnic, faith and other boundaries that we create – and defend – are almost entirely socially and politically defined. The search for identity, then, is like chasing shadows. Much greater emphasis might usefully be placed on how we actually relate to each other, and how relationships between us grow. This could develop in the form of a common sense of *belonging* rather than the idea of a 'common culture'.

Politics and a sense of belonging

Society also grows from *political* interaction - between the state and individuals and between individuals themselves. The ongoing debates about expenditure priorities, the extent and nature of welfare provision, environment issues and the economy as a whole, as much as the everyday round of social activities, helps build a political unity. This 'unity' is important, even if it is only a framework within which we can disagree!

Social and political capital and the sense of trust upon which they depend, can only be built upon dialogue and exchange (Puttnam, 2000). The once derided notions of citizenship and community are beginning to be re-asserted as important. Moreover, the concept of *nationality* - as opposed to the more

marginal notion of national identity - is also taking its place today in new discussions about cohesion and communities.

Our nationality, together with membership of our local 'state', could provide a much stronger basis for political exchange and interaction and is often the only means by which we can contribute to an international and wider debate.

Segregation and separateness

The historic pattern of settlement in Britain means that whilst Britain describes itself as a 'multicultural society', most people do not live in multicultural communities. Most of the ethnic minority population of Britain lives in London and a few other regional capitals, and the white population dominates most of the rest of the country. Even in areas that are more mixed, the separation is often just as evident. Most British towns and cities are divided on an ethnic neighbourhood basis.

The term 'segregation' is often used to describe this separation: but 'segregation' implies divisions which are imposed and enforced by law. Clearly, there is no such regime in force here. It can therefore be assumed that 'self-segregation' - in which some people prefer to live in an area dominated by their own ethnic or faith group - is the main determinant of geographical divisions such as these.

However, in reality, almost all such 'choices' are strongly shaped by socio-economic factors (see Box 2):

Box 2: The socio-economic bases for geographical/ethnic divisions

- * The lack or provision of appropriate social and cultural facilities;
- * The location of suitable schools;
- * Concerns about the lack of safety and security in other areas.

Given that the urban areas 'preferred' by minority groups generally contain the poorest housing and have the worst overall environment, it is certainly hard to believe that they are the consequence of a totally free choice! It is often within these 'segregated' communities dominated by particular groups that 'parallel lives' emerge. They offer little or no opportunity to explore differences and build mutual respect.

Meanwhile, people who have racist views can easily spread myths and false rumours and use ignorance about different communities to demonise the 'other'. That is not to say, of course, that we should move towards some form of total integration or 'assimilation'. After all, some degree of 'clustering' for

each group is probably essential if we are serious about preserving cultural identities. A 'critical mass' – a minimum number - of each community will be necessary to support different places of worship, shops and social facilities.

What do we have in common?

But sharing experiences is not sufficient – and will not develop – unless there is also a shared vision and a real sense of purpose *across* different communities. The ways in which different cultures see their local needs often means that difference is reinforced, rather than stress being placed on what we have in common.

As societies like ours become more diverse, it is also important to focus on common values and national solidarity. This is difficult, given that our experience of diversity has moved on significantly from just a handful of principal minorities to embrace a much larger number of communities – for example, over 300 languages are now spoken in London schools alone.

There is also a danger that we may focus only on the differences of ethnicity or faith – or, in the present uncertain context, perhaps one just one faith, that followed by Muslims. However, the issue of 'difference' today is a much more complex one. We have to address the *fear of difference* much more generally, today, for example:

- Between travellers and the 'static' community;
- Between generations;
- Between rural and urban areas;
- Between different social classes
- Increasingly, within and between ethnic minority communities.

This agenda is very much about enabling people to come to terms with diversity. But we should not dismiss negative perceptions of 'others' too lightly. And we must also deal with real competition over scarce resources to ensure that conflicts are addressed in an even handed and transparent way.

Unfortunately, 'promoting good race relations' in Britain has been given over to a small number of badly resourced voluntary agencies who have often struggled against the odds. Instead the main focus here has been delivering on a more narrow equality agenda. Of course, the focus on equalities remains essential, but it is no longer sufficient to ensure improved community cohesion in Britain. There is a growing belief that we also have to change attitudes and values – win hearts and minds. This has to become a 'mainstream' activity for all public services.

Difference is promoted in Britain in so many respects: encouraging separate schools for different faiths; separate housing provision for minorities; a wide range of separate cultural, arts and sports programmes; regeneration

schemes based on different communities; separate employment training schemes etc. Perhaps we have understated the sorts of things that all British communities have in common?

The challenge for 'Community Cohesion'

Those people who are still in denial about our multicultural reality often oppose equalities and the types of positive action programmes that could ensure that interaction across communities takes place in the workplace, in neighbourhood associations, in schools and colleges, in the council chamber – everywhere!. It is here that racial equality and community cohesion programmes come together and are mutually reinforcing. But this means not only interacting in our daily lives but also as part of a political entity: as nationals with a common interest in the direction and development of the state.

If we fail to create the conditions in which different people feel they *can* interact and promote understanding, trust and respect, the alternative is to micro-manage behaviour through ever more detailed legislation in order to prevent discrimination. A more productive focus might be to try to shift underlying attitudes and values – to emphasise more of what different groups in British society today actually have in common with each other.

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